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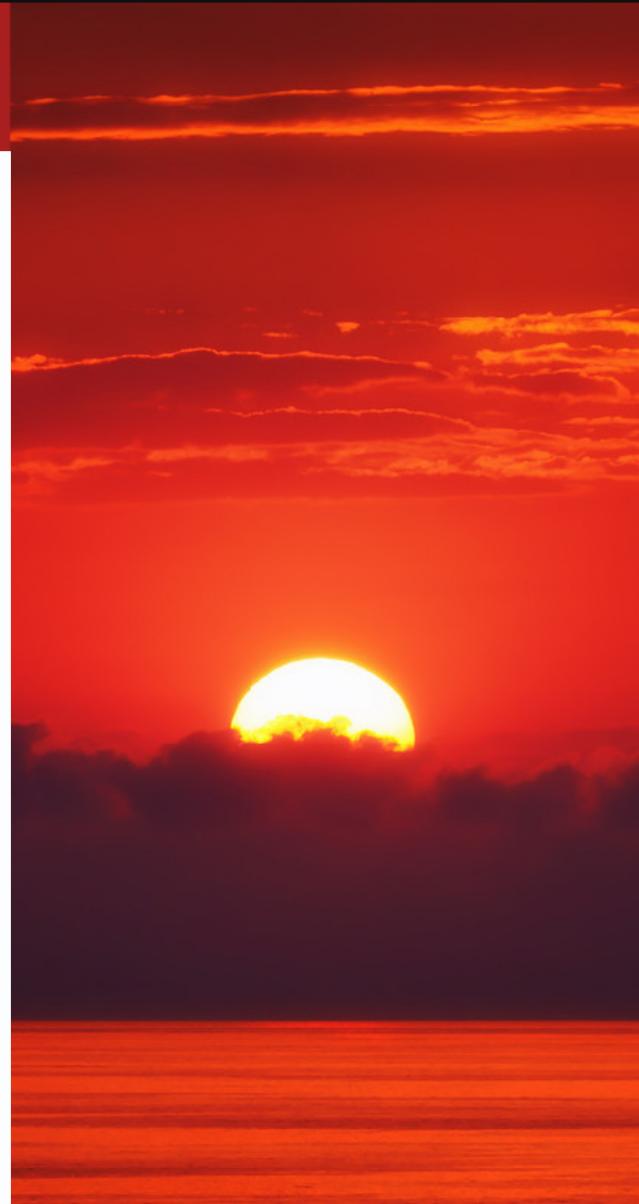
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Celebrating 10 Years of Broadening Horizons:

Where a Decade of Growth Meets a Future of Opportunity



As the NATS team and I wind down our Fall semester and 2025, I reflect on how many people I've interacted with through the years; so many that it's hard to remember. Faces and names come in and out of my memory, and short and long narratives come to mind. Almost daily I get to meet and even work with new people, many of whom are in higher education and/or in the autism/neurodiversity ecosystem. All of them have a special place in the mosaic of my world. In mid-November, my professional organization, the American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA) had its Centennial Anniversary in Washington, DC. The NATS team and I attended. I made plans to go to certain workshops and see particular speakers, but oftentimes my schedule was spontaneously changed as I heard my name called across the Washington Convention Center or from someone coming down the escalator. Sometimes it was a person shouting "Kathy;" other times "Ms. D-B," while some called out my full name "Kathy Dow-Burger" or even an old name, "Kathy Dow." Having been a speech-language practitioner for over 32 years, including before I was married, I've met people at all stages of my life. There were so many current and former students (now colleagues), former classmates and colleagues, bosses and co-workers, as well as new acquaintances and maybe even new friends. We can't forget what kind of thumbprint we've left behind when we attend such events as these.

Three big occasions are happening or will happen this year. First [NATS is running a crowdfunding campaign, Launch UMD, to raise funds for our new, Lab for Autism and Neurodiversity Employment \(LANE\)](#). This is a new SIGNA program to support our autistic and neurodivergent students to get positions in campus labs, internships, and employment. Second, SIGNA's celebrating our **10-year anniversary the evening of Friday, April 10, 2026, in the UMD Stamp Student Union**. Last, NATS will have the honor of [co-hosting the University of Maryland \(UMD\) College of Behavioral and Social Sciences' \(BSOS\) Community Forum](#) along with UMD's Autism Research Consortium (UMARC) on Wednesday, April 15, 2026, from 4-7pm in UMD's Edward St. John building. These events remind us to celebrate innovation, firsts, and milestones. If we don't, before we know it, the moments are past.



If you consider yourself part of either the neurodiversity-autism ecosystem or a friend of SIGNA, **please scan the Save-the-Date QR code** or click on <https://go.umd.edu/SIGNAanniversary> to get more details and to fill out our form. We'd love to send you more information! In this issue, we highlight our new employment lab, the Tapestry space for UMD students with disabilities, the latest UMARC research, and our modified PEERS program for college-bound NATS high schoolers. You will also find current team photos alongside candid memories of SIGNA through the years. These images are imprinted on my heart; they haven't just left a thumbprint, but a "two-thumbs-up" print on my life.

Thanks everyone!

