

ASPIRE!

"Labels can only confine. Aspire to be undefinable."

- Colin Wright

A publication of United Disability Services

Spring 2024



**The Mayor of CHAMPS
Wears Many Hats**



Engage in Community with UDS

A Message from Brian Thomas, President/CEO

First things first. On behalf of UDS and the entire community of providers, thank you so much to everyone who went to the polls last November and voted in favor of Issue 17. The passage of the county-wide issue served to continue taxpayer support of Summit DD. This is such a critical component of the somewhat complicated formula that secures public funding for individuals with developmental disabilities. We thank the voters for being informed and for ensuring that the life-enriching options remain in place for the individuals we support.

In March of each year, we celebrate Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. We focus our efforts on raising understanding about developmental disabilities and promoting inclusion and acceptance of the individuals we serve. The aim is to increase public awareness of the challenges they face, as well as to celebrate their strengths, achievements and contributions to society.

At UDS, we open our doors each weekday to 220 adults who choose to attend the UDS day programs. I am privileged to interact with the most unique and engaging people every day, each with their own interests, personalities and preferences. Our day programs are intensely focused on spending time away from the UDS building and taking part in all the marvelous venues, events and opportunities throughout the greater Akron community. While they are in the facility, more than 70 of these individuals aspire to perform work in our prevocational settings.

I am privileged to interact with the most unique and engaging people every day . . .

Over the years, the number of businesses that provide the project work (often light assembly or packaging) for prevocational DD programs has dwindled. As a result, programming has pivoted towards a combination of community-based learning opportunities, implementing a skill development curriculum in addition to paid work to develop general work and social skills advancing a person on their individualized path to employment. Work continues to be a valued component of the program. A variety of experiences, both community and center-based, result in skill development and independence with an eagerness of our folks to work, earn money and learn new things.

If you are a business owner or manager who is involved in the manufacturing of goods, and who might wish to provide some work for individuals with developmental disabilities, we would love to connect with you. Our management team will happily provide a facility tour and share with you the details of how those relationships operate, and what types of work we can do.

Finally, with spring on the horizon, I invite you to check out the All-Star Training Club. Hundreds of people enjoy staying healthy through our organized sports, while also making friends and nourishing their competitive spirit. Spring sports will be underway in April, including track & field, gymnastics, soccer and bocce. We welcome participants of all ability levels, and it's not too late to sign up. You can find the details and registration forms at www.udsakron.org.

Brian

Celebrating



UDS celebrates its 75th anniversary!

Join us for activities throughout 2024 as we celebrate this milestone!

More information to come.

Winning Everyone Over with His Smile

Celebrating Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

With a heart of gold, a winning smile and a go-getter attitude, Jimmy is affectionately known as the mayor of CHAMPS, UDS's "semi-retirement" program for individuals who are 50 years and older.

Young at Heart

After a few years in our Prevocational Services program, Jimmy joined CHAMPS in 2021. According to Lauren Presutti, a direct support professional working at CHAMPS, "His easygoing, laid back personality, friendliness and genuine smile made him a magnet for our program. While the program is geared to seniors you would never know that when Jimmy is around." His enthusiasm and playful spirit are contagious. If someone is having a bad day, he is always ready with a compliment or a joke, hoping to bring forth a smile from the person.

Interactive Services

While at CHAMPS, Jimmy participates in the work pod three days a week, and the activity pods two days a week, with the opportunity to participate in a community outing one of those days. In the work pod he focuses on his tasks while communicating with his peers. He has been known to assist others, helping them understand something



CHAMPS Program Supervisor Jessie Craig sports an interesting hairdo, along with Jimmy, on crazy hair day during UDS inclusion week last year.

that they may be struggling to complete. In the activity pod, he energetically participates in the exercise segment (as shown on the cover during a drumming fitness segment) and enjoys discussing current events or *Chase's Calendar of Events*. He often asks questions about various topics, prompting conversations within the group. This leads him to suggest activities and community trips that correspond with the topics covered and staff members work hard to incorporate his ideas. He says, "I enjoy hanging out with my friends here at CHAMPS and going out on trips."

