

ASPIRE!

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

- Colin Wright

A publication of United Disability Services

FALL 2026

**Diverse Skills,
Stronger
Workforce**





Connections and Ripples

A Message from Brian Thomas, President/CEO

While planning for my upcoming retirement, I've been reflecting on a multitude of wonderful moments and daily connections that have enriched my working life. Throughout much of the 1980s, I worked summers as a direct support professional at a summer day camp. When I began working at UDS nearly forty years later, how delighted I was to see that so many individuals whom I knew as children are now thriving in the programs that UDS offers for adults.

While a camp counselor in my twenties, and now as a senior citizen, I've enjoyed bringing a guitar to work from time to time, to entertain and sing along with others. Music has a special way of connecting people. As a child at day camp, Glen would come close and touch the guitar, fascinated by the vibrations and excited to hear familiar songs. Decades later, I am so happy that Glen and I are again able to enjoy that connection during my "bring your guitar to work" days.

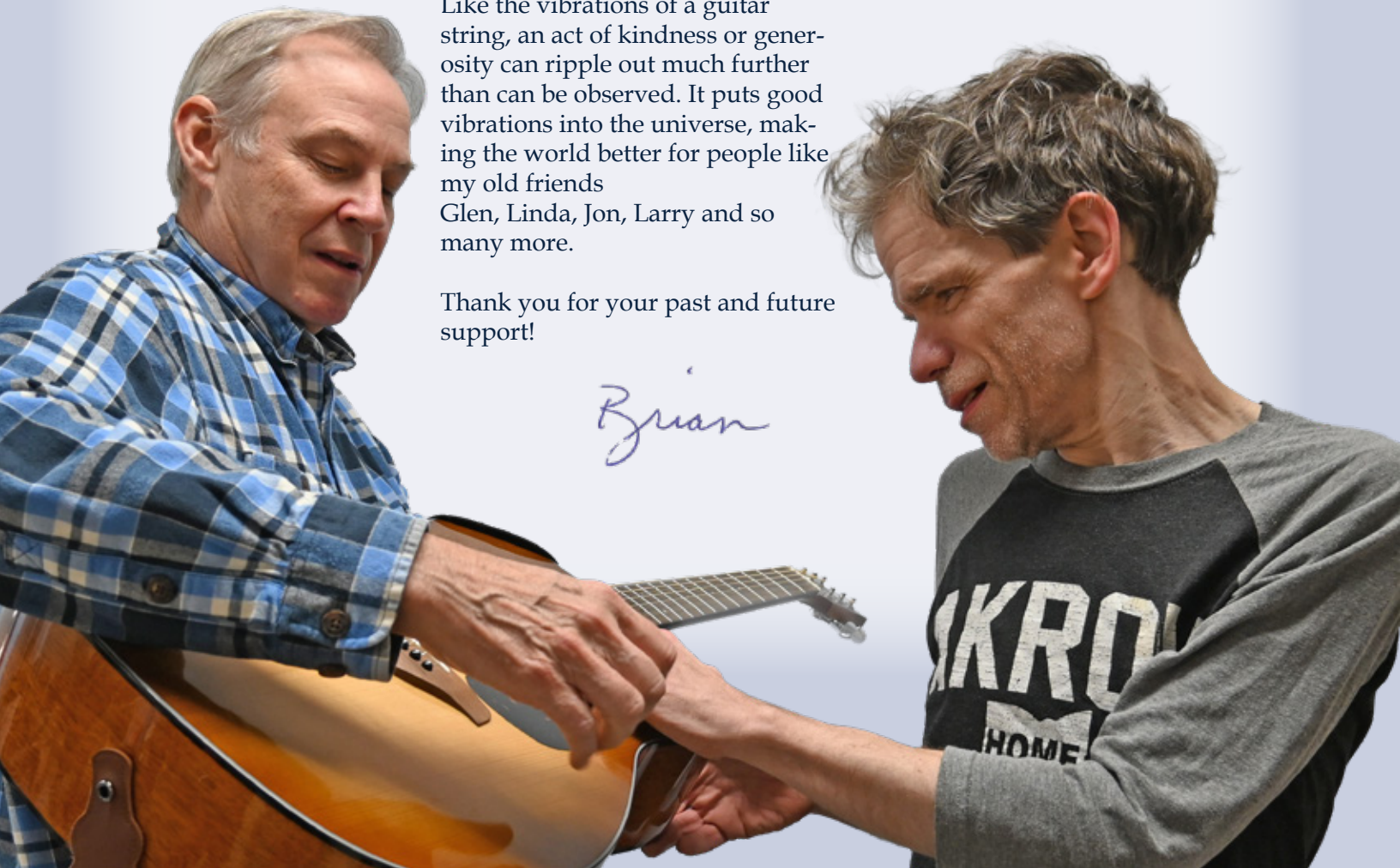
Fostering experiences, connections and good vibrations for hundreds of people each day requires an amazing staff and significant financial resources. We rely on a complex mix of public support, grants from foundations and corporations, fundraising activities and kind donations from people of all walks of life.

