



The SUPERHERO CENTER for Autism



THE SUPERHERO CENTER FOR AUTISM NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 1 • SUMMER 2025

► Supporters play the Heros or Villains game at the 2025 Masquerade Ball at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino.

A Super Start

The year has already been packed with heroic milestones — and we're only halfway through!

From launching new programs to leveling up our events and spaces, the Superhero Center continues to grow stronger, thanks to the unstoppable force of our families, volunteers, supporters and board members.

As you read through this midyear update, we hope you feel the same pride and excitement we do. There's still plenty of action ahead and we can't wait to see what the rest of the year holds.

Gala Greatness

We hit the ground running in 2025 with our 8th Annual Masquerade Ball and we're thrilled to share that it was our most successful fundraiser yet!

We suited up and donned our masks for an unforgettable night at the Hard Rock Hotel and

Our 2025 Supporters

- Field Fastener
- Constellation Nuclear
- Dayton Bennett Photography
- Backyard Baseball
- Studio 815
- RAGS Hair Studio
- Elizabeth Benson
- Reamble Lewis
- The Messinger Family
- Janet Louise Boutique
- Fern Schumacher
- Windsor Pizza Parlor
- North Boone National Honor Society
- UW Health
- and all of our incredible volunteers!

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► Board members pose at the 2025 Masquerade Ball.

Casino Rockford. This year's theme, "Lady Luck," was a heartfelt reminder of just how fortunate we are to be supported by such an incredible community. Thanks to your support, we raised nearly \$22,000! Every dollar will go straight to fueling our programs, maintaining our facilities and supporting the more than 600 families who call The Superhero Center home.

We're deeply thankful to everyone who made the evening shine – supporters, sponsors, volunteers and families alike. A special shoutout goes to our diamond-level sponsors, Constellation and Field Fastener, as well as our gold-level sponsors: Caravel Autism Health, Rockford Personal Injury Lawyers, Chad Kulpa and Fitzgerald Equipment Company. Your generosity powers all we do.

The night was filled with memorable moments. Host Whitney Martin radiated warmth and kept the proceedings on track. Brian Matteson's music lifted our spirits, while Basement Productions Ltd. kept the dance floor buzzing. Pablo Korona shared a powerful video that touched our hearts, and we sincerely thank Lyndsay Matushek and Candise Artz for sharing their story.

We're proud to recognize Victoria Alatorre as our 2025 Volunteer of the Year. Big thanks to Dabadooya and Company for capturing the night through stunning photography and a lively photo booth.

Inflated Creative gave our VIP area a pop with a beautiful balloon arch and Nothing Bundt Cakes wowed us with decadent desserts. We also want to thank Mid-West Family Broadcasting for helping us spread the word to families looking for connection and support.

This year's gala reminded us just how powerful our superhero community can be when we work together. We're so proud of what we accomplished and we're already dreaming up next year's celebration.

Thanks to all who helped us set the tone for an incredible 2025!

Sensory Friendly Fun

In February, we kicked off 2025's family-friendly sensory events with heart at our 3rd Annual Valentine's Dance.

Each year, The Superhero Center creates inclusive, sensory-friendly celebrations around major holidays. For many of our families, traditional experiences like mall photos with Santa can be overwhelming. Our Valentine's, Easter and Christmas events give our superheroes the chance to meet beloved characters like Santa or the Easter Bunny in a calm, welcoming space where they feel safe and seen – and where parents get those cherished holiday photos, stress free.

We're grateful to Crystal Williams, our Family Event Coordinator, and our intrepid team of volunteers for making these sensory events happen.

This fall, we're brewing up something spooky as we reimagine our Halloween event. Staaaay tuuuned!

Snip, Snip Hooray!

We're so grateful to Devin Benesh at RAGS Hair Studio for sharing her time and talents at our very first Sensory Haircut Day! Thanks to her kindness and skill, the event was a big success.



For many of our superheroes, everyday tasks can feel like monumental challenges. Having a safe, supportive space for something as simple as a haircut truly makes a world of difference.

We're excited to host another Sensory Haircut Day soon. Comb our website and Facebook page for future information.