Truly yours,

Kathryn M. Dow-Burger

TEN **10** YEARS

Friedman Family Director of Neurodiversity & Autism Transition Services (NATS) in HESP



From Spark to Flame that Burns Brightly SIGNA's Genesis Story

What's it like to be a first? For some people it's unique to a situation in time or space like being the first child born into a family or the first house on the block. It can also be exclusive to a person's experience; like the first time flying or even your first love. As a person who calls herself a risk-taker, a creative, and a dreamer, the task of starting something from scratch was not new to me nor out of the ordinary. Conceptualizing a program such as SIGNA at the University of Maryland (UMD) was exciting and sorely needed. This notion of a support program for autistic UMD students **was first shared with me by Dr. Jo Ann Hutchinson**, the former Director of our then Disabilities Support Services (DSS), now called Accessibility and Disability Service (ADS). She conveyed that the accommodations students received helped with their access needs; however, many of them still needed more skill-building in areas such as **executive functions, social interaction, self-advocacy, and conflict resolution**.

These skills were in our speech-language therapy scope of practice, and the spark was lit to talk to the Speech and Language Clinic Director in HESP, **Colleen Worthington**, about piloting a program for interested neurodivergent students. She later handed

me a journal article about the Hearing and Speech Clinic at the University of Rhode Island that had created a skills-training program for neurodivergent students as part of their SLP graduate students clinical training program. That was enough for the spark to ignite a flame and the concept of SIGNA moved forward.

Soon after, one of my HESP colleagues, **Nan Ratner**, suggested generating a catchy name for the pilot program and the first iteration was the Social Interaction Group Network (SIGN). However, being a Hearing and Speech program, we soon learned that this created some confusion with sign language. So, we added the "A" for autism, until someone from our UMD Counseling Department said she had a student who was not diagnosed with autism, but could benefit from our support which sealed our decision to name the program the **Social Interaction Group Network for All**.

We are celebrating our 10th anniversary this year!



L - R: Kathy Dow-Burger, Kim Martin, Caroline Kettl, Courtney Luckman, Natalia White



My oh my, we've come so far as we expanded from one program with an enrollment of four UMD students to now 25. In 2019, our program experienced a turning point thanks to the generous support of **Martin and Dina Friedman** who gave us \$500K, which included a \$250K endowment; and, in 2023, added a \$1 million endowment, which birthed the Neurodiversity and Autism Transition Services (NATS) as our umbrella program. We now have three college student support programs within SIGNA: **1) Odyssey** for our freshman as they learn to navigate campus life and college coursework for the first time; **2) Launch** for our upperclassmen who are building their soft skills for lab work and internships; and finally, **3) our new Lab for Autism and Neurodiversity Employment (LANE)** where juniors and seniors work more directly on the preparation for internships and the workplace.

NATS also supports college-bound high schoolers in **1) the EFFECT program** to develop their executive function skills to prepare for college work they'll encounter and **2) the modified-PEERS program** to build their social interaction abilities by exploring sources of friendship, finding friends that align with their interests, and learning how to self-advocate and resolve conflicts. In recent years, many other generous donors have also given monetary gifts to SIGNA. With our recent donations, the NATS program will use the funds to collaborate with the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences (BSOS) and the University of Maryland Autism Research Consortium (UMARC) to host one of the **first BSOS Community Forums on April 15, 2026**, coinciding with "April is Autism Acceptance and Empowerment" month and SIGNA's 10th

anniversary. Our small SIGNA beginnings in 2016 have led to a powerful NATS impact in the 2025-2026 school year. Remarkably, we've provided therapeutic services **to over 225 teens, young adults, and parents, and have trained more than 400 college students, clinical fellows, and early career professionals through our NATS SIGNA, EFFECT, and modified-PEERS programs.** Go Terps!!!

SIGNA Over the Years

2016



2017



2018



2022



2023



2019

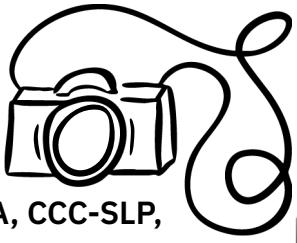


2025



10TH ANNIVERSARY

FALL 2025 NATS Team



SIGNA Peer Coaches, SIGNA Peer Mentors, & PEERS Peer Mentors



Graduate Student Communication Coaches



Aruna Hari Prasad, MA, CCC-SLP, is a Faculty Assistant in the University of Maryland's (UMD) Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences (HESP), where she supervises SIGNA Launch.



Candace Nuzzo Michiels, MA, CCCSLP, is a Faculty Assistant in UMD's Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences, where she oversees and supervises undergraduates for the SIGNA Odyssey program.



Madelein "Maddy" Simonds, MA, CCC-SLP, is a Faculty Assistant for the SIGNA Program in UMD's Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences.



Mairin Batten, MA, CCC-SLP, is a speech-language pathologist with over 10 years of experience. She is the director of the NATS Teen Programs at the University of Maryland (UMD), where she also supervises graduate clinicians.



Kathy Dow-Burger, MA, CCC-SLP is a Clinical Professor and the Friedman Endowed Director of the Neurodiversity and Autism Transition Services (NATS) which includes the SIGNA college program and the EFFECT and modified-PEERS high school college-bound programs.



Lulu Arteaga Baeza, BA a second-year MA-SLP Graduate student, is the NATS Graduate Assistant, and provides support across all programs.

