



# Insight

SPRING 2025 | Vol. 9, No. 1



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Dear Friends,

As we celebrate 50 years since Vinnie Strully founded what would become The New England Center for Children, I want to take a moment to thank you — our dedicated supporters, staff, families, and friends. Your commitment to our mission has been instrumental in shaping NECC into the global leader it is today.

In this edition of *Insight*, you'll read about the students and staff, as well as members of the NECC community, who embody our mission. They are a small representation of the thousands of individuals who help move NECC forward every day. You'll also read about the exciting developments and events that have taken place over the past few months as we continue to grow and innovate.

I encourage you to take the time to explore these stories and reflect on the impact we've made together. Thank you for being part of this journey.

With gratitude,

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Camryn volunteers at Project Just Because as part of her vocational programming. Read more about NECC's Vocational Department on page 8.

# Teacher Feature

## MATT MALONEY

For the last six years, Matt Maloney has dedicated himself to making a difference in the lives of children with autism at NECC. For Maloney, who currently works as a level 2 teacher in NECC's Intensive Instructional Program (IIP), being able to help others is something he's passionate about.



"I want to help children who otherwise wouldn't be able to advocate for themselves," he stated. "NECC has been transformative in realizing these career goals."

Maloney's journey in special education began when he was just 16, working in an after-school program assisting peers and younger students with their homework. It was an experience that resonated with him, leading him to pursue a career in helping children.

"I started working at NECC right after graduating from SUNY Binghamton, where I was working at an on-site program with children with autism. I felt like NECC would be a great next step in continuing my career in the field," he said.

During his time at NECC, in which he has also worked in the residential and Intensive Treatment Team (ITT) programs, Maloney has gained invaluable experience both working hands-on with the students and from NECC's Western New England University (WNEU) on-site graduate program. Maloney is working toward a master's degree in applied behavior analysis.

"The WNEU program has helped me develop professionally as well as gain more experience to become a better practicing clinician," he said. "I have learned that not one

style of teaching fits any individual child; it's important to be able to think on your toes and adapt the way you teach to each individual student."

One of Maloney's greatest joys is seeing students make progress — whether in academic or behavioral development. "Having watched some of my students progress from preteens to young adults has been extremely rewarding," he shared.

Maloney's dedication to his students extends beyond the classroom. Recently, he facilitated the donation of about 75 books to the NECC student library. This act of generosity was sparked by a conversation with a family friend looking to donate gently used children's books. Seeing an opportunity to support literacy and engagement at NECC, Maloney took it upon himself to coordinate the donation.

"Matthew's donation will allow us to replace some well-loved copies currently in our collection," said Dominique Maribett, MSEd, BCBA, LABA, assistant director of NECC's Education Program. She added that the students will also be processing the books into the library's collection, providing a valuable vocational opportunity.

Reflecting on his time at NECC, Maloney acknowledges the profound impact working at NECC has had on his life and career. "NECC has been an unforgettable experience," he said. "Everything I've learned here has made me a better teacher and I learn something new every day. The students I've worked with and staff I've made friends with will always be an important part of my life."



# Acts of Generosity

## NATHAN WEINBERGER



Nathan Weinberger has always felt a deep connection to NECC. His aunt, Rebecca Geller, attended NECC (then ERI) from the age of 15 until she was 21, while his grandfather, Mickey Geller, was a dedicated and active board member for many years. Now, Weinberger is a Boston Marathon finisher, and he did it for Team NECC, carrying forward his family's legacy of support.

"NECC has had a profound impact on my family," shared Weinberger. "My aunt attended the school many years ago, and my grandparents were so happy with the quality of the education and community that they remained involved for the rest of their lives, including serving on the board. In fact, I was first introduced to NECC in high school when my grandpa asked me to come over to help him print out minutes from a board meeting."

Weinberger grew up in Brookline, MA, and currently resides in Cambridge's Porter Square with his partner, Nicole, and their dog, Bolt. Although he had never run a marathon before, he knew he wanted to take on the challenge and do it for a good cause.