Knowledge is Power

Thanks to our Outreach and Parent Education Director, Paige Kazy-Garey, and our board Vice President, Amanda Cismesia, 2025 is already shaping up to be a year of empowerment and insight for our superhero families. With regular in-person classes held right at our center – with childcare provided – parents can focus on learning how to navigate the autism world and discover the resources that will help them thrive.

So far, we have welcomed Anne Mank, CFP, CPA of Savant Wealth Management, who led a session on ABL accounts and special needs financial planning - guiding parents through how to start saving for their child's future and how ABL accounts can help. Our parents also learned about PUNS, a database in Illinois that helps people sign up for important support services like group homes and in-home care.

Paige and her team are out in the community, connecting with families at resource fairs and events across the region to make sure every family knows there's a place for them at our center. She is also hard at work planning our own Superhero Center Resource Fair – stay tuned for announcements coming soon!

Teen Beat

Our Superhero Teen group has been going strong through 2025 as well. Once a month, our teen superheroes and their parents gather for board games, video games, arts and crafts and good vibes. While the teens hang out, it's a powerful space for teens to build friendships, parents who navigate similar journeys find friendship and support.

A huge shoutout goes to our superhero volunteer,



► A full-house in attendance at the March 2025 Mom's Night.

Kristina Baker, who leads the charge and brings these nights to life. We're also thrilled to share that our center's teen room is nearly finished! Soon, our teen superheroes will have their own space to relax, recharge and just be themselves whenever they stop by.

If you're the parent of a teenager with autism or other special needs and you're looking for connection, support and fun for both you and your child, check our website or keep an eye on our Facebook page.

Mom's Assemble!

Our Superhero Moms group continues to soar, with regular gatherings and ongoing support all year long. These meetups are a lifeline for moms who give so much of themselves every day.

Huge thanks to Stephanie Kulpa, our Family Support Director, for creating these moments of connection and renewal for our superhero moms. To learn about future mom events, keep an eye on our Facebook page.

And dads, we see you, too! We're currently assembling a league of your own. Stay tuned for details. Want to help make it happen? Shoot us an email. We'd love to have you on the team.

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► We had a huge turnout for the the initial Among Friends event.

Sibling Support

This year, we were thrilled to launch Among Friends, a brand-new teen group created just for siblings of individuals with autism and special needs.

This incredible group exists thanks to Lena Marquez, who saw the need for a space where teens like her could connect, unwind and just be themselves. With the support of the In Youth We Trust grant from the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois, Lena's vision came to life — and Among Friends was born.

What sets this group apart? It's led by teens, for teens. From planning events to shaping the vibe, every part of the experience is created by the members themselves. It's a place to be seen, heard and supported by others who get what it's like to grow up alongside a sibling with special needs — while still having a blast just being a teen.

Kim Slick, one of our dedicated volunteers, has taken on a vital role in making our Among Friends sibling events a success. Her passion as a special education teacher and her commitment to creating spaces where everyone feels seen and supported shine through in every thoughtful detail she brings to these gatherings.

Know a teen who might want to join the fun? We'd love to welcome them Among Friends!

What's New at HQ

Our very own Administrator and acting Treasurer, Alexa Bois, has been on a mission to supercharge the Superhero Center. Behind the scenes, she's been transforming our space: maximizing storage, decluttering and keeping our shelves stocked with everything our families need.

Alexa also gave our front desk a fresh new look, rolled out a bold new merchandise display, designed an inviting toddler space and is currently adding some serious sparkle to our teen room.

On top of all that, she's stepped up to handle treasurer duties while we continue the search for a new one. We're beyond thankful for Alexa's energy, creativity and commitment to keeping the Superhero Center running strong!

Communications Director Jim Taylor works behind the scenes to keep the Superhero Center Facebook page, the Superhero Parents resource page, and superherocenter.org up to date and fresh. With his team, Jim publishes event notifications, thank yous to all our incredible sponsors, open gym schedules as well as supporting media inquiries and engagement. Jim always has the right words to capture the mission of the center to support Superhero families.

Fresh Capes, New Vision

Big things are happening behind the scenes at the Superhero Center — including some exciting updates to our Board of Directors.