Will you consider setting up a recurring monthly contribution to UDS? In this issue of *Aspire!*, we are launching "The Ripple Effect" campaign to encourage recurring giving of ANY amount each month. It is so easy to set up on our website, www.udsakron.org and every dollar and cent will go directly to program support.

Like the vibrations of a guitar string, an act of kindness or generosity can ripple out much further than can be observed. It puts good vibrations into the universe, making the world better for people like my old friends Glen, Linda, Jon, Larry and so many more.

Thank you for your past and future support!

Brian



Finding the Right Fit

Celebrating National Disability Employment Awareness Month

Two years ago a struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) pushed Maddie into a mental health crisis, leaving her anxious and worried about the future. Could she reenter the workforce? Would she be able to find a job that would relate to her degree in criminal justice but not trigger her OCD and jeopardize her mental health?

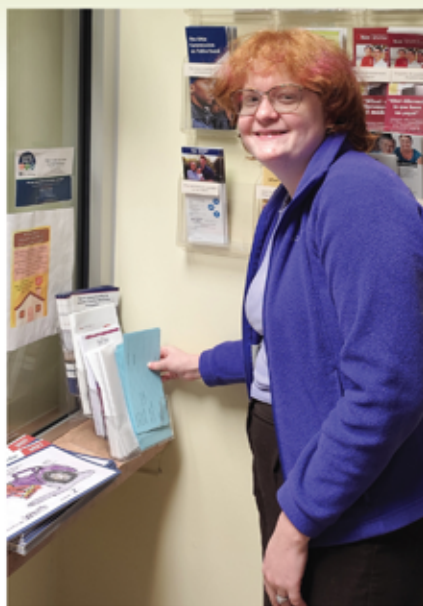
Finding Support

With the help of Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, she was referred to UDS Community Employment Services for individualized job search assistance. Our team worked closely with Maddie to understand her goals and needs. They weren't just looking for *any* job, they wanted to find the best fit, a job where she would be successful.

Back to Work

After a temporary placement working as a clerk for probate court, she landed a job with the Child Support Enforcement Agency. She is now working full time as a clerical specialist, taking payments, answering calls and handling emails and faxes. She loves the job and her coworkers.

"Having this job has changed my life. My mental health tanks when I don't have a job and I get really depressed. Having this job I am happier. I'm more functional and I can get out of bed in the morning. This job means so much to me. I love working there."



Maddie credits the UDS staff members with helping her believe she could find a good job based on her qualifications. Completing most of her college education while she was in high school, Maddie was 19 years old when she graduated with her degree, a testament to her dedication and organizational skills.

