



BEN'S PLACE

Spring Edition | Issue 2 | 2026

Day Program Director Ms. Stephanie

***A Heart for Service: Celebrating 16
Years at Ben's Place***



Meet our Day Program Director, Ms. Stephanie. Read her story inside.

Inside This Issue:

Leadership | A Heart for Service | Program Highlights | Resources/Impact

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Letter from the Executive Director

Emily Pate

Spring has brought exciting growth and renewed energy to Ben's Place. I continue to be inspired by our members, families, dedicated program team, volunteers, and community partners who make our mission possible every day.

I am excited to share that we are now serving **28 members**, and our programs continue to thrive. It's wonderful to see new friendships forming, confidence growing, and meaningful connections being made through both our Day and Evening Programs. Our Evening Program has also seen tremendous growth. When I began as Executive Director last August, only a handful of members stayed for evening activities. Today, we regularly welcome **as many as nine members** after 6:00 p.m., creating even more opportunities for fun, friendship, and belonging.

"Growth isn't measured only by numbers—it's measured by the friendships we build, the confidence we nurture, and the sense of belonging we create every day at Ben's Place."

We're also looking forward to several exciting fundraising events. Join us for our **Barrel Room Brunch on Sunday, July 12, from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.** Tickets are **\$25**, and all proceeds benefit Ben's Place. We're also hosting a **Community Yard Sale on Saturday, July 25, from 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.** at the Center and are currently accepting donations.

Planning is well underway for our **Annual Golf Tournament on Saturday, October 24, at Bent Creek Golf Course**. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of our incredible Golf Tournament Committee, sponsorships are coming in, auction items are being donated, and donated tournament shirts are already in place. We are grateful for the support we've received and welcome additional sponsors and auction item donations.

Thank you for believing in the mission of Ben's Place. Together, we are creating a community where everyone is welcomed, valued, and empowered to belong.

Letter from the Board President

Ebony R. Davis, LCSW-QS, MCAP



As spring arrives, we are reminded that growth often begins quietly. Seeds planted months ago begin to bloom, new opportunities emerge, and communities grow stronger through consistent care and connection. At Ben's Place, this season reflects so much of what we see every day in our members, families, volunteers, and supporters.

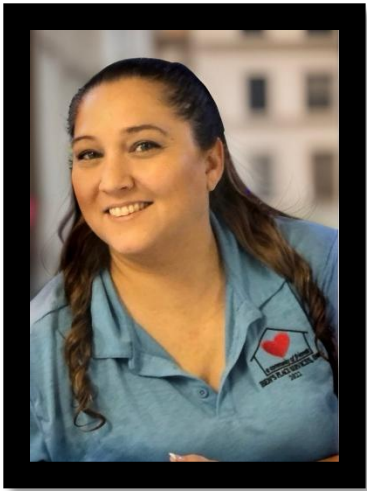
Throughout the year, our members continue to demonstrate resilience, creativity, and the importance of belonging. Whether participating in community outings, developing new skills, expressing themselves through art, or simply sharing laughter with friends, they remind us that meaningful connections enrich all of our lives.

This season also brings renewed energy and momentum for our organization. The Board of Directors remains committed to strengthening Ben's Place through thoughtful governance, strategic planning, and responsible stewardship of our resources. As we look toward the future, we are focused on supporting sustainable growth while preserving the welcoming, inclusive environment that makes Ben's Place so special.

Spring is also a season of gratitude. I want to thank our Executive Director, our dedicated program team, volunteers, donors, community partners, and families for the dedication and compassion you bring to our mission each day. Your support creates opportunities, fosters independence, and helps ensure that every member feels valued, respected, and connected.

As we continue growing together, we remain inspired by the possibilities ahead. With hope, purpose, and a shared commitment to our mission, we will continue creating opportunities for friendship, engagement, and belonging—because everyone deserves a community where they can thrive.

“Everyone deserves a community where they can thrive.”



A Heart for Service: Celebrating 16 Years at Ben's Place

Spotlight: Stephanie Schuler, Day Program Director

1) Having been connected to Ben's Place for so long, what has it meant to you personally to serve as the Day Program Director?

