

CHILED A

CHRONICLES



Welcome to the Fall Issue of the Chiledda Chronicles!

Dear Readers,

As the vibrant colors of fall bid adieu, it is an appropriate time to give thanks to the incredible accomplishments we've achieved this past year. As an organization, Chiledda remains energized by new opportunities, guided by a simple yet powerful goal: creating a brighter future for those we serve.

In this issue, we highlight the following:

- Programming and service developments from both the La Crosse and Menasha campuses.
- Community engagement activities that allow us to connect more closely with individuals outside of our organization.
- Grant funding that provides the necessary resources and momentum to keep us moving forward.
- And much more.

Here's to finishing the year strong and embracing new opportunities ahead. We hope you enjoy reading about the passion and people behind our amazing organization.

Sincerely,

Derek Cortez, PhD
Chief Executive Officer

Halloween Highlights at Chileda

Halloween 2025 was full of festive fun across Chileda's campuses. In La Crosse, students and staff dressed up in creative costumes and joined in a variety of spooky celebrations. The Recreation Department transformed one of the classroom hallways into a Minecraft Haunted Mineshaft, which was a huge hit! The day also featured a spooky movie with popcorn, community and on-campus trick-or-treating, a lively dance party, and Halloween-themed crafts and activities.

Meanwhile, at the Menasha campus, staff and students got into the spirit by dressing up and trick-or-treating around the building. The celebration wrapped up with a Halloween party full of treats, laughter, and festive cheer.

From costumes to crafts, Halloween 2025 at Chileda was a memorable experience for all.



Oktoberfest Fun at Copeland Park

On September 25th, Chileda student attended the Special Festers Carnival, a free event designed for community members with special needs and abilities.

Chileda was thrilled to bring 48 students to enjoy the carnival, where they stayed until the rides closed. This annual tradition is a favorite among both students and staff, who look forward to the joy, excitement, and sense of community it brings each fall.



**NEW
UPDATE**

Brighter Days Ahead: Chileda Shine Launches Family Support Groups

Chileda Shine is excited to announce the official launch of our “Brighter Days Family Support Groups” beginning January 2026 to support families in the greater La Crosse, WI area. These monthly theme-based gatherings are designed to foster a sense of community by providing a safe, welcoming space for families to connect, share experiences, and grow together as they navigate the unique challenges of caring for a child with special needs.

Our heartfelt thanks to the **Otto Bremer Trust Community Responsive Fund!** Thanks to **Great Rivers United Way** for recognizing our work and nominating us, and to **United Way of Wisconsin** for stewarding the grant process. This support will help us expand our impact in La Crosse, WI.

We are also grateful to the **La Crosse Area Community Foundation** for their generous support in making this initiative possible. Visit our [website](#) to learn more or sign up.

Submitted by: Katie Zavodny-Olson,
Occupational Therapist

New at Chileda Shine: Outpatient Occupational Therapy

Chileda Shine is excited to announce the launch of Outpatient Occupational Therapy (OT)—a private pay service designed to help children and young adults with autism, developmental disabilities, and behavioral challenges build independence and confidence. Our individualized, one-on-one sessions focus on fine motor skills, sensory processing, emotional regulation, and daily living activities.

This new service line also offers SOS Feeding Therapy approach, a purposeful play-based approach that addresses feeding difficulties by improving sensory and oral-motor skills in a safe, low-pressure environment with a focus on individual strengths. Both programs emphasize family involvement, ensuring strategies learned in therapy carry over into everyday life.

Chileda Shine’s OT service reflects our commitment to empowering children and their families.

To learn more and get started today visit:
<https://www.chileda.org/occupational-therapy/>



Submitted by: Kaylynn Adams, Adult Family Home Lead Caregiver

Chileda's Adult Family Home

As we transition into the winter season, Chiledda's Adult Family Home is feeling warm and full of pride. This fall, our clients embraced creativity by decorating the house with their spooky artwork, hand-painted pumpkins, and Halloween window stickers that made every room feel festive. As the weather cools, clients continue to grow and thrive—practicing good manners, helping with dishes and laundry, and taking pride in keeping their home tidy and welcoming. While outdoor adventures shift from parks to cozy indoor spaces, our clients still enjoy playing games, movie nights, and helping bake sweet treats together. With winter upon us, we're looking forward to peaceful days inside, moments of laughter, and continued growth together. Each season brings new opportunities, and we couldn't be prouder of the independence and joy our clients continue to display.