Dismantling Barriers

Community Employment Manager Kristen Campagnano says, "Maddie was hired because she brought immense skill to the table and was the absolute best person for the job! My role was simply to help her dismantle the barriers standing between her talent and the county's open door. Navigating civil service hiring can be daunting for anyone, but it presents unique hurdles for candidates with disabilities. We worked closely with Maddie to identify her accommodation needs and discussed how and

when to have that conversation with her employer. The result was a total win-win: a college graduate launched a meaningful career in public service and county government gained a highly-qualified, dedicated professional."

NDEAM

National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) is held in October of each year to educate the public about issues faced by people with disabilities as well as to celebrate their talents and the important role they play in America's economy.

Maddie says, "Most people don't consider the fact that those living with disabilities (visible and invisible) need jobs. There *are* people with disabilities in the workforce. They may not disclose their disabilities but they exist and awareness of that is important."

Life is busy and bright for Maddie and her husband, Nathan. With both of them working, they're enjoying the stability of a two-income home shared with their three cats. A creative soul, Maddie has her own business painting designs onto press-on nails. Canvases don't get much smaller than that of a fingernail so her attention to detail is perfect for this side job.

If you are seeking employment, we want to help you find the right fit. Contact **Kristen Campagnano** at kcampagnano@udsakron.org or 330-762-9755.



Inclusive. Athletic. Challenging. Fun.

Meet the team that is driving All-Star Training Club forward.

The All-Star Training Club (ATC) offers sports year-round to **teens and adults of all abilities**. "ATC is more than a sports program—it's a place where everyone belongs, everyone has a role and every accomplishment matters. We don't just create opportunities for athletes to participate; we create opportunities for them to shine, challenge themselves, discover their strengths and be celebrated for who they are," says Kelly Maze, supervisor of the program (pictured left).

We are excited to announce Darius McGhee (center) has joined the team as a recreational

specialist along with Elaina Fox (right), who has already become a familiar face since she began in April of this year. Together they are structuring sporting activities that will keep athletes engaged and thriving.

Fox has enjoyed getting to know the athletes and seeing their enthusiasm. She says, "I chose this type of work because I love working with people and helping create opportunities for everyone to be involved. What makes ATC so special is everyone adapts to each other and they find ways to work around different abilities so everyone can participate. It brings together athletes, volunteers,

families and people of all different ages and backgrounds."

McGhee, the newest member of the team, enjoys coaching and says, "It isn't about being the best, it's about giving your best each time. It's about showing up and feeling accomplished. A feeling only sports can give."

Maze concludes, "Through sports, our athletes build confidence, friendships, independence, teamwork and a sense of pride." For more information about how you can join, contact **Kelly Maze** (contact information below), or visit www.allstartrainingclub.org. Go team!



Flag football, bocce and bowling are already in full swing but there is still time to sign up for **volleyball** this fall:

October 24 through December 12

Saturdays from 6-7:30 p.m.

**Julie Billiard School Akron,
380 Mineola Ave., Akron**

For more information or to register, contact **Kelly Maze** at 330-762-9755, ext. 242, or kmaze@udsakron.org. The 2026-2027 calendar of sports will be mailed out to athletes soon.

Thanks to everyone who supported
All-Stars at the Alley we raised
\$50,000

for inclusive sports! We hope you'll join us next year!





The Ripple Effect

Why Monthly Giving Matters

Have you ever tossed a pebble into a pond and watched the ripples spread? What begins as a single small action creates waves that reach far beyond the point of impact.

That's the idea behind **The Ripple Effect**, our new monthly giving community.

When you join **The Ripple Effect**, your monthly gift provides dependable support that helps sustain our mission all year long. It supports the programs, experiences and services that empower the individuals we serve to learn, grow, connect and thrive.

Monthly giving is one of the easiest ways to make a difference. Your donation is automatically processed each month, allowing you to easily support our mission all year round. Go to www.udsakron.org/donate. Click "Donate Online." Click "YES" in response to the question: Would you like to make this contribution a monthly recurring gift?

The best part? It doesn't take a large gift to create meaningful change. An individual act of kindness creates a far-reaching wave of impact.

Join The Ripple Effect today.

