



BEN'S PLACE

Winter Edition | Issue 1 | 2026

Mondays with Ms. Jean

A Community Where Everyone Belongs



Meet the volunteer bringing out the gold in everyone she meets.
Full story inside.

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Letter from the Executive Director

Emily Pate

I am thrilled to step into my role as Executive Director of Ben’s Place. Since starting on August 1, 2025, I’ve been inspired every day by our members, their families, our dedicated staff, and volunteers who make this community feel like home.

Our Day Program, led by Stephanie Schuler and supported by Julie Barber on Thursdays and Fridays, continues to grow and thrive. I’m also so pleased to have Jess Lewis leading our Evening Program — she started as a volunteer and has blossomed into an incredible leader who brings joy, creativity, and connection to every evening session. Currently, we proudly serve 25 wonderful members who bring life, laughter, and inspiration to our programs.

“Ben’s Place is more than a program — it’s a community where everyone is known, valued, and encouraged to shine.”

Looking back at our October 2025 golf tournament, which raised \$10,000, I am reminded of the generosity and spirit of our community. These resources allow us to continue offering engaging programs, support, and experiences that matter.

For 2026, our goals are to grow our membership, expand our board, increase our sponsors, and secure ongoing donations of meals and supplies to support daily programming. Most of all, I am grateful to our members and their families, to Stephanie, Julie, Jess, Brian, Angella, our donors, and community partners — for welcoming me into this vibrant and caring family. I am looking forward to all that we will achieve together in the year ahead.

Letter from the Board President

Ebony R. Davis, LCSW-QS, MCAP



As we move through the winter season, I am reminded of the strength and warmth that define our community. This time of year invites both reflection and renewed focus, and I want to take a moment to share my gratitude and look ahead with purpose.

Ben's Place continues to be a community rooted in dignity, connection, and opportunity. Even during the colder months, our members demonstrate the power of belonging and the impact of being supported, respected, and encouraged to grow in their own way. This past year brought meaningful progress—strong community partnerships, successful fundraising efforts, and the unwavering commitment of our personnel, volunteers, and families.

Throughout this season of reflection and renewal, the Board of Directors remains focused on strengthening our foundation. In the months ahead, we will continue prioritizing thoughtful governance, long-term sustainability, and strategic planning to ensure Ben's Place remains a safe, vibrant, and inclusive space for years to come. This includes reviewing our bylaws, refining our board practices, and supporting our leadership team as we continue building capacity for the future.

Winter often reminds us of the importance of connection and community. I want to personally thank our Executive Director, personnel, volunteers, donors, and community partners for the dedication and care you bring to Ben's Place. Your time, energy, and belief in our mission make an immeasurable difference. To our families and members—thank you for your trust and for being the heart of this organization.

As we continue through the season, we do so with hope and determination. Together, we will keep creating meaningful social experiences and supporting independence for individuals with disabilities—because everyone deserves connection, purpose, and a true sense of belonging.

“Throughout this season of reflection and renewal, we remain focused on strengthening our foundation to ensure Ben's Place thrives for years to come.”



Mondays with Ms. Jean

1) What first drew you to working with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities?

I have been drawn to those with special needs since I was in high school in 1975. I volunteered at an after school program and loved it. I remember helping teach a student with special needs how to catch a ball and when Mom came to pick the child up she was thrilled. My plan was to go to college to major in Special Education but I was young, got homesick and just ended up taking a different route but always coming back to be involved somehow with the special needs population. Even as I worked in school cafeterias in Pennsylvania I would sign up for any class I could take about Autism that was given. On my scheduled days off from the school system (Christmas, spring break, other holidays) I worked at CPARC (Cumberland Perry Arc) and then at an autism school for a few years. I feel like those with autism or any other difference are very interesting and I can always learn from them.

2) What has been the most meaningful part of this work for you?

I always enjoy seeing those I serve be able to become the best they can be. I see everyone with potential and think our job is to bring the gold out in all people. I have worked in many capacities in this field but I absolutely love having people express their creativity. Their projects should never look like mine but always be totally theirs. I believe encouraging those I work with in this way, brings out the best in them. This is seen in their faces, the sheer joy. In this way, I think art can be therapy. We all need to be encouraged and know our worth, I believe.

As I said above, I have been drawn to this population for a very long time. In 2021 I went to Kenya, Africa and met a special needs teacher. We started a non profit and now supply money so that they have a lunch program. Without this the students were not able to have lunch as there was nothing to bring because of the extreme poverty. I was appalled that these students

could not eat simply because they were special learners. In Kenya, many feel a child born with special needs is a bad omen. Again, we need to find the gold and bring it out.

3) What made you want to volunteer at Ben's Place?

I had heard about Ben's Place a few years ago but didn't know anything about it. At this time, I worked for The Arc Jacksonville in various positions. I retired in 2021 but then asked if they would hire me back to create and run an art program on a trial basis. They agreed and this lasted two and a half years. When I again knew it was time to leave, I prayed about the next and Ben's Place kept coming up in my mind, which was a little crazy as I had never been there or had any involvement. I am glad that I pursued this opportunity.