Fall Fun at Ferguson's Orchards

This fall, Chiledda students from La Crosse enjoyed a crisp autumn day at Ferguson's Orchards in Galesville, WI. From exploring the orchard and playing outdoors to spending quality time with friends, the visit was filled with seasonal joy and laughter. The beautiful weather made it the perfect setting for making memories and celebrating the season together.



On-Campus Immunization Clinic a Success

This fall, Chiledda in La Crosse partnered with Mayo Clinic Health System Pediatrics to host an on-campus immunization clinic. Thanks to this collaboration, 27 students received 49 immunizations — all without leaving campus. Programs like this help students access essential care in a familiar, supportive setting. We're grateful to Mayo Clinic and our dedicated staff for making this clinic a success.

Get To Know Regina



Regina Serrano

Grants
Development



Regina Serrano joined Chileda in 2024 and has since played a pivotal role in advancing our mission. Her expertise and dedication have been instrumental in securing multiple grants, providing essential resources that allow us to pursue key organizational initiatives.

Tell us a little bit about yourself and what you like to do in your free time.

I currently live in Arizona. In my free time, I enjoy working on my home, learning to cook all types of food, getting outdoors for exercise and spending time with my family.

What do you love most about working at Chileda?

The process of identifying resources to meet the needs of children and staff excites me. Watching a project take shape and succeed is truly gratifying.

Can you share a Chileda project that you are particularly proud of?

I am proud of the opportunities created by our newly established relationships with our funds for the family support groups, continuation of Camp Chileda and installation of an inclusive playground for the Chileda Learning Center in Menasha.



What is something your co-workers might be surprised to learn about you?

I really enjoy sports a lot! Watching and attending youth, college and professional sports such as baseball, basketball, and football.



Leadership Growth at CASP Summit



Team members from Chileda's La Crosse and Menasha campuses attended the Council of Autism Service Providers (CASP) Leadership Summit in Des Moines, IA, this past September. Over two days, they participated in interactive sessions and small group discussions led by experts in the autism field. The summit offered valuable opportunities to strengthen leadership skills and build meaningful professional connections.

Submitted by: Regina Serrano,
Grants Development

Recently Funded Projects



Playground equipment installation in
Menasha in November 2025.

Chileda has been very fortunate to receive financial support from a variety of organizations. Here is a brief recap of some recent projects that benefited from grants support.

Chileda Learning Center Menasha - Inclusive Playground

Our funding partners have enabled us to install a fully accessible, inclusive playground where students can play, socialize, and learn. A Chileda thank you to:

- **Herb Kohl Philanthropies – Hometown Grants Program**
- **Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration**
- **Home Depot – Menasha and Appleton**
- **Wispect Foundation**

Chileda La Crosse and Menasha – Camp Chileda

In 2025, Camp Chileda was launched to address a critical summer gap in services by blending Extended School Year (ESY) support with a camp-style experience. We appreciate the support of:

- **Gillette Pepsi Corporation - DEW-ing Good Grant**
- **Wispect Foundation**

Chileda Shine – Family Support Groups

This monthly program empowers families of children with autism and behavioral challenges by providing emotional support and peer networks. We are grateful to:

- **La Crosse Area Community Foundation**
- **United Way of Wisconsin – Otto Bremer Trust Fund**

Specialized Student Chair

Many thanks to the **La Crosse Area Community Foundation** for providing the funds to purchase a specialized chair for a student in need. This chair provides protection on all sides, ensuring the child is able to sit upright and participate fully in their learning.

Chileda Shine: Mayo Health Center – Hometown Health Grant

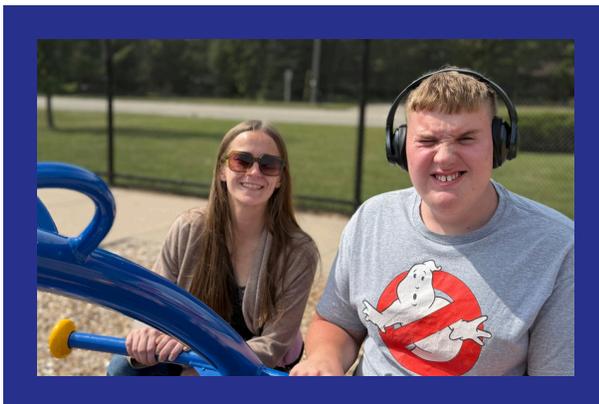
This **Mayo Clinic** award will assist in pairing each student with a behavior technician who will model ways to increase skills in emotional regulation, community integration, self-care, and socialization. Children and families in rural areas such as Monroe, Vernon, Trempealeau, Crawford, as well as Juneau counties will benefit from greater access to services.

