

A THOUSAND WORDS

Sharing Pictorial Stories of Friendships and Celebration Through This Edition of The TILLEGram



WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

TILL Staff Recognized At Home And Beyond

Staff at TILL are renowned for their dedication, compassion, ingenuity and skills. With such a large and diverse workforce, some of their achievements remain (as yet) unsung. Look for more stories recognizing the everyday accomplishments of staff in future editions. In the meantime, here is a sampling of some recent award winners:

In July, Littleton Residence Manager **Ashraf Muguluma** was selected as the recipient of the 2024 Providers' Council Gerry Wright Direct Service Employee Award, which he accepted at an October ceremony. In his nomination, Ashraf was described as "truly a hero" in the lives of the four men at the Littleton home where he has worked since he started at TILL. In 2023, he organized a thirteen-day, cross country trip to national parks in Colorado and Utah with three of the residents. In December, Ashraf, who joined TILL in 2016, was promoted from Residential Support Professional. "To be honest, I feel like I'm attached to this place," he explained.

Another Providers' Council honoree, **Jennifer Thomas**, received the Volunteer of the Year award for her work with the marketing department at TILL, where she has contributed her talents weekly for eight years. An alumnae of TILL's Springboard Social Club, Jennifer describes herself as an advocate and a "voice" for people with mental health issues and other disabilities.



THEIR SMILE IS HIS OWN REWARD

Program Manager John Baptist Sseppuuya Honored by DDS as "a wonderful advocate for his residents"

By nature, Chelmsford residence Program Manager John Baptist Sseppuuya prefers "to remain incognito." So, when he first learned that he was to be recognized by the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) Northeast Region, he thought it might have been "a prank of sorts." But reading the reasons he was nominated turned out to be "a pleasant and humbling surprise."

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From the President



Dear Friends, Families, and Colleagues,

TILL is celebrating its 45th anniversary this year. Much has changed since May 1, 1980, when I began the organization.

In the 1950s, parents who had been given no choice but to put their children in institutions dared to hope that their children did not have to be hidden away for life. This effort continued with the activism of the '60s. Self-advocates came forward, legislation was passed, and awareness of the ills society had inflicted on so many became obvious. This expanded activism continued well into the '70s when a new community-based services system came into being, and TILL and other like-minded agencies began to form. We dreamt of what could be, alongside parents and public stakeholders, and turned those dreams into reality.

We are honored to be a part of that revolution from the outset and a continued vital part of the future of community-based services. We have come a long way, but it is up to each of us to ensure that we do not lose the progress we have made. Our mission to be visible in the community, to provide opportunities for learning, for fun and for continued growth is our calling card. It is up to each and every one of us to carry that message in our everyday lives and work.

A very appreciative thank you to the individuals we support, to our families, our business and state funding partners and to our valued employees without whom none of these dreams could come true.

Thank you for choosing to be a part of TILL.

Sincerely,
Dafna Krouk-Gordon
Founder and President
TILL, Inc.



Stay in Touch

Email info@tillinc.org to receive the latest news via email, update your mailing address or find out more about TILL's services. Keep up with news, events and more by following us on socialmedia.tillinc.org/social-link



PERFECT 10

TILL Named to List of Top 100 Women Led Businesses for 10th Consecutive Year



If word that TILL has been selected as one of the Top 100 Women Led Businesses feels like old news, there is a reason: 2024 marks the tenth consecutive year the organization has received the honor.

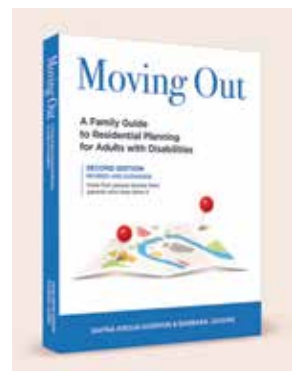
Sponsored by The Women's Edge and The Boston Globe and celebrated Nov. 1 at Boston's Copley Place Marriott, this annual list recognizes the state's leading companies and non-profit organizations run by women, a sector which now represents \$124.5 billion dollars of the Massachusetts economy.

