Jason Chandler is a positive and bright eighth grade student from Peterman, Alabama, who is currently attending Excel High School in Monroe County. Jason looks forward to working with all of his teachers in order to continue expanding upon his academic potential. Having the opportunity to work with Ms. Morgan Andrews for the past three years has assisted Jason in enhancing his educational performance and developing psychosocial skills as he continues to grow and prepare for his transition. Jason noted, specifically, his appreciation of Ms. Andrews, by referencing her as his “second mom” who “treats me the best.” Jason is pleased to have support from his large family, including his parents, grandparents, two sisters, and cousins nearby.

Looking into the future, Jason shared his excitement about his own upcoming transition. As a young man, Jason has already begun to develop interests of his own, both inside and outside the classroom. He explained his favorite course is mathematics and discussed his enjoyment of repairing antique clocks with his grandfather, working with his father at the hardware store, and building and constructing different projects. One of his most recent projects was building his own zip line and rope swing. Jason was excited to participate in the governor’s proclamation signing ceremony, which recognizes March as Transition Awareness month. He will also have the honor of introducing the keynote speaker, HK Derryberry and Jim Bradford at the 2017 Alabama Transition Conference.
Morgan Andrews is constantly busy, determined to provide quality education and skills training to her students. In her first teaching position, Morgan taught transition education to students with disabilities (e.g., teaching social skills and preparing students for their driver’s education exam) and students in general education (e.g., college applications). Then, Morgan began working at Excel High School, as an autism and emotional disturbance behavioral specialist. Morgan has her own self-contained classroom and works with four paraprofessionals that assist students while in general education classrooms in order to continue developing behavioral skills, such as self-management and working through anger in a constructive manner.

To understand Morgan’s current employment, it is important to reflect on the path that led her to become a teacher at Excel High School. Prior to teaching, Morgan moved away from home to earn her college degrees, unrelated to special education. Ready to begin her career, she worked as a mental health counselor with a caseload of children ages 3 to 18 with disabilities. She described some of the difficulties related to supporting the needs of her consumers, as many of the children’s concerns at home spilled over into concerns at the school. She recognized that parents could be better informed and educated on ways they could assist their children. Eventually, Morgan went on to earn her master’s degree in special education and returned to her hometown in order to give back to her community.

Morgan is a dedicated, hard worker who always puts the needs of her students first. She maintains this momentum by continuing to network with others, as she did at the Transition Leadership Academy last year. She highlighted the importance and benefits of joining with other professionals to listen to one another. Through this process, she gained valuable knowledge and resources to provide the best services in order to support students through both school and community means. She specifically valued the ability to work in a small, intimate setting, troubleshooting methods to reach out and help students achieve success at their highest potential. Additionally, she noted how imperative these experiences are within rural communities, like Monroe County. Morgan discussed some of the hardships students, parents, professionals, and communities face when living in a rural community. Ranging from minor to far reaching setbacks, Morgan acknowledged the need for further parental involvement and education to limit the barriers between school and home and to promote student support. Furthermore, she spoke about the need for additional support personnel, mental health counselors, and understanding from others as people may not be fully aware of the amount of commitment that is required for a holistic approach or the importance of students receiving the appropriate therapy they need to be successful.

Morgan shared an important message with those who work in any capacity with students, stating, What you invest is what you get back. If I invest all me in my students and give them my best, I get the best from them. Even a hug or high five or smile when they get off the bus can set the tone for the day. She noted that students have their own concerns and are attuned to the adult in their lives, sharing how a student once expressed that they had no other adult to speak with other than their beloved teacher. As she reflected on these statements, she discussed the importance of building a positive rapport and establishing a foundation of trust with students. Looking back on her own personal experiences, she immediately expressed how much her students have made her more sensitive, open-minded, and patient. She encouraged others, who like herself feel stronger after being in the education system, to remain confident and be an advocate.
Jane Elizabeth Burdeshaw has committed her professional life to ensuring that the needs of individuals with disabilities are understood and met across the state. As commissioner of the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS), she is continuously enhancing policy, reviewing funding, and highlighting stories about the challenges and achievements of Alabama’s children and adults with disabilities. In her role, she oversees four major programs – Alabama’s Early Intervention System (EI), Children’s Rehabilitation Service (CRS), Vocational Rehabilitation Service (VRS), and State of Alabama Independent Living (SAIL) – that provide services to individuals with disabilities of all ages in homes, schools, the workplace, and the community. Providing coordinated developmental education, employment, and support services to some 50,000 Alabamians and their families is no easy feat.

