

C H I L E D A

CHRONICLES



Welcome to the First Issue of 2026!

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the winter edition of the Chileda Chronicles! During this time of year, we are reminded of the strength, warmth, and resilience that define our Chileda community. In this issue, you'll find stories that shine through the season—moments of growth, connection, and dedication that describe the meaningful work happening across our organization and the outstanding individuals that make an impactful difference each day.

It is my hope that these pages inspire you to celebrate the good we create together and brighten you up even during the frostiest of days.

With much appreciation,

Derek Cortez, PhD
Chief Executive Officer

**NEW
UPDATE**

Celebrating One Year of the Chileda Blog

This month marks one year of the Chileda Blog. What began as a simple idea—to create a space that helps families who may need support while staying connected to Chileda has grown into a meaningful platform powered by voices from across our organization.

Over the past year, twelve authors have contributed blog posts that share experiences, expertise, resources, and provide insights into the work we do every day. These articles are designed to support families by offering helpful information and fostering deeper connections to our staff, services, and the various members of the Chileda community. Thanks to the dedication of our authors and the engagement of our readers, we had over **19,000** views on our blog posts in 2025.

We're grateful for a successful first year and look forward to sharing even more stories, resources, and perspectives in the year ahead.

To continue following our blogs, please visit: <https://www.chileda.org/blog/>

Congratulations, Brooke!



Brooke Edmondson recently achieved her Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) certification. This accomplishment reflects

Brooke's dedication, expertise, and commitment to the field of behavior services.

Brooke was also recently promoted to Director of Behavior Services at the La Crosse campus. We are excited to see her continue to grow in this role.

A Heartfelt Thank You for Another Successful Chileda Giving Tree!

This past holiday season, we were excited to continue the tradition of the Chileda Giving Tree at Rosie's Café in La Crosse, WI. Thanks to the generosity of Rosie's Café and all who donated, every gift went directly to our residential students, helping make their holidays brighter and more joyful. We are so grateful for their kindness and support in spreading cheer!



Brighter Days Family Support Group Begins for 2026

January 25th marked the kickoff of our 2026 Brighter Days Family Support Group. These monthly sessions will continue through September 2026, with each meeting focusing on a different topic designed to support families and caregivers.

January's session was centered on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). While the kids participated in structured activities during the session, families had the opportunity to meet with Chileda Shine professionals, ask questions, and receive support from one another. The event offered a comfortable space for learning, connection, and community-building.

February's topic will focus on proactive behavioral strategies, and in March, we will be discussing advocacy.

If you would like to sign up for future sessions or learn more about the Brighter Days Family Support Group, please visit our website.

<https://www.chileda.org/brighter-days-family-support-group/>

Submitted by: Bailey Long, Chileda Shine Program Manager

Skills Sessions at Chileda Shine

Skills Sessions at Chileda Shine officially launched in January and takes place Monday through Friday during after-school hours. The structure to each session includes 30-minute rotations involving a variety of crafts, experiments, group games, and sensory activities. This rotating format keeps clients engaged throughout the afternoon, allowing our behavior technicians to devote more time to client support.

Each week introduces a new theme to explore. Participants have journeyed *Under the Sea*, blasted off at *Space Camp*, tackled STEM projects during *Building Connections*, and created bright, colorful artwork in *Rainbow Creations*. These themed experiences have supported positive peer interactions, expanded leisure skills, improved schedule following, and reinforced safe behaviors.



Holiday Spirit Week in La Crosse

Holiday Spirit Week at Chileda is always a cherished tradition. This year's celebration took place December 15–19, 2025, filling our campus with laughter, creativity, and holiday cheer.

Each day featured a festive dress-up theme that included: Flannel Day, Grinch Day, Ugly Sweater Day, Winter Wonderland, and Polar Express Pajama Days. Students and staff embraced the spirit, showing off cozy flannels, colorful sweaters, and plenty of holiday magic.

The week was packed with activities that brought everyone together. Staff participated in a door-decorating contest, transforming hallways into festive winter scenes. For students, a highlight was a special visit from Santa, who stopped by to share cookies and spread joy. The celebration wrapped up with a cozy holiday movie day—providing the perfect ending to a week filled with smiles and seasonal fun.



Holiday Spirit Week in Menasha

Holiday Spirit Week at the Menasha campus was filled with festive fun and joyful moments for both students and staff. From themed dress-up days to a variety of holiday-inspired activities, the week brought cheer throughout the campus.

Students especially enjoyed hands-on experiences such as decorating cookies, building gingerbread houses, and participating in sensory-friendly games and activities. Filled with smiles, laughter, and plenty of holiday creativity, Spirit Week was a wonderful way to celebrate the season together.