Leisure Time

Jimmy lives with his sister Patty and enjoys regular visits with his dad. When they get together

they like venturing out to places like the Hartville Flea Market, where they take advantage of big sales. At home, he enjoys working on crossword puzzles and spending time with his friend Theresa, who comes over every other week. When the weather is warmer he says, "I like working in the yard and helping some of my older neighbors clean up the leaves in their yards."

Whether he's at UDS or at home, he's a charmer and a "smooth operator" with a big heart. It is easy to see why he's the mayor of CHAMPS, leading by example, offering a smile and a helping hand to anyone in need.

Awareness

Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month is a nationwide event to raise awareness about the inclusion of people with disabilities and address some of the barriers that those with disabilities face. During this month, and every month, UDS celebrates abilities and the tremendous impact positive people like Jimmy have on us and in the community.

For more information about CHAMPS (Community Health And Meaningful Programming for Seniors), contact **Jessie Craig**, program supervisor, at 330-762-9755, ext. 224.

Technology for Visionaries

High school baseball can be a life-defining moment for some, but for Youngstown resident Ed Emerick, a game defined his life in an unexpected way. As the sun came down over the stadium, Ed stood in the outfield with an open glove waiting for action. At the mound, a pitch is thrown, and the batter sends the ball high. Ed readies himself to catch the ball but loses the trajectory as it returns to Earth.

Ed couldn't see the ball.

The batter didn't hit a home run, rather, Ed was experiencing symptoms of retinitis pigmentosa: a genetic condition that causes cells in the retina to slowly break down over time, bringing about vision loss. It's a disorder he also shares with his grandfather, brother and his two cousins, and a condition for which the Judith A. Read Low Vision Services at UDS was able to provide support.

"Low Vision Services is the only reason I've been able to successfully remain employed in a very good career," Ed says. "I'd say there is no way for me to know where I'd be if it wasn't for the clinic and Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD)."

Looking through the Fog

Ed compares his vision to someone driving through fog in the daytime. "Glare for me is huge," he states emphatically. In addition to influencing his peripheral vision, Ed experiences central vision loss and his eyes have problems responding to light. His reaction to light requires him to keep several pairs of sunglasses in his big Ford

pickup, as different levels of glare require a variety of lenses to protect his vision.

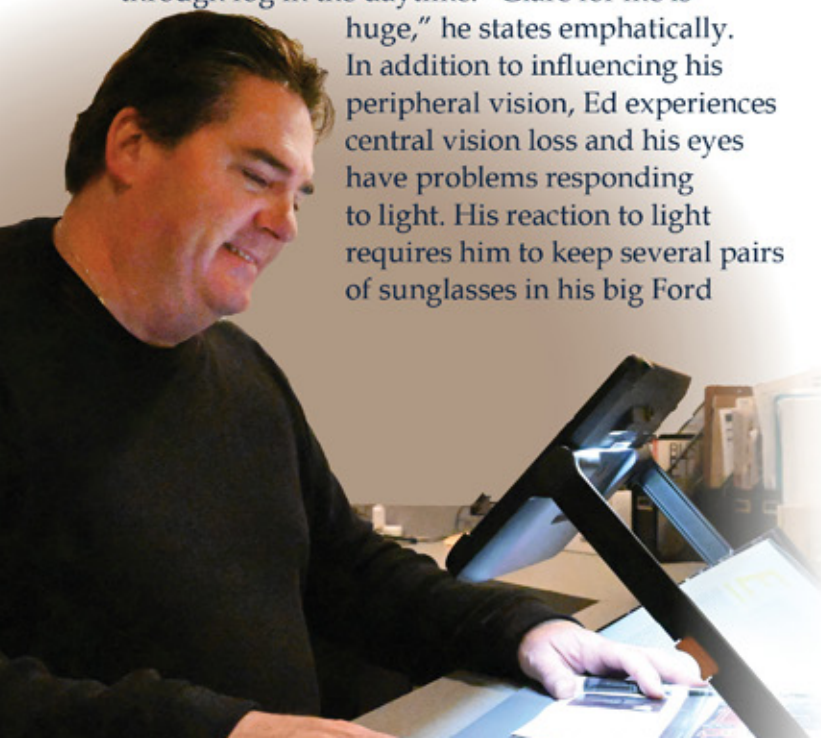
Originally an electrician by trade, Ed found himself retreating to an office position helping teach apprentices as his condition worsened. In his younger days Ed was able to undergo Lasik surgery—something he would not be a candidate for today. Though the operation provided momentary relief, the surgery eventually caused his corneas to collapse, requiring specialty contact lenses to correct the issue.