TEN **10** YEARS



CAN Summit

By Sorrah Edwards-Thro



Working with SIGNA members as both an individual coach and a group leader in fall 2024, I realized that autistic students have accumulated years of shame by the time we get to college. The neurodiversity movement has gained a lot of ground, but many of us are still coming in carrying the baggage of lessons we learned about ourselves from well-meaning people who were trying to support us but didn't know how. Whether we view our neurodivergence negatively as something to overcome or positively as a superpower, we might be basing our self-worth on our ability to connect with others and get things done. **We cannot teach social communication and executive functioning skills without also addressing this internalized ableism.**

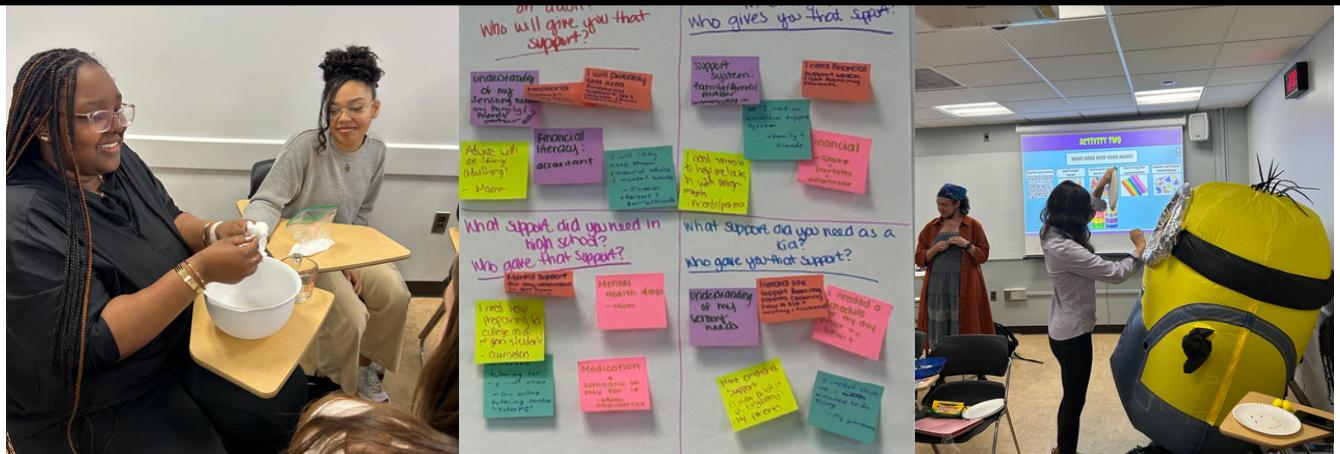
In the spring, I was invited to develop and pilot *Odyssey*, a new group curriculum focused on liberatory social skills through themes of Values & Passions, Disability Justice & Solidarity, and (Self-)Advocacy. We approached skills from a **neurodiversity-affirming perspective** that made space for authentic joy. Instead of emphasizing equal conversation turn-taking, for example, we acknowledged **info-dumping** as a neurodivergent practice and devoted ten minutes of every session to a different group member expanding on a topic of their choice. We discussed the hard parts of having brains that work differently, such as **meltdowns and shutdowns**, with an emphasis on how structural barriers and stigma contribute to these difficulties. And, we **practiced (self-)advocacy** to promote access in the face of these obstacles.

Thanks to funding from the Neurodiversity and Transition Services (NATS) program, I was able to travel to this year's College Autism Network (CAN) Summit in Pittsburgh, PA, to present on the pilot. At the Summit, I had the chance to connect with people across the ecosystem of supporting autistic students' success: from accessibility office staff to researchers, employers, service providers, and fellow neurodivergent folks. Talking with and presenting to this audience, I became even more aware than I already was of **how many people have been looking for resources that directly confront the messaging autistic people have received that there is something wrong with us.**



I'm pleased to report that this fall, SIGNA **continued to draw on the Odyssey material to deliver liberatory content to the program's first-year members**. As I celebrate all that we accomplished and continue to strive for, I want to make sure to shout out my fellow student clinicians, **Favour Bright-Agindotan and Ellie Williams, our supervisors Candace Nuzzo Michiels and Kathy Dow-Burger, and our four SIGNA members** for their willingness to take risks and invest in pulling off this "secret third option." It's been so exciting and sustaining to move closer to liberation together.

Reimagined Odyssey Group Promotes Self-Reflection and Personal Growth



What has been your favorite memory with SIGNA?

“September social” -MJ

“Meeting and getting to know my mentee”

Which lesson did you find the most helpful?

“Self advocacy”

“Group work skills”

“The lesson on burnout was the most helpful for me” -RH

What was your favorite memory with your Peer Mentor?

“Info-dumping activity we did”

“Learning that we share the same interests and being able to connect about the things we enjoy”

“When she brought me mac and cheese for my birthday” -MJ

What are you most proud of from this semester in SIGNA?

“Going out of my comfort zone and being more comfortable speaking out and participating”

“Learning more professional skills”



Student Testimonials

TEN **10** YEARS

“In SIGNA, I am most proud of building my clinical toolbox through connecting with my member.”

-Jessica Lacava, Peer Mentor

“SIGNA has helped me gain more clinical experience in this field, helping me narrow down what I want my focus to be.”

-Anonymous, Peer Mentor

“I am most proud of creating a strong relationship with my member. As a peer mentor it has been amazing to see her improve and grow from the things we have worked on and see her be more social and herself around not only myself but others. It made me feel like I've made an impact in a way I haven't before.”