During a recent interview, Burdeshaw strongly voiced the extent to which she values the team effort required across the community and at all levels to ensure these programs and services succeed in the goal of assisting individuals with disabilities in achieving their maximum potential and increasing their self-sufficiency and independence. Making these services work requires a cohesive team and outstanding leadership. Burdeshaw has demonstrated her leadership skills in a variety of roles, and her journey to her current position as commissioner has been shaped by her previous experiences. Burdeshaw began her career as a counselor at the Alabama Elks Memorial Center in Montgomery. Drawing on her master’s degree in counseling and human development, she provided support and counseling to residents of the center. While employed there, she witnessed firsthand all aspects of the consumers’ daily lives. This experience led her to discover her passion for serving persons with disabilities and paved the path to her current career. In 1998, Burdeshaw joined ADRS, where she has served as a case manager, vocational rehabilitation counselor, rehabilitation specialist, staff development and training coordinator, and director of Human Resource Development. She was appointed commissioner in July 2016.

These important pursuits are highlighted here to illustrate that she has worked and continues to work at the individual, local, and state levels in promoting the advancement of the field of rehabilitation services. As she advocates for people with disabilities during the development of laws, policies, and services, she enhances her professional knowledge and expertise by inviting ADRS consumers to share their personal stories with lawmakers and policymakers. Jane Elizabeth is a dedicated, energetic advocate and works continuously to assure that Alabamians of all ages across the state are being served at the individual, local, and state levels. Her tireless passion is evident, and we look forward to hearing more from her during the Transition Update at the 2017 Alabama Transition Conference.
Linda Hames was truly a leader in Transition and an inspiration to her co-workers and the students she served. She led our Transition Program for many years with the utmost integrity, dedication and service from the heart. Her life on this earth was too short but she made a positive impact on all the lives she touched. Thank you Linda for growing me as a leader and believing in me.

—Becky Fields, (Retired) Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services

Linda Hames was very compassionate in her work with the transition programs!

—Mary Browning, Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services

Linda Hames was a very hardworking and compassionate woman. She had a heart for transition and knew her job very well. She made a positive impact on everyone she came in contact with. She will be greatly missed.

—Shereka Haley, Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services

I remember Linda’s gentle manner and reflective thought. I cherish many times that I shared with her, but one that stands out is the summer that she, Dan Roth, and I wrote a grant to begin a youth self-advocacy project entitled My Voice. We worked hard and had a lot of fun. Linda was a champion for youth and young adults with disabilities and is greatly missed.

—Karen Rabren, Auburn University
The one characteristic of authentic power that most people overlook is humility. It is important for many reasons. A humble person walks in a friendly world. She sees friends everywhere she looks, wherever she goes, whomever she meets. Her perception went beyond the shell of appearance and into essence.

—Alicia Hodge, Alabama State Department of Education

Linda was one of those precious people who always reached out to others, encouraged many hearts (especially mine) and cheered for those moving toward a better life. She is one of my real heroes!

—Mabrey Whetstone, (Retired) Alabama State Department of Education

Linda was a pioneer in transition. When working with Linda for long hours at Youth Leadership Forum she would reflect on earlier times in her career. From teaching in a classroom to her work at Lakeshore and across the state, Linda was passionate about providing the best services possible to youth with disabilities. Linda was a member of the Alabama Rehabilitation Association, which was another way Linda was involved in the field of rehabilitation and professional development, and a way in which I was able to witness Linda’s constant passion for dedication and hard work in the field of rehabilitation. Linda inspires me to continue the great work we do in transition across Alabama.

—Nicholas Derzis, Auburn University
Transition Unlimited is an Alabama pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) initiative designed to build capacity and connect services to appropriately implement pre-employment transition services throughout the state. It is a new collaborative project sponsored by the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS), Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Service, in partnership with the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute (ATLI). ADRS is partnering with ATLI to provide guidance to transition stakeholders and local education agencies during the development of action plans for the delivery of Pre-ETS that best meet the needs of students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially eligible for vocational rehabilitation services. The goal is to build awareness of Pre-ETS throughout Alabama.

