

In The Spotlight...

Autism Awareness Celebration!

The 9th annual Autism Awareness Day celebration was held in Waycross, GA (Ware County) at the Okefenokee Heritage Center. The event is coordinated each year by Kim Gibson, Ware County School district's special



William Hall, Pierce County Special Education Director, drives the train

education parent mentor. Parent mentors from Brantley County (Lisa Gillis) and from Pierce County (Kristi Murphy) assist with the coordination. Parents, children, and staff from all eight counties in the South Central GLRS region attended the event, and many individuals beyond the eight counties attended with a total attendance exceeding 650! South Central GLRS supports the event by coordinating sign-in and t-shirt sales. Barbara Sonnier, Ware County Assistive Technology coordinator, coordinates the volunteers, and Stacie Sheys, Ware County High School special education coordinator, provides a place to pick up information about autism. Signs about autism are found throughout the OHC grounds, providing information and facts for attendees. Volunteers, usually consisting of students from various organizations, assist with all aspects of the event from hanging art work to directing parking for attendees. This year we were honored to have Ware County's Student of Excellence state finalist winner, Michael Logan, help with the event.

This is a fun day for families to come out and have a relaxing time with their children and also interact with staff in an informal manner. Examples of activities include a train ride, bounce houses, face painting, designing picture frames, and doing the hula hoop. Food is provided and organized by the Brantley County team. An art show featuring art done by students in Ware, Pierce, and Brantley counties is on display in one of the train box cars at the heritage center.



Dr. Tonya Johnson and Donna McClain, Special Education Directors for Coffee and Ware County, respectively

We plan to continue this tradition next year but move the event to another, less busy, month and change the name to Exceptional Children's Day to broaden the audience and inform attendees about facts related to various disabilities served by special education.



Stacie Sheys, Ware County High School Special Education Coordinator, Michael Logan, Ware County School District's Student of Excellence Award Winner, and an Easter Seals Representative.



Dana Robbins, South Central GLRS director, and Lisa Fesperman, South Central GLRS Program Specialist. Lisa also provides psychological services to Atkinson and Ware counties.





In The Spotlight...

Synergy is the interaction of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects. The Heart of Georgia Transition Alliance (HGTA) brings together multiple school districts, transition service agencies, colleges and universities, and concerned citizens to help improve the graduation rate and post school outcomes for students with disabilities in the Heart of Georgia RESA Region. Through coordinated services and activities synergy occurs when the HGTA works together to accomplish goals. In 2010, the Heart of Georgia Transition Alliance identified 7

goals, that if accomplished would help improve post-school outcomes for students with disabilities in the region. The goals of the HGTA are:

1. Bridge the information and services gap by encouraging agencies to work together and to share knowledge in order to raise the number of students with disabilities who graduate and who enter the work force.
2. Reduce gaps attributable to budget constraints through grant writing, fund raising, etc...
3. Influence this region to adopt, expand, and support programs and services which can be sustainable over time so that students with disabilities and their families can receive consistent transition programming and information from early on
4. Develop transportation options so that individuals with disabilities can access services and employment
5. Improve the individual education and transition planning processes so that planning meetings and student interviews can be positive and effective transition tools
6. Develop a culture among schools and employers in which individuals will be educated and employed based on their abilities rather than excluded based on disability.
7. Support, empower, and partner with families to raise awareness of resources and information concerning transition so that individuals with disabilities will become productive citizens.

Throughout the 2018/2019 school year the synergized efforts of the Heart of Georgia Transition Alliance have helped individuals with disabilities, their families, teachers of transitioned aged students with disabilities, and service organizations learn about opportunities in the region to benefit individuals with disabilities. The activities and events provided by the Heart of Georgia Transition Alliance included bi-monthly Transition Alliance Meetings, a Community Forum on Disability Services, The Heart of Georgia Transition Alliance Christmas Gala and Champion Awards, the 5th Annual I Can Conference, and an information parent meeting on Students with Disabilities Rights and Responsibilities...Navigation the Legal System as a Parent or Guardian. Collectively over 560 people attended these meetings and trainings held by the Heart of Georgia Transition Alliance.

Bridging the information and services gap and improving the individual education and transition service planning process began with the Community Forum on Transition Services that was held on October 30, 2019. Fifty-eight participants attended the event including personnel from local school districts, educational and transitions service agency providers, individuals with disabilities, college and university personnel, parent mentors from Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership, and Elise James from the Georgia Department of Education. Resources and information were provided from each agency represented and participants were encouraged to ask questions they might have about the services and supports provided by each agency. The HGTA provided all resources from the Community forum online at: <https://www.hgtransitions.org/community-resource-directory> .

The Heart of Georgia Transition Alliance strives to develop a culture among schools and employers in which individuals will be educated and employed base on their abilities rather than excluded based on their disability. The Heart of Georgia Transition Alliance Champion Awards and Christmas Gala is an annual event that not only showcases the gifts and talents of individuals with disabilities, but it brings awareness of the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities. On December 8, 2018, one hundred twenty- one community members, school districts personnel, individuals with disabilities, employers and others joined in celebrating the accomplishments of this year's award recipients. About students with disabilities and for students with disabilities, the event also served as a fundraiser for the HGTA's annual I CAN Conference. Continued on page 10.