-YahNi Jones, Peer Mentor

TEN **10** YEARS

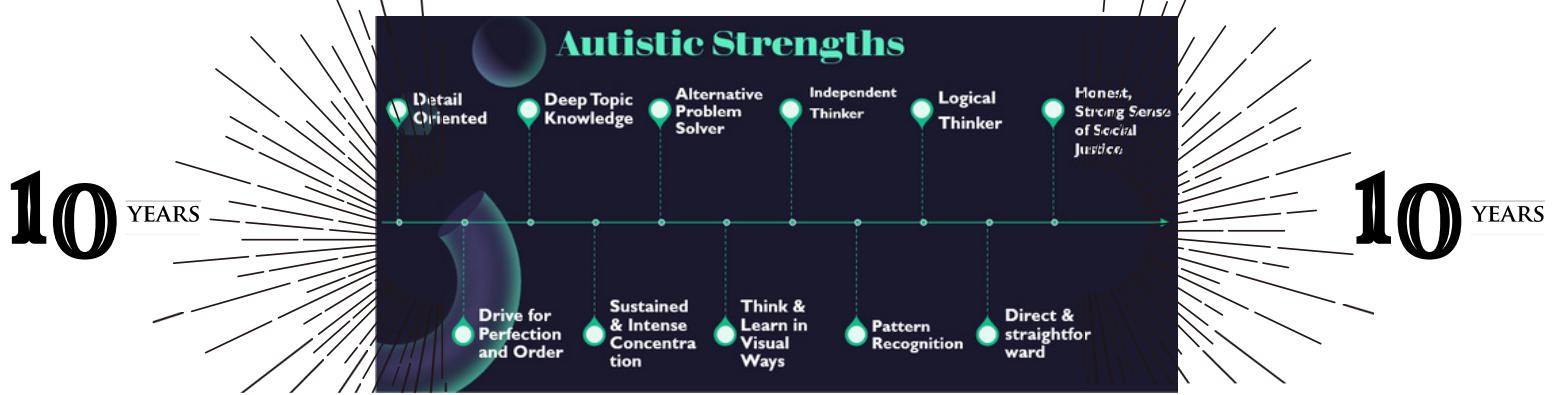
“SIGNA has helped me with my time management and communication skills.”

-Anonymous, SIGNA Launch Member

Empowering Neurodivergent Terps for the Workforce through the Lab for Autism and Neurodiversity Employment



There are certain times in a young adult's life that mark a clear transition from being a minor; one is moving out of the house to get a job or starting college. Another clear shift is getting a full-time job, which gives the person more economic stability, enhances quality of life, and builds an economic future. More than 70,000 autistic young adults transition to employment age each year (IACC, 2023). And approximately 85% of them with a college degree are unemployed or underemployed (Autism Society, 2023). Of employed autistics, they are more likely to lose their jobs due to behavioral and social difficulties rather than to their inability to do their job (Bury, 2020). Interestingly, the average autistic adult employee maintains their job for 2 years compared to the national average of 4.2 years (Wei, et. al., 2018). As a result, our neurodivergent University of Maryland students often face barriers to employment—not due to lack of strengths and talents they bring into the workplace, but due to a lack of inclusive preparation and opportunity.



That's why the NATS-SIGNA program has launched the **Lab for Autism and Neurodiversity Employment (LANE)**, a bold initiative to prepare our students for internships, job placements, and long-term career success.

Our new LANE employment program helps fill the experience gaps that our autistic and neurodivergent students have so they can build their resume, networks, and confidence. These gaps in experiences include working a summer or college job, participating in labs and clubs, and socializing where they develop their communication, listening, conflict resolution, and self-advocacy skills. In addition, LANE will:

- customize employment readiness workshops,
- partner with inclusive employers for internships and job shadowing,
- invite autistic and other neurodivergent professional guest speakers,
- provide peer mentorship and coaching, and
- create research-informed tools to support neurodivergent success in the workplace.

One clear message our SIGNA students communicated is that they do not have time and, in some instances, know where to start to complete documentation and practice employment preparation skills. These skills include writing resumes and cover letters, practicing their elevator pitch and interview skills, searching for jobs, and asking for letters of recommendation. That is why we created an employment-readiness study hall so our LANE students can have a quiet place to work, body double with others, review email and letter templates, and ask questions to each other and to an employment coach who supports this time.

This work is already paying dividends in a short time, as two of the four students in our fall semester pilot program have already been hired: One will be employed by Wells Fargo and starts a full-time position upon graduation this month, and the other was hired by our UMD Department of Transportation and will be using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) which is an area of interest to this student.



By: Maddy Simonds,
MA, CCC-SLP





Help Us Empower Neurodivergent Terps for the Workforce

LAUNCH UMD CROWDFUNDING!

We're goin' on a crowdfundin' campaign, which ends December 31st, to create the Lab for Autism and Neurodiversity Employment! Thanks to those who've supported our neurodivergent students so far as they prepare for meaningful careers. As you've read, our **NATS-SIGNA Program** proudly celebrates its **10th anniversary in 2026**, and we want to continue to be a national leader in supporting **autistic and other neurodivergent UMD students** through a unique, four-pronged model:

-  **Skills training** for neurodivergent students
-  **Clinical education** for speech-language pathology students
-  **Research** to improve clinical outcomes
-  **Campus and community outreach**



Neurodivergent students often face barriers to employment—not due to lack of talent, but due to a lack of inclusive preparation and opportunity. That's why we've launched the **Lab for Autism and Neurodiversity Employment**: a bold initiative to prepare our students for **internships, job placements, and long-term career success**.

Why Give?

Your donation will directly impact the lives of neurodivergent Terps—empowering them with the tools, confidence, and opportunities they need to thrive beyond college. Together, we can build a more inclusive future where all students have the chance to shine.