This initiative is a response to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, which mandates Pre-ETS be provided to students with disabilities, allowing those students with an opportunity to gain the skills necessary to compete in today’s workforce.

Alabama has set the tone for this mandate and starting in January of 2017, ADRS and ATLI staff members traveled throughout the state working with local multidisciplinary teams as they learned together and collaborated to develop action plans for the delivery of Pre-ETS for over 360 high schools in Alabama. The Transition Unlimited Action Plan Meetings offered specific Pre-ETS planning to each local high school. For each meeting, vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors served as team leaders as they partnered with up to five other team members who represented a certain high school. Teams consisted of up to six members who represented an array of transition roles, who were committed to and knowledgeable about improving transition services for students with disabilities, and could make decisions about the delivery of Pre-ETS provided at the local level.

This collaborative team effort generated stronger partnerships among dedicated professionals who represented diverse transition roles (e.g., vocational rehabilitation counselors, special educators, Pre-ETS specialists, school job coaches, special education coordinators, 504 coordinators, career and technical educators, school administrators). These team members engaged in action plan development by evaluating their current programs and making a plan for improvement and expansion. The action plans developed this year included the five required Pre-ETS: (1) job exploration counseling; (2) work-based learning experiences, which may include in-school or after school opportunities, or experience outside the traditional school setting (including internships), that is provided in an integrated environment to the maximum extent possible; (3) counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs at institutions of higher education; (4) workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living; and (5) instruction in self-advocacy, which may include peer mentoring.

The time during each meeting that we [ATLI staff members] looked forward to the most was teams’ networking during the highlights portion of the agenda. This provided teams with a time to share resources, learn from one another, and introduce new ideas. The entire agenda provided a big picture view of the state’s implementation of Pre-ETS.

A participant’s feedback from one of the thirty Transition Unlimited Action Plan Meetings, described his or her experience as “a short workshop that was packed with valuable information which excluded the fluff (school representative, Tuscaloosa). This is one example of many positive statements provided by participants, recognizing the ongoing need and appreciation for this type of training.

Additionally, all teams will be provided ongoing technical assistance throughout the process of this initiative. Overall, Transition Unlimited underscores our commitment to keep a focus on transition services at the local level. For more information about this initiative, visit, auburn.edu/atli and click on Transition Unlimited.
THIS IS TRANSITION UNLIMITED. (CONTINUED...)
An Alabama Pre-Employment Transition Services Initiative
...sponsored by the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Service, hosted by the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute
TAKE 5 WITH...
EVA WESCHE, New Conference Specialist
Auburn University • Auburn Transition Leadership Institute

Story by Leah Kartovicky

Tell us about your background and past work experiences. I am a native of Germany and have been living in the United States for over 20 years. Early in life, I believed I needed to expand my horizons and did so by exploring different cultures and countries, while serving others and pursuing a degree in hospitality management while in Germany. Prior to moving to the United States, I worked in Germany, Switzerland, South Africa, and Italy. After having a second career as a homemaker and settling in Auburn, I began working at an automotive supply company. Since the company has ties with Germany, I worked as the local representative for the plant, allowing me to use my bilingualism and customer service experience.

What brought you to the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute (ATLI)? I am always looking for opportunities to assist and serve others, which led me to ATLI. I was impressed with the work done at ATLI and was excited for the opportunity to be able to assist in working with students with disabilities as they learn occupational skills, as well as to support the conference as transition stakeholders learn about the most recent practices and resources.

What are you most excited for in your new position as conference specialist? I am most excited about using all of my past experience in customer service and my understanding of different backgrounds and cultures when working on the various projects at ATLI. I believe that my experiences, working not only for companies that held high standards, but also my passion of caring for my four children, allows me to work toward what is most important at ATLI, building brighter futures for youth and young adults with disabilities as they transition into adulthood.

~Building Brighter Futures~

WE BELIEVE IN TRANSITION AND LOVE IT.

NEWSLETTER NOTES
Do you have an interesting personal story to share about the transition process? Our newsletter staff would like to hear from you! Call 334.844.5927.

Archived issues of ATLI Directions are saved at auburn.edu/atli (click on “Resources”).

Guest editors: Leah Kartovicky and Kat Cler, ATLI Graduate Assistants