TILL founder and president Dafna Krouk-Gordon views the honor in a wider context. "We are proud that TILL and 16 other human service agencies throughout Massachusetts have received this recognition."

For TILL, she added, "This achievement is inextricably linked with our ability to provide rewarding career opportunities and growth to our incredible staff of human service professionals."

A MUST (RE) READ

Dafna Krouk-Gordon and Barbara Jackins, an attorney and expert on special needs planning, wrote "the book" on residential planning for adults with disabilities in 2013. Now, the revised and expanded second edition of *Moving Out* has been released, with the authors sharing information and advice from decades of experience working with families. First-person stories from parents who researched options and helped their child select the most suitable living arrangement help other families on this journey of residential planning. *Moving Out*, 2nd Edition, is now available on Amazon.



THEIR SMILE IS HIS OWN REWARD

Program Manager John Baptist Sseppuuya Honored by DDS as “a wonderful advocate for his residents”

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This was not the first time that John has had to square positive acclaim with his natural inclination to remain “out of the spotlight.” In 2019 and 2023, John received an Above and Beyond Award from TILL’s Professional Development Committee for employees “who go that extra step in the performance of their duties.” He attributes the DDS award to “teamwork” (eleven Chelmsford staff care for its five residents) and “also the support we get from the other departments of TILL.”

John arrived in the U.S. from Uganda in 2016. A family member who was a TILL Residence Manager recommended he apply for a position. “She was certain TILL was the right place for me to resume working on my career growth in the USA,” John recalled. “She was right.” He was hired as a Residential Support Professional (RSP). “The cultural diversity at TILL made me feel instantly at home,” he said. Back home in Busega, his experience was with individuals in institutions and larger communities rather than homes. “I was particularly impressed by the person-centered approach in the residence,” he said, adding that it is “something I still find very special.”

Two years later, John became Residence Manager in Chelmsford. He had worked with senior women like the Chelmsford house residents before but one new experience in the role was cooking. In his culture, John explained, “the kitchen was a preserve of the ladies and a no-go area for men.” So, he found the prospect of making meals for residents “a welcome challenge” and reached out to peers on staff who patiently shared their skills. Today, he says, “The ladies at TILL Chelmsford and my family say I sometimes prepare very delicious dishes.”

On a visit to the Chelmsford residence, DDS Service Coordinator Kate Poulin noticed “how staff interact all of the time with the individuals” whether it is Bingo, other games or activities. “This comes from John as he is a great leader [who] ensures that his team is attentive for all of the residents’ needs and wants.”



She appreciated the way John and his team make sure that the residents are engaged with the community - bowling, dining out and participating in other local activities - and with each other through household responsibilities. He also prioritizes connections with the families of residents.

John uses personal events to create a sense of community, from residents’ birthdays to hospital visits. Kate was impressed that he threw a birthday party for one of the residents while she was hospitalized.

“John is a wonderful advocate for them,” she says, “and he is a motivator for his staff, too. John will go above and beyond for everyone. It is apparent that his actions come from his heart, and he really cares for everyone.”

One day, John aspires to become a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst [BCBA]. In the meantime, he is fulfilled by the response he receives from the ladies he works with. He acknowledges their challenges with aging including declining mobility and health, yet he thrives on their responsiveness.

“Whenever I see a smile on their faces,” he says, “that’s what drives me.”

FOLLOW THE LEADERS

Key Roles Filled by TILL Staff and Autism/Neurodiversity Veteran

The search to fill several pivotal positions led to TILL and beyond. In October, Strattus Clinical Manager **Caitlyn Watt** received a promotion to Director of Clinical Services. Prior to joining TILL in 2023, Caitlyn worked as a clinician, then in supervisory roles within emergency services and residential programs, while continuing to provide therapy in outpatient mental health services. In December, Billerica Day Habilitation Senior Program Manager **Marilyn Kuhn** was elevated to Director of Day and Vocational Services. Marilyn began as Site Supervisor

for Billerica TILL Central and Autism Initiative in 2012 and has more than three decades experience in various settings including vocational, residential and day services. From Special Olympics to the Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE), **Jay O’Brien’s** experience includes human services as well as government and communications. A graduate of Holy Cross (BA) and Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, Jay’s new role will focus on independent and creative living programs.