Ed maintained his jovial attitude despite the challenges of living with a vision impairment, but he also knew when it was time to get serious about finding a new solution. That's when OOD and Ed's vocational rehabilitation counselor in Youngstown suggested he visit our Low Vision Services located in Akron.

Delivering Technology

Low Vision Services taps into the self-proclaimed "tech-geek" within Ed, supporting him with a variety of aids and assistive technology paid for by OOD.

For those with retinitis pigmentosa, the chances of continuing to drive are low. Fortunately for Ed, his condition is as unique as he is, giving him just enough vision to rely on the Ocutech 6x Sport II Bioptic Lens for driving. Think of the device as turbo-charged bifocals. With it attached to the top of a pair of glasses, it allows Ed to focus better on streetlights and signs along the road and helped him to obtain a special driver's license through the state of Ohio. Not everyone with a visual impairment is a candidate for the bioptic driving program. Individuals must meet specific



vision requirements and pass a challenging and comprehensive test administered by an Ohio driver's license examiner for both day and nighttime privileges.

"I will tell you one thing, and that's if you learn nothing else, you will learn to pay attention to signs when you're driving with a bioptic lens," Ed says as he cleans his sunglasses. "I think bioptic drivers are safer than most drivers."

When he's not in the driver's seat, he uses a smaller monocular lens, capable of capturing road signs and highway exits to help his wife navigate while they drive to the Ohio River with his beautiful boat in tow.

Ed also uses technology to achieve work-life balance. One notable improvement would be his closed-caption television, or CCTV. His original CCTV took up the entire space under his desk at work, whereas his Humanware Explorē 12 is roughly the size of an iPad. The Explorē 12 allows Ed to freely read wherever he feels comfortable, offering mobility and convenience over his massive CCTV.

Additionally, the MyEye by OrCam gives him the best of both worlds. A device that attaches to his glasses like the bioptic lens, the MyEye is capable of viewing text or objects and relaying the information to Ed audibly, allowing his eyes a chance to rest without missing critical information. Thanks to Low Vision Services, Ed sees life in a whole new light.

For those hesitant to pay a visit to Low Vision Services, Ed has this advice: "Be honest about your visual issues and don't assume you know what all your options are and what visual aids may be of benefit. Let the pros guide you through the process."

If you're interested in learning more about any of the services provided by the clinic or its large selection of low vision aids and assistive technology, call 330-762-9755 or visit us online at www.udsakron.org.



Making a Difference One Bowl at a Time

What's better than a bowl of comforting soup on a winter afternoon? Enjoying the hot soup *and* supporting a worthy cause. After a four-year hiatus the return of the BraVo! Souper Bowl was a delicious way to warm our bodies and our hearts in support of One of a Kind Pet Rescue.

Several employees of UDS made their favorite soup recipes and entered them into the flavor-filled competition that was held on Friday, February 9. The Judges' Choice award went to Brian Thomas, UDS president/CEO, for his cheesy potato soup, and the winner of the Tasters' Choice award was Kay Shellenberger, vice president of programs, for her crack chicken potato soup.

Thanks to everyone who supported the event, BraVo! raised \$660, along with an assortment of pet supplies, and presented the donation to One of a Kind Pet Rescue's CFO Jim Bartlebaugh who was on hand for the event.



New Tool Strengthens Services for Job Seekers

In October 2023, UDS Community Employment Services was one of 48 programs chosen nationally to participate in a year-long pilot project called ES-Coach through the University of Massachusetts Boston. ES-Coach is a smartphone-based tool and its development was funded by the National Institute on Disability. The Kessler Foundation is funding the Pilot Project to test the software. The goal of the tool is to help community employment teams visualize their employment support practices, reflect on how they are providing services, set goals and act for continuous quality improvement.