"Being a part of Ben's Place for the past 16 years has given me the opportunity to build strong relationships with our members, their families, and their providers. I've had the privilege of supporting individuals as they graduate from high school, transition into young adulthood, and grow into adulthood—some are now in their mid-30s. Watching each person develop, gain confidence, and reach new milestones has been an incredibly rewarding experience. It's a privilege to be part of their journey and to witness how each individual has grown over the years."

2) What makes the Ben's Place Day Program special?

"What makes the Ben's Place Day Program special is that it provides a safe and supportive environment for individuals to connect and socialize, while also giving families and caregivers time to focus on work, daily responsibilities, and rest. It creates a space where members are engaged and valued, and where families can feel confident knowing their loved ones are in a welcoming, caring setting."

3) What is the most rewarding part of your work?

"The most rewarding part of my work is working with each unique individual and the different perspectives and insights they bring. I find it incredibly meaningful to learn from them and to be part of their daily experiences. I also deeply value being able to provide peace of mind and support to families, parents, and caregivers. I enjoy connecting with

them and being part of their journey—navigating challenges, celebrating milestones, and sharing in their accomplishments along the way.”

4) What would you like our families, supporters, and community members to know about Ben’s Place?

“We would love to have you as part of our team. Ben's Place prides itself on remaining affordable and keeping costs low. We rely on fundraising, donations, volunteers, and community support to be able to serve individuals who may be on a waiting list for services or living on SSI. If you have a skill to share, time to give, resources, or the ability to make a donation, we would greatly appreciate your support.

We also welcome new friends. Please help spread the word about Ben's Place. If you know an adult with a developmental or acquired disability who is looking for a fun, supportive place to have adventures and make new friends, we would love to meet them.”

“Watching each person grow, gain confidence, and reach new milestones has been one of the most rewarding parts of my journey at Ben’s Place.”

Stephanie’s dedication reflects the heart of Ben’s Place—building relationships, fostering independence, and creating a community where everyone is welcomed, supported, and valued.

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.”

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/>

Spotlights – Ms. Julie & Angella

- **Day Program Update**

Ms. Julie and Angella both support our Day Program. Ms. Julie assists the programs on Thursdays and Fridays, including helping our members share and sell the items they created. She also does our weekend cleans. Angella is our ride monitor. She makes sure everyone gets checked in and is safely escorted to the correct ride pickup at the end of the day. Our monthly programs include Arts & Crafts, Games, Dances, Fitness, Music/Karaoke, Movies, and Social/Living Skills. Together, along with Ms. Stephanie, they make a wonderful team for our Day Program.



Ms. Julie Barber

1. What do you enjoy most about working at Ben's Place?

"My favorite part of working at Ben's Place is, of course, spending time with our members. Building relationships with them and being part of their daily experiences is the most rewarding part of my job."

2. What is one thing you hope our members and their families know about the work you do?

"I hope our members and their families know how grateful I am to be part of the Ben's Place team. It is a privilege to have a positive impact on the lives of our members. I get so much out of working with them—watching them make progress, celebrating their accomplishments, and seeing them enjoy time with their peers makes every day meaningful."



Angella Fuentes

1. Why is it so important to make sure members get on the right transportation?

"Making sure our members get on the right transportation is important because their safety is our top priority. We want each member to feel confident about which vehicle or JTA Connexion bus they should board, helping to prevent confusion and ensuring everyone gets home safely."

2. How long have you been involved in Ben's Place?

"I've been part of the Ben's Place family for more than 20 years. I joined shortly after moving to Jacksonville from California, and it's been a privilege to serve our members and watch the organization grow over the years."

- **Evening Program Update: Growing Connections**



Jess Lewis

Since Jess Lewis joined our Evening Program, held Wednesday through Friday, participation has continued to grow! Today, we're excited to regularly welcome as many as nine members after 6:00 p.m.—a significant increase from just a handful of participants a year ago. In fact, participation has nearly doubled over the past year.

Jess has created a warm, welcoming environment where members enjoy coffee, tea, hot chocolate, snacks, and meaningful conversations with friends. Evenings are filled with fun activities such as bingo,

sand art, tie-dye projects, games, and other creative experiences that encourage connection and laughter.