"When I decided I wanted to run the Boston Marathon, I couldn't think of a better organization and I'm so happy to have been chosen to run for Team NECC," he shared. "Fundraising for NECC meant that every step I took in my marathon training was done out of love for my aunt and in memory of my grandparents. That's the only way I was able to motivate myself on the long runs."

Since leaving NECC, Aunt Becky, as Weinberger fondly calls her, has been thriving in her adult life. She lives in Brookline and has been working as an artist at Gateway Arts since 1997. Her work has been featured in galleries in both Massachusetts and New York. "She participates in all sorts of extracurriculars — her social calendar is much busier than mine!" Weinberger joked.

Knowing the impact NECC had on his aunt, which Weinberger called "far reaching," he was passionate about raising funds to ensure other families can experience the same level of support. Prior to Marathon Monday, he had raised nearly \$12,000.

One of the most unexpected joys of Weinberger's marathon journey was the fundraising process. "It was fun

and creative in a way that I wasn't expecting," he said, adding that Nicole was instrumental in the fundraising efforts. "For example, I love baking, and was pretty successful doing monthly baked goods sales. In March, my sister and I baked macarons, and getting to spend a full day baking with my sister is always a joy, especially on a rest day after a long run."

Another highlight of being part of Team NECC was connecting with the students and staff. "I loved getting to see the work of the school and the students," he said. "The amazing staff at NECC sent all the runners care packages, including friendship bracelets made by the students. Connections like that, even little ones, were definitely my favorite part of being with Team NECC."

As race day approached, Weinberger was filled with a mix of excitement and anticipation. He joked that while finishing would be the best part, he knows this experience is about so much more. "Going into training, I hoped to walk away with a sense that I can do hard things if I commit to them. Now, I know I'm going to be walking away with a deeper connection to an amazing organization."



Former NECC student Rebecca Geller proudly shows off one of her art pieces.



Young Nathan and his grandfather, Mickey, who served on NECC's Board of Directors for many years.





# YOUR GIFT, YOUR IMPACT

When you give to NECC's Annual Fund, your gift provides students with opportunities to be a part of the community and to have fun outside of the classroom. Throughout the fall and winter, students enjoyed community trips to the apple orchard, practiced soccer skills at the Special Olympics headquarters, and celebrated the holidays at school!





## JESSICA SASSI NAMED A 2025 INNOVATOR IN HEALTHCARE



NECC President and CEO Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, was named one of the *Boston Business Journal's* 2025 Innovators in Healthcare. Dr. Sassi was recognized in the category of Health Equity Champion, which, according to the *BBJ*, "honors someone who has worked to break down inequities in healthcare or healthcare access for underserved populations or areas."

Dr. Sassi is a trained clinician who has spent the last 18 years working at NECC, and her direct experience in behavioral analysis enables her to be a powerful advocate for better services for children with autism. Her roles on the Massachusetts Autism Commission as well as on the Board of the Massachusetts Association of Private Special Education Schools (MAAPS) give her a platform to share expertise with legislators about the needs of this population and the importance of early diagnosis and treatment.

Continuing the ground-breaking work established by NECC's Founder and Former CEO Vinnie Strully, Dr. Sassi is committed to expanding access to crucial resources for individuals impacted by autism. NECC is currently serving more than 15,000 learners with autism worldwide through the campus in Southborough, presence in public school classrooms throughout New England, global consulting and clinics, and the ACE® ABA Software curriculum. However, by training the next generation of special educators, clinicians, and researchers — a cornerstone of NECC's mission and one of Dr. Sassi's top priorities — NECC can continue to expand its reach.

In the last 50 years, more than 3,500 staff have been trained at NECC; 1,800 of those have earned advanced degrees through NECC's on-site master's program. These staff alumni have gone on to help children with autism around the world in places like Ghana, Iceland, and Brazil.