Goal: \$20,000



Campaign starts and ends: Monday, 11/3/2025 – Wednesday, 12/31/2025

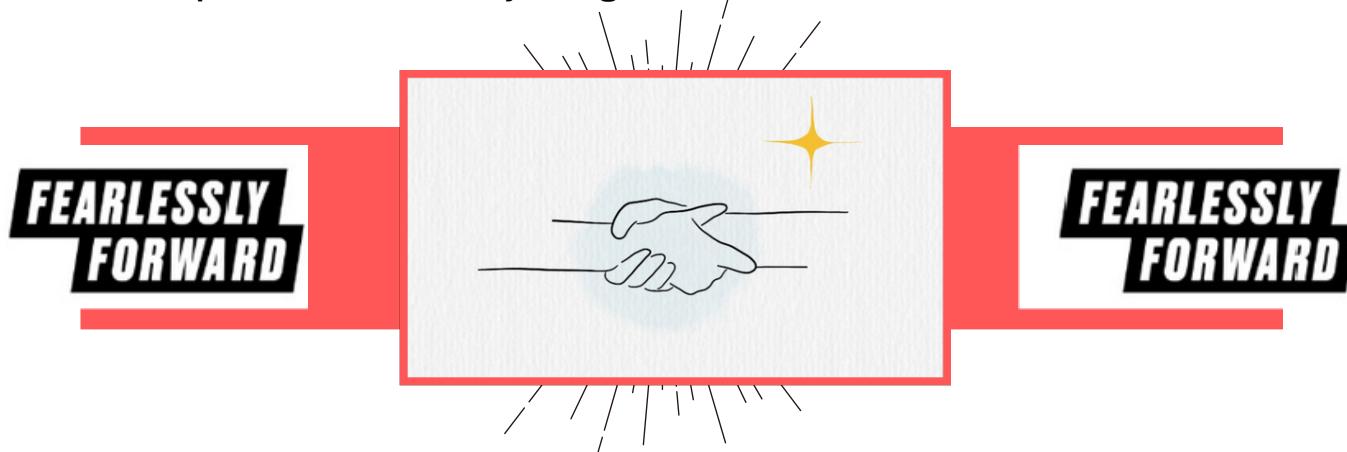


Every gift counts—no matter the size!



For many adolescents and young adults, social interactions can feel complex, unpredictable, or overwhelming. When SIGNA began ten years ago, we quickly realized that many of our freshmen were entering college with limited experience navigating these challenges. In response, NATS began offering the PEERS® program (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills) to area teens. Originally developed by Elizabeth Laugeson, PsyD, at UCLA, the PEERS program is an evidence-based curriculum with many strengths, but it is not without shortcomings. Members of the neurodivergent community have raised concerns about elements of the traditional curriculum, particularly its emphasis on masking and its lack of neurodiversity-affirming practices.

Although PEERS is evolving, the NATS team **has been intentional in taking the strongest components of the program and modifying them to center neurodiversity-affirming principles**. This approach teaches concrete social strategies while **prioritizing self-acceptance, self-advocacy, and genuine connection**.



Traditional PEERS curricula include lessons on masking or adjusting one's identity to fit neurotypical expectations, approaches that can be emotionally exhausting and detrimental to teens' long-term mental health. In our modified model, we intentionally remove those components. Instead, we focus on topics such as:

- ★ **Self-acceptance and self-disclosure:** recognizing and valuing one's own neurotype, and learning when and how to share personal information in ways that feel safe and empowering.
- ★ **The double empathy problem:** understanding that communication breakdowns are mutual, not one-sided, and that both autistic and non-autistic people may misread each other's perspectives.
- ★ **Making authentic connections:** prioritizing relationships that honor the teen's identity, interests, and communication style.



Families tell us that this shift makes a meaningful difference—not only in how teens learn social skills, but in how they feel about themselves. One parent shared:



“I found PEERS incredibly helpful as a guiding force in helping my daughter navigate anxiety-producing social situations. They took the time to really get to know each of the PEERS participants and used this insight to tailor their approach and how they interacted individually with the participants.”

“I found the activities and exercises to have the perfect balance of pushing my daughter outside of her comfort zone, without being too intimidating or too uncomfortable. To this day, my daughter still uses the strategies that were initiated with PEERS. Additionally, with college right around the corner, I feel that her PEERS experience will go a long way in preparing her for this part of her journey.”

“And I cannot say enough great things about the entire PEERS team – they are truly exceptional!”



Another family recently shared a real-world milestone that highlights how these skills support independence and self-advocacy:

“I wanted to let you know that A decided to verbally commit to college. When she called her coach to tell her (using her PEERS phone skills!), she also told her about having autism. This was mostly A’s decision. The coach told her she was ecstatic to have her on the team and thanked her for telling her. She will be there for whatever A needs.”

These moments capture the outcomes we hope to see through our modified-PEERS approach. We are committed to creating a space where young people learn relationship skills without compromising their identity, authenticity, or well-being. This work is ongoing, and we continue to refine our approach to provide truly neurodiversity-affirming care.

As we look ahead, we remain deeply grateful for the trust families place in our team and inspired by the growth we see each session. If you have questions about our modified-PEERS program or want to learn about upcoming groups, please reach out. We would love to connect!

umd-teenpeers-effect@umd.edu



**By: Mairin Batten,
MA, CCC-SLP**





Improving Speech-Language Therapy for Autistic Adults



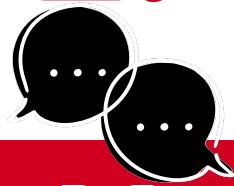
A lot of autistic adults have strong language skills, but aren't satisfied with the conversations they have in their day-to-day life. Maybe they're having trouble making friends, or are miscommunicating with their professors or coworkers. It can be hard for speech therapists to figure out what the problem is and what to work on, since they don't get to observe real-life conversations. Furthermore, traditional speech-language therapy has focused on trying to get autistic people to act more like non-autistic people. But that's probably not the best way to make conversations go better.