4) What has surprised you (or inspired you) most so far at Ben's Place?

I was impressed that the money of items sold could go directly to the clients who came to this program who made them. I was also surprised by all of the supplies just waiting to be made into something. I am inspired by all of the staff that I have met. Stephanie and I work very well together and I enjoy seeing her and working with her. She has such a beautiful personality and works with such love for all. You see, I've worked with many people over the years, and sometimes certain roles aren't always the right fit for everyone—but Stephanie truly is. She approaches her work with love and respect for all, and as we talk and learn about each other, I've come to see that this reflects the way she lives her life. She is truly a blessing.

5) What would you say to someone considering volunteering here?

I would tell them they should come and try it out. I am glad I did. If I didn't have other things going on, I would be here other days besides Monday, but maybe in the future.

“I see everyone with potential and think our job is to bring out the gold in all people.”



Feeding Program at Special Needs school in Kenya

Support the Mission. Strengthen the Community.

Get involved today. We currently are seeking volunteers for our annual golf tournament on Saturday, October 24th at Bent Creek Golf Course.

<https://bensplacecof.org/forms/new-member-volunteers/>

Community / Program Highlights

- **Day Program Update**

Stephanie and Julie are always finding fun ways to get our members out into the community—whether it’s shopping trips, visiting local spots, or grabbing lunch together. These outings complement our monthly programs like Arts & Crafts, Games, Dances, Fitness, Music/Karaoke, Movies, and Social/Living Skills. Together, they make a wonderful team, and Julie also helps members share and sell the items they create.



Day on the Town Shopping



Visiting a Horse in the Neighborhood



Walk to Hardee's for Lunch

- **Evening Program Update**

Jess is at our Center Wednesday through Friday evenings, bringing her experience working with adults with special needs in New Jersey. Members enjoy dinner, tea or coffee, jigsaw puzzles, dance moves, and some time to relax before heading home.



Members completing a jigsaw puzzle

Spotlight – Brian, Social Media Director



As the Social Media Director, I share information with our community and our community partners across our social media platforms. It’s more than just posting — it’s about keeping everyone connected, informed, and engaged with the amazing things happening every day. I am truly grateful for the team here at BEN’S PLACE SERVICES, INC. ❤️ And I’m especially thankful to Miss Emily for giving me this opportunity. This is a role I have wanted for a very long time, and I don’t take it lightly. I’m proud, honored, and thankful to serve as the Social Media Director.

“It’s more than just posting — it’s about keeping everyone connected, informed, and engaged with the amazing things happening every day.”

Community Resource Spotlight – Special Needs Planning

What is Special Needs Planning

by Larry Thompson, Board Member & Financial Advisor at Corebridge Financial, Inc.

Parents and caregivers of adults with special needs face unique and ongoing planning challenges. Special needs planning helps protect public benefits, support long-term care, and promote stability and independence. Without a clear plan, well-intended actions, such as leaving money directly to a loved one, may unintentionally affect eligibility for government programs.

“Planning thoughtfully today helps create stability, independence, and confidence for tomorrow.”

Thoughtful planning can address financial resources, legal documents, caregiving roles, and future housing needs, while respecting the individual’s abilities, preferences, and quality of life. Planning is not about predicting every outcome, but about being prepared for life changes and unexpected events.

Starting early allows families more flexibility and time to make informed decisions. Working with qualified legal, financial, and care professionals can help families understand available options and coordinate efforts.

This article is for educational purposes only and does not constitute personalized financial, investment, or legal advice. Larry can be reached via email: lt6742@gmail.com

Thanks to our 2026 Board Members!

Ebony Davis, President
Dawn Lunt, Vice President
Channing Sapp, Secretary
Jay Abraham, Treasurer
Clay Glisson, Trustee
Bob Graver, Director
Larry Thompson, Director
Debra Waye, Director
Annie Yarbrough, Advisor

Impact Snapshot & Get Involved

Stay connected! Follow Ben's Place on all our social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn



“Every small action adds up to a bigger impact — together, we make Ben’s Place a thriving, welcoming community.”

Impact Snapshot

25 adults with disabilities supported through community-based programs

Last major fundraiser: Golf Tournament October 2025: \$10,000 raised

Next major fundraiser: Online gift card auction, April 22nd-25th

100+ volunteer hours each month invested in connection and independence

Donors & community partners: **City of Jacksonville, Jaguar Foundation Community Impact, Ashley Furniture, College Automotive Specialists, Domtar, Ebtide Counseling LLC, Fence Nation, Friends of Ben’s, FSCJ & UNF - Occupational Therapy Programs, J.B. Coxwell Contracting Inc, Tri Star Truck and Trailer, Watco, Wel Companies, Eta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc, ABWA**

Get Involved

There are many ways to get involved at Ben’s Place! Consider volunteering, donating your treasures [here](#), preparing or donating a meal, or contributing supplies to help keep the Center running. Don’t forget to follow and share us on social media! For more information, call 904-635-4633.

“Whether you give your time, talent, or treasure, you help create a community where everyone belongs.”