

# Building Bridges to a More Inclusive World



## The Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support

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Christine Palus with her daughter, KiKi, who was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3

Fifteen years after its founding, **The Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support** at Saint Joseph's University continues to find new ways to help individuals with autism thrive and create a more inclusive world.

by **Matt Cosentino**

**W**hen Christine Palus's daughter, KiKi, was first diagnosed with autism at the age of 3, she was mostly nonverbal and had a tough time responding to simple questions. Fast forward 10 years and KiKi's communication and social skills have improved dramatically. Christine believes such progress is due largely to KiKi's involvement with The Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support at Saint Joseph's University.

"It's her favorite place on Earth," Christine says. "As soon as she gets on the St. Joe's campus, she's raring to go. She feels totally at home there and it's such a happy place for her. ... It's been a real gift for our family and for my daughter."

Founded in 2009, The Kinney Center has a twofold mission: to offer services that are tailored to every age and skill level; and to provide the autism professionals of tomorrow with hands-on experience in the field. The Center has established key relationships with local businesses and universities to provide internships and job opportunities for individuals with autism as they approach adulthood, while also providing these enterprises with training on how to best accommodate neurodiverse employees in the workplace.

Executive Director Theresa McFalls, Ed.D., LSW, has been with The Kinney Center almost since its inception. She has watched it evolve from an organization focused on youth programming to one that now offers the full gamut of services designed to meet clients where they are to help them achieve their goals.

"What I love about The Kinney Center is that we've really been able to grow with the needs of families," she says. "The children who were coming to our camp programs started to get older and they needed a different type of service, so we

added transitional programming, adult programming, and college programming. We actually had a camper who came in our very first summer and he is now a college student at St. Joe's, and that's been really cool to see. We have other clients who started in that same camp who are on a vocational track and we're still able to provide vocational training and transitional services for life skills. We can be a destination for whatever type of support people are looking for."

The youth program, open to ages 5 through 14, provides applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy in a warm environment so they can learn social skills. School districts provide funding for this over the summer months to ensure their students can maintain those skills over the break. The youth program also has sports and recreation components, both of which are essential to a child's development.

Christine has seen her daughter find a dedicated friend group within Kinney's youth programming, and KiKi has also attended special events like a petting zoo and a visit from Santa Claus. Christine and her husband have developed close relationships with other parents who have similar experiences with their children; some of the St. Joe's students who have worked with KiKi have come to her birthday parties and stayed in contact with the family even after graduation.

"The Kinney Center was a saving grace for us over and over again," Christine adds. "When [KiKi] was little, things were really hard and we had challenges at school and weren't sure what services to get. The Kinney Center would come to school meetings, they would brainstorm with us, they would develop programs and practice with her. They have become part of the family. The students that we've worked with over the years have become part of the family in many ways, too.

"When you have a child with autism, it can be lonely and there aren't a lot of outlets or safe spaces," she continues. "The Kinney Center has really been a lifeline for that."

The transitional program can help individuals ages 15 to 18 figure out the next step, whether that involves going to college or entering the workforce. The college program, for those 18 and older, can offer resources as they pursue their degree, and the adult program for the same age group allows them to continue their journey while honing life skills such as money management and cooking at home.

The Kinney Center's partnerships come into play with the transitional and college programs. Some of the Center's clients have earned jobs at the campus bookstore or coffee shop, while college students with autism have opportunities for internships



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—Theresa McFalls,  
The Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support

and even full-time employment with businesses such as Wawa, Philadelphia Insurance Companies, Vertex, Merrill Lynch, and Elmwood Park Zoo.

"We've had a number of great partners over the years, and they're really seeing the impact that these students can make on their team," Theresa says. "Research shows that people with autism can be more productive in the workplace than a neurotypical person. They bring really unique perspectives and they're able to see through problems that maybe someone else isn't seeing."

The Kinney Center provides HR and management training for a variety of businesses and is available to provide ongoing support to businesses and individuals with autism alike. Furthermore, The Kinney Center has



KiKi's communication and social skills have improved dramatically, which Christina attributes to her daughter's involvement with The Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support at Saint Joseph's University. "It's her favorite place on Earth," Christine says.

been tasked with training other colleges and universities that might not have the resources for a fully-fledged autism support program; its team has also received inquiries from museums, zoos, and theaters in the community seeking guidance on how to best serve their clients who have autism.

As for St. Joe's students who are studying to enter the field, the combination of academic excellence and real-world experience the program provides makes them attractive to potential employers. The business school also has a new "Neurodiversity in the Workplace" certification that can be acquired as part of an MBA or as a standalone addition.

"Employers know that if they hire a Kinney SCHOLAR, they will go above and beyond," Theresa says. "If they start with us in their first year, they can accrue over 2,000 hours of direct practice experience, so employers know that these students are coming out not only with the educational background but also the hands-on training. We have students who are going out directly to work with people with autism, but we also have people who have taken the broader approach to occupational therapy or speech therapy, law, medicine. These are really autism-informed practitioners in a variety of fields."

In other words, The Kinney Center has become a leader in autism service and training innovation—locally, regionally, and even nationally.

"We have some students who come to St. Joe's and know this is what they want to do, while other students just happen upon it," Theresa says. "I had a senior math major who took an 'Intro to Autism' class that I was teaching as an elective, just as an 'easy' class before graduation. He ended up staying on at St. Joe's, getting a master's in special education, and working at The Kinney Center. We've had student-athletes who started doing volunteer hours because they needed to as a requirement for the team, and they fell in love with the work and started working at the Center. There are a lot of stories like that."

For all of the assistance The Kinney Center has given the Palus family, perhaps the greatest contribution to their lives has been the ability to find hope amid the uncertainty.

"It is such a comfort to know that St. Joe's is so invested in planning these different programs," Christine says. "I dream that KiKi will be able to go there someday [as an undergrad]. If not, I know that they'll continue to be a support for us. It's amazing that St. Joe's is in this space and that The Kinney Center exists because there is such a dearth of options. I think they've proven ways to do it, ways to support students, and ways to open doors. It's incredibly inspiring and needed." ■