The Autistic Conversation Analysis Toolkit aims to change that. This new research project seeks to help autistic adults and their speech therapists work together using real conversation examples from daily life. The tool will use **AI to efficiently transcribe and analyze recordings of conversations** so that a therapist and their client review them together to better understand what is causing the challenges and set goals that matter to the autistic person.

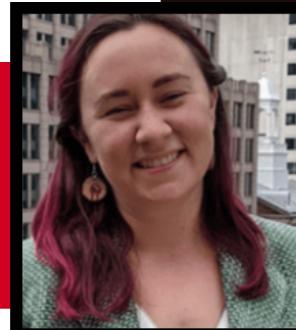
To develop the tool, the research team is surveying and interviewing **both autistic adults and speech therapists, and analyzing sample conversation recordings**. Later this academic year, they will host a collaborative design workshop bringing together autistic people, speech therapists, and other stakeholders to shape the first prototype.

The project is led by **Shevaun Lewis** (an expert on linguistic meaning), **Kathy Dow-Burger** (a speech-language therapist with over 30 years of experience supporting autistic people), and **Sorrah Edwards-Thro** (an autistic student studying speech-language therapy). **Rida Kutty** (a student in the Applied Machine Learning program) is helping build the technology.

The researchers are currently recruiting autistic adults to participate in the study. To be eligible, you must be over the age of 18, have received some speech therapy after the age of 12, have worked on conversation skills in speech therapy, and live in Maryland, DC, or Virginia. If you're interested, please fill out our study screener [here](http://go.umd.edu/aut-talk-screener):(go.umd.edu/aut-talk-screener)!



By: Shevaun Lewis and
Sorrah Edwards-Thro



The Tapestry Opens As An Inclusive Space for the Spectrum of Disabled Students

The NATS team was fortunate to chat with UMD's Inaugural Lead of the Disability Cultural Initiative, [Dr. Sara Acevedo](#), the new disability culture affinity center. Described in its welcome event flyer as "a student-focused space that prioritizes cultural practice, programming, and education rooted in intersectional disability community wisdom," The Tapestry is one of several new student cultural lounges [that UMD](#) center, which opened in September.

In our discussion, Dr. Acevedo described the importance of the Tapestry and what initiatives are being planned for the disability community at UMD. Dr. Acevedo, a scholar activist, identifies as "an Autistic woman living with chronic illness, born and raised in South America."



Our interview with Dr. Acevedo has been edited for length and clarity.

NATS: The Tapestry Disability Cultural Center is in the new Cole Student Activities Building. Could you tell us specifically where people can find it and what hours it's open?

DR. ACEVEDO: On the Tapestry is located in the Cole Student Activities Building. You enter through the Driskell Gallery entrance and you will find the first room is the multipurpose room to your left. That's a room that can be reserved by student organizations. The student lounges are all different new spaces for students, [and] those spaces don't need to be reserved. They can be used from 9am to 5pm. There are always people there to greet whoever is coming in.

NATS: Thinking about the main goals in creating a disability cultural center here at UMD, can you describe the purpose and why it's important?

DR. ACEVEDO: This was a three year project that was undertaken by the **Student Experience and Culture Department**, which was initiated by the director and prompted by student activism. It was all rooted in students' desire for having spaces that were rooted in community, identity, and affinity cultural practice. The students were integral to thinking about how the spaces would be designed, how the spaces would function, how they would be staffed, and how they would serve different student communities. So, it was a very **collaborative process and a long time coming**.

NATS: Can you describe The Tapestry space and what students can expect when they go there?

DR. ACEVEDO: Each [affinity lounge] space has its own community practice. Each has a fridge and a little coffee bar. **Whereas all other spaces have carpet, Tapestry does not** because it was meant to be designed accessibly for wheelchair users, cane users, walker users, and other accessibility and mobility devices. There's a couch, a big massage chair, and another little sitting area with a big rug; we have a sensory swing and a beanbag sitting area; we have a big table in the middle that people can use to do arts and crafts or do homework. And there are two little huddle rooms. **One of them is a low-sensory space** that we've created; there's a yoga mat, cushions, one of those galaxy projectors with Bluetooth, and a noise machine as well. My next step is to install some lights. The other huddle room is a meeting space, so it's kind of like a little conference room with a whiteboard and different sitting options in there. We also have a big bookcase where we have games, Braille Uno, ASL coloring books, disability justice coloring books, a knitting kit, and other things like that. We are working on getting a ton of fidgets with the logo for the Unity Center.

NATS: What kinds of events or activities have you featured at the Tapestry?

DR. ACEVEDO: We just completed two signature events for the fall. The first one was a **care package workshop** that was instructed by a disability justice activist. The other one was the **UMD showcase for Superfest International Disability Film Festival**, which is the longest-running disability festival in the world. All the films are by and for disabled communities, so disability artistry is showcased. We had a selection of short films screened, and a panel discussion with people who have participated.

NATS: Is there anything that you're looking forward to planning in 2026?

DR. ACEVEDO: Yes, definitely. This will be the second year that we are sponsoring the celebration of graduates. [UMD Disability Community Graduation Celebration, hosted by student group DICE, Disability: Identity, Culture, and Education]. That's going to be happening every spring. [We hope to have an event] around access art, disabled podcasting, and accessible media. I [also] want to organize a workshop with someone in our community who does tapestries out of little origami, [who is] going to be teaching and showing students how to do it, and crafting the different tapestries to put around the space. I'm excited about that! The other thing that I'm working on is a **Disability Culture Initiative around a scent- and fragrance-free education campaign**.