Submitted by: Jason Colvin, Recreation Manager

Winter Camp at La Crosse



The Recreation Team at Chileda in La Crosse introduced its first-ever Winter Camp Chileda—an inclusive program designed for campers in our residential facility. Running from December 26, 2025 to January 4, 2026, the camp provided a dynamic environment where students could apply skills learned throughout the school year while enjoying the magic of winter.

Winter Camp focused on social and emotional growth by blending classic winter activities with adaptive experiences tailored to each camper's individual needs. Each day offered a mix of high-energy play, calming sensory experiences, and creative challenges—ensuring every camper could participate in ways that felt safe, successful, and fun.

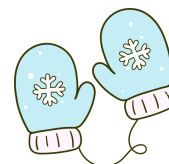
Highlights of the week included exciting outings like adaptive skiing at Mt. La Crosse, snow tubing at Whitetail Ridge, and a festive Rotary Lights van ride.



On campus, campers enjoyed indoor favorites such as the Cocoa Café, where they practiced communication and teamwork while serving hot chocolate, the Winter Escape Room, and hands-on activities like Ice Science Exploration and the Snowstorm Sensory Experience.

Evenings were filled with engaging programs designed to promote connection and fun. Campers enjoyed an Ice Cream Social to wind down and practice social skills, a lively Avalanche Capture the Flag game, and the playful Reindeer Run, which had everyone laughing and working together. The week also featured a festive New Year's Eve Party filled with music, dancing, and countdown fun, and wrapped up with a campus-wide Winter Carnival, celebrating achievements and shared memories.

The Recreation Team is grateful to everyone who helped make Winter Camp Chileda a memorable and meaningful holiday experience for our students.



Submitted by: Derek Cortez, PhD, Chief Executive Officer

Autism in Focus

Another Wisconsin winter is upon us—the kind that tests patience, resolve, and perspective. Long stretches of cold, snow, and darkness can wear on even the most resilient among us. It takes a certain hardiness to move through the season with steadiness and sometimes even a smile.

I often reflect on hardiness not only as it relates to enduring winter, but as it relates to our work at Chiledda. Suzanne Kobasa (1979) showed that psychological hardiness can help individuals stay healthy and buffer the negative effects of high-stress environments. Furthermore, Kobasa's research points out that hardiness is comprised of three components: challenge, control, and commitment.

Psychological hardiness and its components also apply to autism care. Challenge invites us to see each difficult moment not as a setback but as a chance to understand an individual more deeply. Control reminds us that while we cannot shape every circumstance, the consistency of our responses matter. Commitment keeps us engaged with purpose, especially on unpredictable days.

Supporting individuals on the autism spectrum requires flexibility, patience, and adaptability. Progress varies for every individual, and success often appears in small, meaningful steps. Research by Gugliandolo et al. (2023) on families and caregivers of autistic individuals shows that the combination of resilience and hardiness are strongly linked with reduced stress and improved parental (caretaker) well-being.

In the depth of winter, it's easy to slip into survival mode. But our work asks us to pause and reflect on how we show up for those who trust us. So, we might ask ourselves:

- 1 Do I see challenges as opportunities to grow and better understand those I support?
- 2 Do I recognize the influence I have through consistency, compassion, and care?
- 3 Am I connected to the purpose behind my work, even on the hardest days?

The work we do at Chiledda demands heart, resilience, and dedication. As we move through these winter months, may we continue to recognize our impact and the importance of hardiness—not just for weathering Wisconsin winters, but for the transformative support we provide every day.

References:

Gugliandolo, M. C., Liga, F., Larcán, R., & Cuzzocrea, F. (2023). Parents of children with developmental disorders: Family hardiness and resilience. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, 48(3), 334–339.

Kobasa, S. C. (1979). Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37(1), 1–11.

Employee Spotlight



Bailey Long
Chileda Shine
Program
Manager

I focus most of my time on preparing activities for clients, training and providing feedback to staff, responding to crisis when needed, and creating schedules and coordinating intake for our Skills Sessions.

What do you love about working at Chileda?

I love Chileda Shine because of the immense impact we have on our families' lives and the "little wins" that make a world of difference for our clients' independence.

Interesting Tidbits

Outside of my time at Chileda, I love to spend time outdoors camping, rock climbing, kayaking, and hiking!

Background and Experience

I started at Chileda Shine as a Behavior Technician in 2023 and transitioned into a Lead Behavior Technician shortly after. I graduated from UWL this past December and was excited to accept the Chileda Shine Program Manager role.

A Closer Look at Your Role

The Shine Program Manager position was created to oversee all daily living skills sessions and to help ensure that our behavior technicians are able to align each and every session with each client's treatment goals.



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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