*One gift.
Every month.
Endless possibilities.*



Ride with UDS

With one of the largest fleets of accessible vehicles in the area, UDS Transportation Services provides safe and reliable transportation for our passengers. You might think we only provide rides to individuals who attend the agency's adult day programs but we do much more than that.

- We contract with Summit County Department of Job and Family Services to provide transportation to eligible individuals. Non-Emergency Transportation (NET) services, both in- and out-of-county, is provided for **medical appointments**. Students are transported to **therapy schools**.
- Our lift-equipped vehicles are available to provide **shuttle services** for community events such as Special Olympics and the Soap Box Derby.
- We also provide transportation for **organizations and community groups** on a contract basis.

Consider us for your next event, medical appointment or for daily transportation to day programming or school. For more information contact **Jim Acton** at jacton@udsakron.org.





Embracing Community Impact

BraVo! is committed to serving the community and enhancing personal growth through volunteerism. For more than twelve years our volunteers have packed dental bags for Embracing Futures, a nonprofit organization that provides financial assistance for orthodontic and dental care for underprivileged children in Summit, Stark, Portage, Medina and Wayne counties. During our partnership with them, BraVo! has assembled more than 66,000

bags! Program Supervisor Heidi Imhoff says, "Our volunteers don't just assemble dental bags; they pack them with genuine care and excitement, knowing each kit gives a child a healthier smile. Our volunteers love the hands-on nature of the job because the impact is so immediate and rewarding."

This year Embracing Futures is celebrating their 80th anniversary and they visited UDS to interview

team members and film our folks in action as they assembled bags. We congratulate them on their milestone anniversary and for giving children the confidence to share their beautiful, bright smiles with the world.

Is there a way we can serve your nonprofit organization? Are you looking for a rewarding adult day program? Contact **Heidi Imhoff** at 330-762-9755, or himhoff@udsakron.org.



Decked out in RubberDucks apparel, participants from Adult Day Services cheered on the home team during three games at the ballpark this summer, thanks to the Jill Marsey Recreation Fund. Two other trips pictured here were to the Akron Art Museum and Greater Cleveland Aquarium (partially covered by the Jill Marsey Recreation Fund). Going out into the community to explore and experience new things is a wonderful way to connect with the world around us and provides our participants with some unforgettable hands-on activities, like the opportunity to pet a stingray!



BEFORE



AFTER

Bocce Courts Get a Facelift as Skills are Honed

After a sweltering, humid summer, the bocce courts we use had become overgrown with grass and weeds. Prevocational Services came to the rescue, donned their gardening gloves and cleared out all of the courts before All-Star Training Club's bocce season began in September. Joining Prevocational Services was Eagle Scout, Ian Spangler, who helped with the courts and painted one that was in rough shape. The transformation is remarkable.

Prevocational Services Supervisor Kristy Mulneix says, "Volunteering gives individuals opportunities to learn skills that will help them progress on their path to employment. They are also able to support programs within the agency and build meaningful relationships with others in the community."

By volunteering, they gain a strong sense of teamwork and reliability while mastering key workplace skills like time management, safety and problem-solving. At the same time they are able to explore possible options for future employment because the primary focus of the program is to help individuals develop the tools they need for employment in a community setting.

Current volunteer jobs include serving meals at local community centers for the Salvation Army, doing janitorial work for local churches and PBS in Kent, and providing support to the Akron Food Bank. Members of one church have even invited our folks to join their exercise class on Tuesdays and Fridays. Friendships have been formed from these experiences that are valued by each individual and