NATS: Why was the name Tapestry chosen?

DR. ACEVEDO: I came up with the name Tapestry. **For me, The Tapestry really speaks to intersectionality, which is at the center of my work.** It's speaking to that multiplicity of experience that intersects with disability, and that is so important for disability communities and for others— like our political companions—to know that we're not only working on disability, but actually disability at the intersection of multiply-marginalized identities as well as multiple rich cultural practices. So it is that intersection of culture, identity, and community that are at the center of the name.

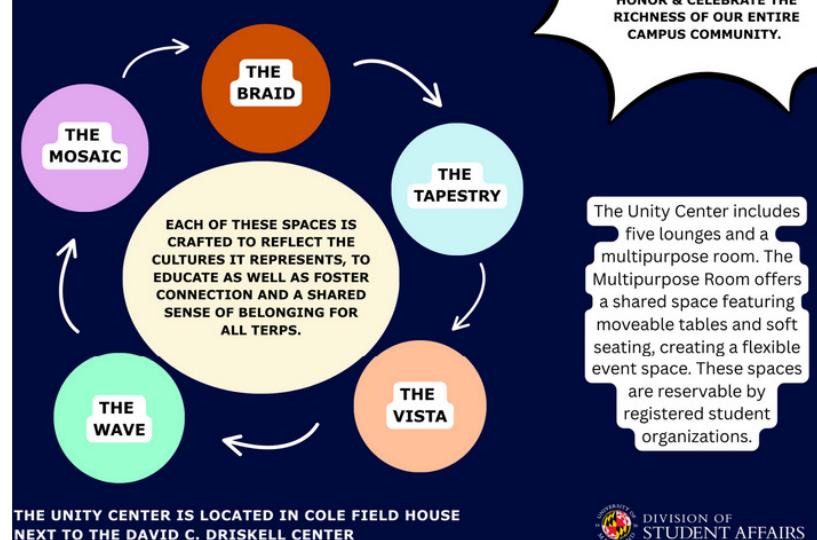
NATS: Is there anything else that students—neurodivergent, neurotypical, and anyone else in our community—should know about The Tapestry?



DR. ACEVEDO: I think that what's important is that people know that it was created for students, and that it's a space that is **curated to be accessible and to be disability-affirming as well as intersectional**. We would like to have as many students come by and as many students enjoy the space. It's important to us that the **space is utilized for all disabled students, and neurodivergent students in particular**. You know, that's my identity. I'm Autistic. So I really, really value the fact that we had so many different people contribute to envisioning and imagining the space, and that one of the main features of The Tapestry is the low-sensory room. **I want students to know what students' that it's for ideas them. I are also for want continuing to know to grow the space:** things that they might need, things that they're thinking about would be great for the space—both in terms of functionality and aesthetic and all of those elements. The Disability Culture initiative really goes beyond serving one community; it is actually a campus-wide initiative. So, although the Unity Center and the spaces are primarily for students, the work that I'm doing is for the whole university. It's all about disability culture and really moving away from this very insulated or insular understanding of disability as either a clinical pathology and an afterthought—like a “check the box” and a compliance legal matter. We want to shift that narrative and **focus on disability as identity and as culture**. That education portion is really, really important to my work.

The Unity Center

GROUNDED IN THE COLLECTIVE VOICES OF OUR STUDENT BODY & CREATED TO HONOR & CELEBRATE THE RICHNESS OF OUR ENTIRE CAMPUS COMMUNITY.



THE UNITY CENTER IS LOCATED IN COLE FIELD HOUSE
NEXT TO THE DAVID C. DRISKELL CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