## NECC STAFF PRESENT RESEARCH AT BABAT

This past October, nearly 150 NECC educators, researchers, clinicians, and staff from the ACE® department attended the 45<sup>th</sup> Annual Berkshire Association for Behavior Analysis and Therapy (BABAT) Conference at the DCU Center in Worcester. NECC staff presented cutting-edge research, attended workshops with applied behavior analysis (ABA) professionals, and reconnected with former colleagues. The conference also gave NECC the chance to engage with prospective staff and staff alumni, dive deeper into topics on ABA, ethics, and behavioral medicine, and share insights about the ACE® ABA Software System.



## ST. MARK'S SATURDAYS RETURN TO NECC

After a long hiatus due to the pandemic, a special partnership between NECC and St. Mark's School in Southborough has made its return. This collaboration, which had been in place for several years before the pandemic, was designed to foster meaningful connections between the high school students from St. Mark's and NECC.

"There is so much value in this program," shared Kristen Sidman, MEd, MS, OTR/L, program director of OT, PT, and APE services. "I see what it does for our students, and for the St. Mark's students, and it's so rewarding."

The program first took shape thanks to a former staff member who came to NECC from St. Mark's. She recognized the potential for St. Mark's students to gain invaluable experience working with individuals with special needs while providing an enriching integration experience for NECC students. This partnership was a natural fit; of the school's 15 different Saturday Program service-learning options, the "Teaching & Learning at NECC" class has become one of St. Mark's most popular.

"We generate a lot of interest in this service-learning option," said Neil Cifuentes, a faculty member and coach at St. Mark's, who served as the advisor of the fall cohort. "Students find it extremely rewarding and also fun. They love hands-on activities, and they especially enjoy forming bonds with some of NECC's students through the various activities that they all engage in."

Sidman shared that this program is a true peer-to-peer integration opportunity for NECC's residential students, as they are the same age as the St. Mark's volunteers (ages 14+).

"The older our students are, the fewer opportunities they have for true integration," she shared. "It is very difficult to provide our residential students with integration activities on the weekends, which is why it's been so beneficial for our group."

During this seven-week program, St. Mark's students spend an hour with NECC students — 30 minutes in the gym, and 30 minutes in the recreation and leisure room. For the first three weeks, NECC's OT/PT/APE staff plan the activities, but by the fourth week, St. Mark's students take over designing the remaining weeks' activities.

"We want them to have the ownership and feel the responsibility of creating meaningful activities," said Sidman, adding that the goal is to allow the students from both schools to bond naturally, with NECC teachers taking a backseat to

allow St. Mark's students to lead. "We will coach them on things and some of the challenges that our population has, but this isn't just a 'show up and participate' thing; they actually have to have some thought and responsibility into planning in order to learn something."

Sidman added that the activities are always engaging for both groups of students. Past sessions have included making Taylor Swift friendship bracelets, crafting slime, playing volleyball with a giant beach ball, parachute games, and obstacle courses. This fall, one of the St. Mark's Saturdays coincided with a Special Olympics soccer event, and all of the St. Mark's volunteers showed up to cheer NECC students on.

"It was fabulous," said Sidman. "The best part of this program is that all of the kids laugh so much. Doesn't matter if it's a St. Mark's kid or a NECC kid, they all are laughing and truly having fun. It's one of the most heartwarming experiences I have witnessed at NECC."

The partnership is equally as valuable for St. Mark's.

"This relationship is very important to our school," said Cifuentes. "We seek to develop our students to lead lives of leadership and service, and this relationship offers our students an opportunity to serve the community in a very meaningful way."





## BU DENTAL PARTNERSHIP



**Boston University** Henry M. Goldman  
School of Dental Medicine



This fall, NECC embarked upon a new partnership with the Boston University Henry M. Goldman School of Dental Medicine (GSDM) to deliver dental exams and preventative care for students at NECC's on-site dental clinic.

The Smigel Supersmile® Dental Clinic at NECC Southborough opened in September 2023. Through this new collaboration, pediatric dental residents from GSDM are gaining hands-on experience working under the supervision of the school's faculty while providing essential dental services to residential students.

"Access to care is a relevant topic when it comes to dentistry for people with special healthcare needs," shared Mary Nell Cella, DDS, pediatric dentist and clinical instructor at BU's GSDM. "It's been really meaningful to provide comprehensive oral healthcare for NECC students in a setting that is comfortable and familiar to them."