Submitted by: Rob Becker, Principal,
Chileda Learning Center- Menasha, WI

Building Momentum in Menasha: Growth, Grants, and Gratitude

There's a sense of excitement and progress in the air at Chileda Learning Center – Menasha. As the leaves change and the school year settles into rhythm, our team is celebrating a strong start to 2025–2026. We've officially reached full enrollment, and with growing interest from families and school districts, we've begun waitlists for both middle and high school levels. It's a meaningful milestone that reflects the trust placed in our staff and the impact of our work with students.

This season also brings some exciting changes to our physical space. We've secured funding for brand-new playground equipment. The support from generous foundations and charities means our students will soon enjoy a refreshed outdoor area designed to encourage movement, play, and connection.



Playground installation is underway, and we're racing to get everything in place before winter.

Inside the building, we're preparing for even more improvements to assist our students and staff. We're launching a remodeling project led by Consolidated Construction Corporation of Appleton, WI. These upgrades will be completed while we continue our daily work, ensuring minimal disruption and maximum benefit. The renovations will enhance our learning environment and reflect our commitment to growth, accessibility, and long-term sustainability.

As we look ahead to the rest of the school year, we're filled with gratitude — for our families, our staff, and our community partners. Their collective support helps us build something truly special in Menasha, and we're excited to keep the momentum going.



Submitted by: Derek Cortez, PhD, Chief Executive Officer

Autism in Focus

Autism seems to be a hot topic among American conversations. Whether television news, magazines, or podcasts, there is a lot of information surrounding this topic. Essentially, the two major questions that have emerged revolve around:

- 1) What is the cause of autism?
- 2) Why is there an increase in autism rates?

Many debates, arguments, and accusations have accompanied the answers, and intelligent and principled people are expected to take a stand. Sadly, too often these debates are driven by political convictions and opinions, and TikTok short emotional videos. I listen to smart people with complete conviction and confidence state what they believe to be a contributing cause and NOT a cause after “years of research.”

On one hand, I am grateful that this has moved to a more primary place of national conversation. The optimist in me wants to believe that once we waded through the accusations and unproven opinions of what is causing autism, we will come out on the other side with more clarity and understanding. But for now, we must wrestle through these conversations, continuing to provide support and services to those in need of what Chileda offers.

Chileda has no official position, nor do we stand with any organization or position to either question. Our mission is and has always been *to improve the quality of life for individuals with cognitive challenges and extraordinary behavioral needs*. We do not have the luxury of getting caught up in the national debate. There is too much work to do; too many families and individuals that need support and service. This is why we exist. This is our greatest ambition. We refuse to alter our course of “doing the work.”

Our priorities are simple. 1) To serve with compassion and intention. 2) To continue to walk in humility and integrity. 3) To serve the most vulnerable among us. This has and continues to define us, regardless of common discourse.



Employee Spotlight



**Courtney
Warren, MS,
CF-SLP**

Speech-
Language
Pathologist

Since beginning my work at Chileda, I have discovered a particular passion for the school setting and the meaningful progress that can be made in this environment. I have truly enjoyed getting to know the students and learning more about the diverse ways autism can present in communication, behavior, and learning. Each student brings unique strengths, perspectives, and challenges, which has deepened my understanding of how to individualize therapy and support communication across all contexts. I value the opportunity to collaborate with a multidisciplinary team to support the whole student—focusing not

only on speech and language development, but also on emotional regulation, social connection, and functional communication that promotes success both in and outside the classroom.

Collaboration is a key part of my role—I work closely with teachers, occupational therapists, behavior specialists, direct support professionals (DSPs), and other team members to ensure communication goals are integrated across settings and routines. I also believe that providing staff coaching and modeling to promote consistent use of communication supports within classrooms is essential and something I strongly advocate for.

I am originally from Green Bay, WI but moved to La Crosse in middle school. Growing up here, I was always familiar with Chileda and the incredible services they provide. I used to lifeguard at Erickson Pool in La Crosse, and the highlight of my day was always when the Chileda students came to swim. It feels like such a full-circle moment to now be working here as a service provider, supporting the very community I admired growing up.

In my free time, I love grabbing a latte from a local coffee shop and taking my dogs for walks.

We'd Love to Hear From You!

Your thoughts and suggestions are important to us! Please take a moment to share your feedback on this edition of the newsletter. What did you find helpful? Is there something you'd like to see in future issues?

<https://forms.office.com/r/7vv36H44uZ>

Or feel free to reach out directly at marketing@chileda.org

Thank you for helping us make this newsletter better for you and your family!

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