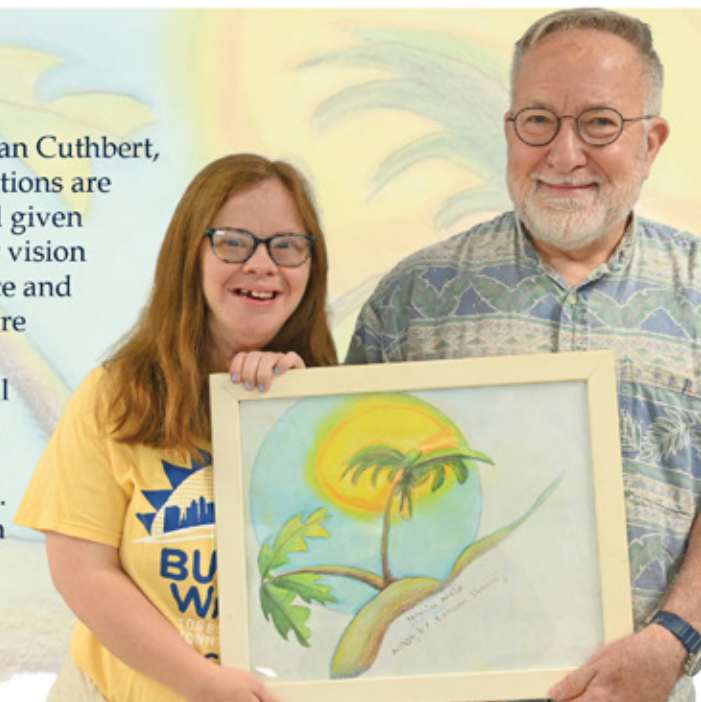
our community friends as well.

Another way our participants develop skills is through paid production work done in-house where they earn a paycheck for the work they complete. Jobs include putting cotton swabs into bags, packaging travel kits for pet waste (Tidy Paws), assembling small metal parts (Young Regulator) and collating packets (Summa). Individuals are also paid hourly while developing skills and performing janitorial duties, light maintenance, groundskeeping and mail delivery at UDS.

To learn how individuals can join Prevocational Services or how businesses can contract with UDS to complete production work, contact **Kristy Mulneix** at 330-762-9755, ext. 271 or kmulneix@udsakron.org.

Collective Expression

A creative collaboration has flourished between local artist Dan Cuthbert, a weekly volunteer, and many participants at UDS. Illustrations are drawn and colored by folks in our programs, like Kathleen, and given to Cuthbert. He sits down with each person to understand their vision for their illustration. The line work serves as the soul of the piece and Cuthbert breathes life into each one with subtle gradients, texture and vibrant colors. This partnership is about amplification—the self-taught artist brings out the strength and beauty of the initial drawing and together they create an original piece of work that is framed and put on display at UDS. After a few weeks on display, the finished illustrations are given to the artists to keep. Kathleen is thrilled with the beautiful result of her collaboration and she already has it hanging in her Hawaiian-themed room.



United Disability Services

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The mission of UDS is to provide and support inclusive, life-enriching options through person-centered programs and advocacy.

UDS is a non-for-profit organization [501(c)(3)] with programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF).

Bob Chess, chairperson

Brian Thomas, president/CEO

Lisa Armstrong, director of

communications and external relations

Sandy Palmer, editor

Amy Tubergen, writer



You can make a difference in the life of someone with a disability by donating today.

To learn more visit: www.udsakron.org/donate



UDS

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ENGAGE
EXCEL

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Volunteer Feature: Opportunities for Groups

UDS recently hosted two groups looking to build community and teamwork through volunteerism.

The University of Akron's National Residence Hall Honorary students spent an afternoon with bowlers in our All-Star Training Club inclusive sports program. Jess Cliff, student leader, appreciated UDS' welcoming and inclusive community. "Everyone was so kind and encouraging. Our members had a chance to create strong relationships while giving back."

Cameron Carris PE, director at Ketchum & Walton Co., and coworkers spent a morning in our Adult Day Services assisting in a spirited cornhole tournament. "We want to support the community we live and work in and build community." Everyone enjoyed the camaraderie and friendly competition.

If your group is interested in team building through volunteering, visit udsakron.org or call **Amy Tubergen** at 330-762-9755, ext. 243, for more information on volunteer opportunities at UDS.