According to Dr. Cella, BU dentists will see many students every six months, while others will visit the clinic more frequently, such as every three months, or as part of a weekly desensitization process. "The caregivers at NECC have been really helpful in facilitating weekly desensitization visits and we have found it has made quite the difference in behavior outcomes during our appointments," she said.

The BU GSDM is a premier academic dental institution promoting excellence in education, research, oral healthcare, and community service to improve the overall health of the global population.

"We are honored to provide dental services to children with autism," said Dr. Michelle Henshaw, professor of health policy & health services research and associate dean for global population health at GSDM. "Improving the overall health of our diverse population remains a key component of our school's mission. Opening the eyes of future healthcare professionals to health disparities in our nation and around the world is a vital part of a complete education in dental medicine."

## A NIGHT OF CREATIVITY AND COMMUNITY

On Thursday, April 10, the NECC community gathered for a truly unforgettable evening at the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual NECC Art Show. Hosted by David Klein and Elizabeth Wetherbee Klein, who is also chair of the NECC Board of Directors, at the Southborough Community House, the event brought together nearly 100 parents, staff, students, and community supporters in a vibrant celebration of creativity, connection, and compassion.

More than 90 pieces of original artwork — created by NECC students, staff, and local artists — transformed the space into a gallery full of creativity. The open-house style event and online auction raised more than \$10,000 for NECC's Annual Fund, which supports essential resources for students and teachers that are not covered by tuition.





## NECC GALA RAISES \$1.27 MILLION

On November 15, more than 400 guests gathered at the InterContinental Boston in a remarkable show of support for the students of NECC. The evening, which raised \$1.27 million, was a celebration of growth, opportunity, and the transformative impact of NECC's vocational program.

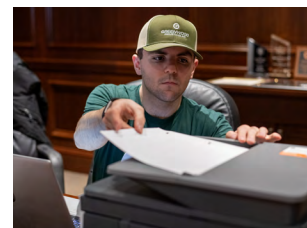
For 30 years, NECC has provided vocational training to students, with approximately 140 students participating annually. Beginning at age 14, students engage in skill-building that continues through their graduation at 22. Over three decades, more than 700 students have received vocational training, preparing them for success in real-world work environments.

"Like a garden, the vocational program is synergistic. It starts with our dedicated teachers and vocational specialists who work to nurture and prepare our students as they learn the necessary skills to one day perform jobs outside the walls of NECC," shared NECC President and CEO Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA. "This program truly enriches the lives of our students, and our students in turn, enrich the lives of the community members around them."

A highlight of the evening was the introduction of two NECC students, twin brothers Bobby and Frankie Saldi (pictured bottom right). Bobby, who works in the community at Apex Entertainment, Old Navy, and Greenwood Industries, and Frankie, who completes jobs across NECC Southborough's campus and volunteers at Project Just Because in Hopkinton, are examples of the depth and breadth of services the Vocational Department can offer students.

"Every day of the last 17 years, The New England Center for Children has allowed us to be better parents," shared the boys' father, Frank Saldi. "They took so much pressure off us and allowed us to be Mom and Dad. Not a teacher, speech or language specialist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, or a job coach. Literally, a weight was lifted. They provided us with all the information, resources, and support we desperately needed."

The evening's Fund-A-Need supported the construction of a greenhouse on NECC's Southborough campus. This new greenhouse will allow NECC students to continue their hands-on vocational work that started with the Edible Schoolyard garden beds, building skills and gaining experiences year-round.





## NECC CLINIC-DUBAI CELEBRATES FIVE YEARS



In December, NECC's Clinic in Dubai celebrated five years of providing applied behavior analysis (ABA), speech and language therapy (SLT), and occupational therapy (OT) to individuals of determination.