We were proud to officially welcome Kelly Dinsmore into her well-deserved role as President in late January. It's a title she made official after leading our record-breaking gala. Amanda Cismesia, formerly our Fundraising Events Coordinator, stepped into the role of Vice President.

With Amanda's move, we welcomed Dayton Bennett to the team as our new Fundraising Event Coordinator. As the owner of Dabadooya & Company,

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Dayton brings serious event-planning power to our board.

We also added Crystal Williams as our new Family Event Coordinator. Crystal wasted no time, putting together our sensory-friendly Valentine's Day events – and she hasn't stopped. From organizing our Easter Bunny event to launching our first-ever sensory haircut day, she's been a whirlwind of energy and creativity

As for our treasurer position, it's still open for now, but we're in the process of interviewing some truly outstanding candidates. We can't wait to welcome a new member to help us keep the superhero ship flying high!

Be a Hero!

At the Superhero Center, our greatest strength doesn't come from capes or superpowers. It comes from our volunteers. We are proud to be a 100% volunteer-run organization. Every smile, every event and every open gym is powered by the dedication and compassion of our amazing team of volunteers.

We depend entirely on these everyday heroes to keep our mission alive. Their selfless service allows us to provide support, joy and resources to families who



► Our volunteer opportunities include open gyms, holidays events, birthday parties, special events, and more.

need it most. Whether they're organizing events, keeping the center tidy or simply sharing a kind word, our volunteers make everything possible.

A special thank you goes to Jeff Cismesia, our incredible Volunteer Coordinator. Jeff's tireless efforts, leadership and heart are the glue that keeps our team strong and connected. We couldn't do this without him!

If you'd like to join our team of heroes, we'd love to hear from you! To learn more or arrange a volunteer training, head to our website. Did you meet a volunteer at an open gym/event/party that went out of their way? Let them know by shouting them out here.

Superhero Spotlight: Hector

Hector and his mom, Dyanna, are regulars at the Superhero Center's open gyms and sensory-friendly events. Hector is a wonderful friend to other superheroes, and Dyanna always finds time to connect with other parents while supporting Hector. Hector's favorite toys are the cars and trains, especially his yellow school bus.

Recently Hector has been using more words and practicing his letters, and we are so proud of him for all the ways he is learning and growing. Both Hector and Dyanna are such special members of our superhero community and we're happy to see them at almost all our open gyms!



► Hector at the 2024 sensory-friendly Christmas event.



LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Empowering Every Hero, Every Day



Dear Superhero Families, Friends, and Supporters,

As we continue our journey at The Superhero Center for Autism, I am filled with gratitude and pride in our community. Each day, I am reminded of the incredible strength, resilience, and potential of the individuals and families we support. Our mission—to provide a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment for individuals with autism — remains at the heart of everything we do.

In the first part of 2025, we've made some exciting strides. From new programming and highly-attended sensory-friendly events to a wonderfully successful fundraiser we continue to strengthen our foundation, The Superhero Center for Autism continues to be a place where children thrive and families find the support they deserve.

Some highlights this quarter include:

- **2025 Masquerade Ball** – Our annual masquerade ball held at the Hard Rock Casino, Rockford raised over \$22,000 to support open gyms, parent education, sensory-friendly holiday events, sibling activities, and teen nights.
- **Among Friends Teen Sibling Group** – Our teen sibling group was made possible by the vision of one of our own superhero's sisters and a grant we were awarded. Among Friends provides a safe place for siblings of individuals with special needs and autism to socialize and support one another. We hold monthly events to help support this group.
- **Sensory-Friendly Events** – This year we have hosted many sensory-friendly events, such as, a Santa event, a Valentine's Day dance, off-site sensory-friendly haircuts, and an Easter Bunny event.

Looking ahead, we are thrilled to announce the return of our 5k race in the fall of 2025 and our annual masquerade ball in the spring of 2026. We believe in the power of community and the potential of every individual. With your continued support—whether through donations, volunteering, or simply spreading the word—we can make an even greater impact.

Thank you for being part of our superhero family. Together, we are creating a world where every individual can be accepted and supported.

With gratitude and optimism,

Kelly Dinsmore

Kelly Dinsmore
President, The Superhero Center for Autism





► Christian Williams, attending an open-gym.