Our Community Employment staff members receive a text message from ES-Coach each day at a random time that asks three quick questions about the employment supports they are providing in a specific 30-minute time frame and then shares a tip about best practices. "It really helps us see where

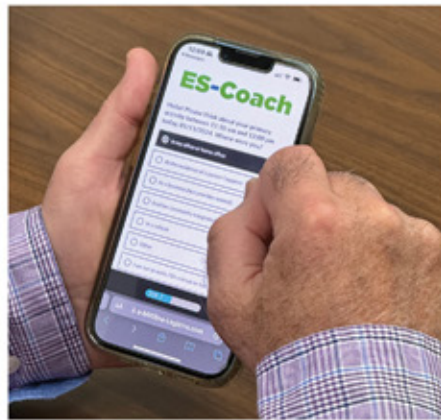
we're spending our time," says UDS Employment Specialist Dan DePasquale. "ES-Coach allows us to determine the best ways we can help our employment seekers." The data feeds a dashboard where community employment staff and the community employment manager can check our implementation of supported and customized employment and compare our data with anonymous aggregated data from other programs in the study.

Training specialists from the University of Massachusetts

do group and individual coaching with the managers of the participating employment programs to review and process data to help managers determine areas for quality improvement and how to implement best practices in employment supports.

UDS Community Employment Manager Kristen Campagnano says, "I like the micro learning suggestions, they're nice tips to help our best practices." Along with discovering and participating in the program, Kristen also recently shared the benefits of ES-Coach at an Ohio Provider Resource Association meeting, suggesting the program to other employment providers throughout Ohio.

For more information on ES-Coach or any of the community employment services offered by UDS, contact **Kristen Campagnano** at kcampagnano@udsakron.org or by calling 330-762-9755, ext 246.



Inclusion Day at UDS





Our 30-year-old vehicle lift has been replaced with a new four-post lift from BendPak. In addition to making the life of our mechanic easier, this 27,000-pound vehicle lift also helps UDS remain compliant with the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT). With contorting ramps and an upgrade from a chain to a galvanized cable lifting mechanism, the new lift will keep our vehicles and passengers safe on the road for decades to come. We thank the Charles E. and Mabel M. Ritchie Memorial Foundation for the grant that contributed to this purchase.



Students from Stark State's occupational therapy program visited UDS on Tuesday, February 27. SociAbilities Program Supervisor Heidi Young is pictured above demonstrating a regulating drinking cup while explaining how adaptive aids benefit the people we serve. The group toured the agency while they were here and learned about all of our programs. Students from the program tour UDS two times a year.

Save the date!

UDS



ALL-STARS

ALLEY

Make plans now to join us at an exciting new venue!

Saturday, July 20

6-9 p.m.

Clutch Lanes & Sports Center

4190 State Rd.

Cuyahoga Falls, 44223

Exploring The Art of Living

When the first pages of *Kaleidoscope* were compiled and copied in 1979, the goal was to provide a creative outlet for adults with disabilities who were in the vocational program of the agency now known as United Disability Services. Forty-five years later, it is an award-winning publication respected both nationally and internationally, with hundreds of submissions received each year from all over the globe. We are excited to celebrate our anniversary and to announce the publication of issue 88. In this issue, several authors share ways they're mastering the art of living with disability as an essential element of a creatively crafted life. We hope you'll enjoy the work we have selected, and that you'll find something that resonates. Check it out at www.KaleidoscopeOnline.org.



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You can also hear authors reading excerpts of their work from past issues on our podcast which can be found at KaleidoscopePodcast.podbean.com.

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◆
You can make a difference in the life of someone with a disability by donating today.
To learn more visit: www.udsakron.org/donate



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Volunteer Feature: Joan Wagner

After retiring from her career as a certified occupational therapy assistant (COTA), Joan Wagner knew she wanted to stay active and involved in the community. She explored volunteer opportunities, but nothing seemed quite right until she discovered UDS through the VANTAGE RSVP volunteer program. "I found my niche," Joan says. "Everyone is welcoming and it's such a positive atmosphere."

Joan spends a few hours every Wednesday with her friends in the CHAMPS day program at UDS. Embracing the program's focus on enhancing the physical and cognitive health of mature

individuals, Joan uses her skills to help with art, craft projects, Bingo and other activities. She appreciates the excitement and willingness to try new things she sees each week in the program participants. "I get more back than I give!"

If you are thinking of volunteering in the community, Joan's advice is "Try! You never know unless you try. You might find your niche, too."

For information on how you can volunteer at UDS, contact **Amy Tubergen**, Community Relations administrative assistant, at atubergen@udsakron.org.