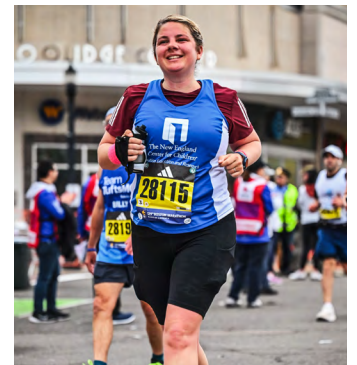
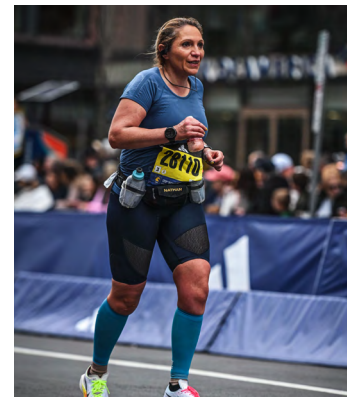
"The NECC Clinic in Dubai was established to meet the high demand for effective autism services," said Kristin Buchanan, MEd, BCBA, executive director of NECC's Gulf Consulting. "In five years, we've supported hundreds of individuals across the Gulf through our clinics, consulting services, and community programs."

Starting with one staff member, the Clinic has grown to nearly 30 employees, serving 68 individuals. Beyond therapy, the Clinic invests in the community through social media outreach, parenting resources, and free public workshops on child development and behavior analysis. In December, it also hosted a complimentary therapy-based winter camp for consulting clients and their siblings.

NECC's presence in the UAE extends beyond Dubai. Since 1997, NECC has provided autism services in Abu Dhabi, later opening the Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Special Education (MRC-NECC). NECC's Gulf Consulting has since served over 300 students across the GCC. In April 2023, NECC expanded its Dubai services by launching the Allied Health Clinic, which has since merged with NECC Clinic-Dubai.

## TEAM NECC CONQUERS BOSTON MARATHON

On April 21, 10 runners completed the 129<sup>th</sup> Boston Marathon® presented by Bank of America on behalf of Team NECC. These runners — a mix of NECC staff, family, and friends — completed the 26.2 miles from Hopkinton to Boston after spending the last six months training and raising funds for autism awareness. This year's team broke the Team NECC record, raising more than \$120,000 for NECC's Annual Fund. Congratulations to our runners: NECC friends Lashawnda Bland, Cristina Busu, Mary Feldmann, and Prem Itharat; NECC staff alumni Bobby Grant and Charlotte Mann; current NECC staff Lauren (Rae) Torff and Emily Walden; NECC parent Amit Chawla; and nephew of a former student Nathan Weinberger (read his story on page 3).







## NECC STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN JR. NBA CLINIC IN ABU DHABI

When the NBA Champion Boston Celtics visited Abu Dhabi this past October for pre-season games as part of the NBA in Abu Dhabi initiative, NECC's Global Consulting students were invited to take part in the festivities.

At the invitation of ADQ, one of the event's sponsors, NECC consulting students and participants from NECC's Adapted Basketball program joined a Jr. NBA Fit Clinic. Held in the NBA District fan zone, the hour-long session featured basketball drills and exercises with Jr. NBA coaches. Afterward, participants and their families enjoyed NBA District activities, games, prizes, and meet-and-greet opportunities with NBA legends.

"This was a great opportunity for our students and the basketball community to gain experience with enthusiastic coaches," said Tiffany Howley, community outreach and consulting specialist. "It's a wonderful example of inclusion in Abu Dhabi's community activities."

The Fit Clinic's success led to an invitation for NECC's students to join a 10-week program that concluded in January.

Building on its commitment to inclusivity, NECC's Global Consulting launched the Adapted Basketball League in November 2023. Every Sunday, NECC students and individuals of determination play alongside high school volunteers from Abu Dhabi Knights Basketball Academy and the American Community School (ACS).

"We wanted to provide an inclusive extracurricular activity where students could develop new skills and friendships," Howley explained.

The league runs in six-week blocks with 20-30 athletes. Karima, whose son Gabriel participates, shared her gratitude: "It's been wonderful to see Gabriel's confidence grow, and friendships develop."







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## SAVE THE DATES

**6/2** Carlos Placido Dunkin' Golf Classic  
**8/17** Falmouth Road Race  
**11/14** Children of Promise Gala

— 27<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL —

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