One of Jess's passions is promoting healthy eating habits. Members enjoy helping prepare dinner while learning about nutritious meals, fresh salads, and trying new foods like falafel. These shared experiences not only build life skills but also encourage members to step outside their comfort zones and discover new favorites.

The evening often ends with members sharing a meal together and enjoying a spirited game of UNO before heading home—a perfect way to close another fun-filled day at Ben's Place.

"Our Evening Program is about more than activities—it's about building friendships, developing life skills, and creating a place where everyone feels at home."

Community Resource Spotlight – Florida ABLE United: A Valuable Tool in Special Needs Planning

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

Florida ABLE United is Florida's qualified **Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE)** program. It was created to help eligible individuals with disabilities save and invest money while maintaining eligibility for important means-tested government benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medicaid.

What Is Florida ABLE United?

ABLE United accounts are authorized under Section 529A of the Internal Revenue Code and are administered in Florida through ABLE United. Earnings grow tax-free, and withdrawals used for qualified disability expenses are generally tax-free.

An ABLE account functions similarly to a college savings plan but is specifically designed for individuals whose disability began before the applicable federal age requirement. Family members, friends, employers, and the beneficiary may contribute to the account, subject to annual federal contribution limits.

 Key Benefits of an ABLE United Account

- ✓ Save and invest while helping maintain eligibility for SSI and Medicaid*
- ✓ Earnings grow tax-free
- ✓ Qualified withdrawals are generally tax-free
- ✓ Contributions can be made by family, friends, employers, and the beneficiary
- ✓ Funds may be used for:

• Housing	• Transportation
• Education	• Healthcare
• Employment support	• Assistive technology
• Personal support services	• Other qualified disability expenses

- ✓ Encourages greater independence and financial flexibility
- *Subject to eligibility requirements and applicable program rules.

"ABLE United accounts allow individuals with disabilities to save and spend money while protecting eligibility for important benefits like SSI and Medicaid."

A Flexible Tool for Everyday Expenses

In special needs planning, an ABLE United account is often used as a flexible spending and savings vehicle. One of its primary advantages is that the beneficiary generally retains direct control over the account and can access funds for day-to-day disability-related expenses.

This makes ABLE accounts particularly useful for managing housing costs, transportation expenses, and other routine needs that may be more difficult to address through a Special Needs Trust (SNT).

ABLE Accounts vs. Special Needs Trusts

Both ABLE accounts and Special Needs Trusts help preserve eligibility for public benefits, but they serve different planning purposes.

ABLE United Account	Special Needs Trust
Best for everyday disability expenses	Best for larger assets and long-term planning
Beneficiary generally manages the account	Trustee manages the trust
Annual contribution limits apply	No annual contribution limits
Easy to establish and manage	Requires legal drafting and administration

Using Both Together

For many families, the best solution is not choosing one over the other but using both together. A Special Needs Trust can serve as the primary long-term planning vehicle, while an ABLE United account can provide the beneficiary with convenient access to funds for qualified disability expenses.

Using both tools together may provide greater flexibility while helping preserve eligibility for government benefits.

Interested in Learning More?

If you have questions about ABLE United accounts or special needs planning, consult with qualified legal, tax, and financial professionals to determine the approach that best fits your family's unique circumstances.

FINRA Disclosure

This article is provided for educational and informational purposes only and should not be construed as legal, tax, investment, or financial planning advice. Eligibility requirements, contribution limits, benefit rules, and tax treatment may change. Individuals should consult with qualified legal, tax, and financial professionals regarding their specific circumstances before implementing any special needs planning strategy. Neither ABLE accounts nor Special Needs Trusts are appropriate for every situation, and no recommendation is being made to purchase, open, or establish any specific account or trust arrangement.

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Thanks to our 2026 Board Members!

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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



Join Us in Making a Difference

**Volunteer.
Attend.
Donate.
Share.**

Together, we are building a community where everyone belongs.

Impact Snapshot

28 adults with disabilities supported through community-based programs

Last major fundraisers: Online gift card auctions, **\$3,225+**

Next major fundraisers: **The Barrel Room Brunch, July 12th & Yard Sale, July 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**