Color Legend: Description of each Space

- **THE MOSAIC** A MOSAIC IS CREATED FROM SMALL, MULTICOLORED PIECES OF STONE OR GLASS. PRACTICED BY CULTURES AROUND THE WORLD SINCE ANCIENT TIMES, PASSED DOWN THROUGH GENERATIONS. FROM THE ZELLIGE OF NORTH AFRICA TO THE TURQUOISE SCULPTURES OF CENTRAL AMERICA, MOSAICS REMIND US THAT CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND HERITAGE ARE BEAUTIFULLY MULTIFACETED. IN THIS SPACE, WE CELEBRATE THE PIECE & HONOR THE WHOLE, ESPECIALLY FOR THE MULTIRACIAL, MULTIETHNIC, AND ADOPTEE MEMBERS OF OUR COMMUNITY.
- **THE BRAID** BRAIDING IS A SACRED PRACTICE IN NATIVE AMERICAN AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES. TO BRAID—WHETHER IT'S HAIR, SWEETGRASS, YARN, OR ANOTHER MATERIAL—ONE MUST GATHER THE THREE STRANDS WITH INTENTION, TIME, AND PATIENCE. THE BRAIDER THEN MUST CAREFULLY WEAVE THE THREE STRANDS TOGETHER, CREATING A UNIFIED BOND. IN THIS SPACE, WE WEAVE TOGETHER THREE STRANDS: RELATIVES, CULTURE, AND EMPOWERMENT TO CREATE OUR COMMUNITY GATHERING PLACE.
- **THE TAPESTRY** A TAPESTRY EMBODIES NOT ONLY ARTISTRY BUT ALSO THE COMPLEXITY OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND PATTERNS THAT BIND AND SEPARATE SELECT COMMUNITIES ACROSS TIME AND SPACE. THE TAPESTRY IS A SPACE OF EXPLORATION, CONNECTION, AND CURIOSITY; ONE WHERE THE EXPRESSION OF SHARED DISABILITY IDENTITY AND THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF LIVED EXPERIENCE MIGHT ALSO ILLUMINATE WHAT MAKES US UNIQUELY HUMAN -- TOGETHER, IN CELEBRATION, MOURNING, AND IN-BETWEEN.
- **THE WAVE** A FOCAL POINT OF ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS ARTWORKS AROUND THE GLOBE, THE GREAT WAVE OFF KANAGAWA BY KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI, THE WAVE SYMBOLIZES A POWERFUL AND DYNAMIC FORCE OF NATURE. YET, THE WAVE CANNOT EXIST WITHOUT THE STRONG BONDS BETWEEN ITS SMALLER UNITS OF MATTER. IT IS THROUGH THIS COLLECTIVE POWER THAT THE ASIAN, PACIFIC ISLANDER, AND DESI COMMUNITY FOUND ITS VOICE AND STRENGTH IN HISTORY. MAY THIS SPACE HONOR THESE BONDS BETWEEN OUR COMMUNITIES AND THE CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGHOUT OUR LANDS.
- **THE VISTA** THE VISTA IS A SPACE RECOGNIZING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LATINE COMMUNITY TO THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND. CALLING TO MIND BEAUTIFUL LAKES, MOUNTAINS, COASTLINES AND FORESTS OF OUR HOMELANDS, THIS TITLE IS A CALL TO REFLECT ON THE NATURAL WORLD THAT SURROUNDS US. THE NAME VISTA ALSO INVITES US TO CONSIDER OUR CURRENT PERSPECTIVES, HONOR THE PAST CHANGEMAKERS THAT HAVE BROUGHT US TO THIS POINT, AND TO EMPOWER THE GENERATIONS THAT WILL FOLLOW TO INSPIRE A BETTER VISION FOR THE FUTURE.



By: Candace Nuzzo
Michiels, MA, CCC-SLP



NEURODIVERSITY & AUTISM TRANSITION SERVICES

Community Outreach: Henson Day

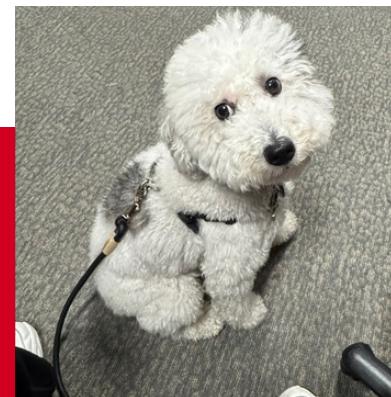


This year, the Neurodiversity and Autism Transition Services (NATS) team participated in UMD's Henson Day, with **activities related to neurodiversity and Autism, inclusion, belonging, allyship, and empowerment**, on Wednesday, September 24, 2025. We loved having everyone who stopped by as part of this event!

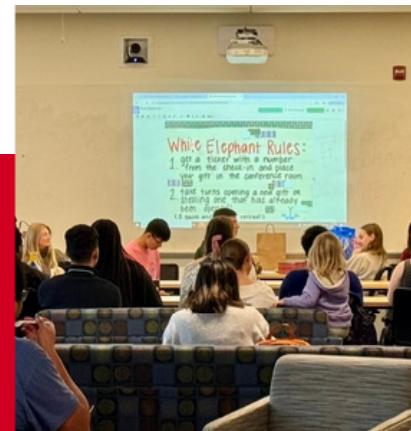




NEURODIVERSITY & AUTISM TRANSITION SERVICES



Mental Health: Self-Care Fair & Comfort Dog



End of Semester NATS Event: Art-based mindfulness, Community Puzzle, White Elephant, and Team Gingerbread House Competition



NATS Embraces the Future Ahead

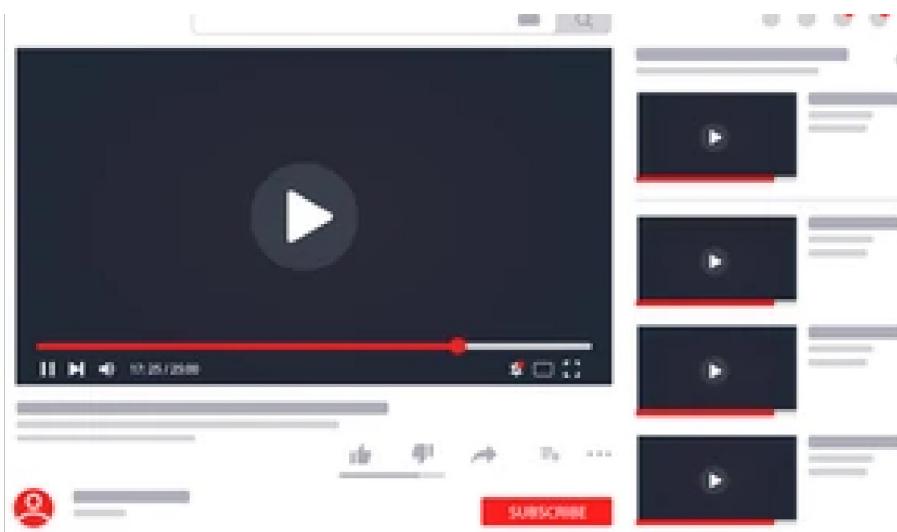
Harnessing a Decade of Growth to Reach New Horizons

Heartfelt thanks to **Martin and Dina Friedman** for their Generous Endowment



Thanks to **Northrop Grumman** for supporting our pre-employment programming

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