HOLIDAY WRAP-UP

Festivities Were Full-Throttle Throughout TILL

TILL is renowned for celebrating its staff and the individuals we support. This holiday season was no exception. Special seasonal activities extended across the residences and day programs, along with pay-it-forward initiatives like those at TILL Central in Billerica, where individuals made holiday cards for veterans and dropped them off at the local DDS office. At the residences and programs of TILL, holidays are for sharing and charity begins at home.



IN THE LONG RUN

Welcome to TILL Games XXVII

September marked the 27th year of TILL Games, our annual track event for all ages and abilities held at the Reggie Lewis Track and Athletic Center in Roxbury. 150 athletes took part in races including a one-mile run, short and long distance race-walks, wheelchair races, team relays and a youth fun run. In organizing this TILL tradition, Community Connections Director and Assistant Director Paula Aiesi and Kingsley Brown left no detail untended, including a photo booth to document every athlete's achievements.





A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Cultural Festival Represents The Diversity of the TILL Community

“It was one of the best TILL events ever!!!”

Another noteworthy nomination for a favorite festivity was the Cultural Festival, which Director of Community Connections Paula Aiesi described as “friends coming together to show their multicultural pride.” On Sunday, November 3rd, over 400 people from TILL gathered at the Boston Marriott Newton for an afternoon of fashion and food, music and dance. The eclectic performances included everything from Scottish bagpipes to Ugandan dance, concluding with Sheree Wynter & Trevor (aka the Jamaican stage name for Community Connection’s Assistant Director Kingsley Brown).

“Never before have I dared to dance in public, but the love and respect for my flag and my island gave me the courage,” Maria Rodriguez, Residential Support Professional in Lexington, wrote to Dafna after the Festival. “On behalf of my beloved island of Puerto Rico, thank you, TILL, for this beautiful experience.”



VIVE LA DIFFERENCE

Springboard Social Club Members Experience France with Friends

They were a mix of women and men, adults of all ages, yet many of the 25 Springboard Social Club members who spent a week exploring France together in November had known each other for years. The four group leaders, Springboard's Nicole Leontakianakos, Sherrri Shafman and Community Services Coordinator Dale Belcher, along with Charlestown Residence Manager Ben Ayree, had a long connection to the program and its members. Yet there is nothing like travel to bring even familiar friends closer. Their week-long adventure included not just pillars of Paris like the Louvre and Palais Royal but side trips to Normandy on Veteran's Day and the markets and cafes of Saint-Malo in Brittany, destination for some memorable crepes. From a painting class at the Eiffel Tower to a primer on navigating the Metro and visits to a castle in Chambord, the Springboard delegation immersed themselves in the culture of France.

Even a Springboard veteran like Nicole, who has been with the program for a dozen years, marveled at the compassion and patience members showed each other. Some stayed back with the group leaders to help others negotiate challenging terrains. When one member left her cellphone an hour and a half away and the bus had to turn back, not one member complained.

"It was a new place for everyone," Nicole recalled. "We were all taking it in and not knowing what to expect. They were wanting to take care of each other. It's magical when you see it happen."



ALL ABROAD

Education Through Travel (ETT) Trip to Germany Builds Life-Changing Bonds

Their journey began on October 17. According to their itinerary, it lasted 6 days. Unofficially, it may never end.

The schedule included visits to Neuerkerode, an inclusive village, and to a public school, each with models different from human services and education in the U.S. There were also the landmarks from the Berlin Wall to the Reichstag, and cultural touchstones like beer halls, bread baskets, and bratwursts. Yet for all the recreational, cultural and educational experiences that were a part of their 6-day trip to Munich, Berlin and Braunschweig, Germany, the most lasting takeaways for the 10 staff members from across TILL were about their travels together.

"It was a wonderful experience of bringing together different departments," Dafna observed. "We truly enjoyed each other's company and got to know one another with promises of connecting throughout the work year."

"We all bonded as if we [had] always known each other," confirmed Peabody Residence Manager Carol Ejindu.

That connection made the trip unforgettable for Cravings Program Manager Dawn Lemay-Dube who wrote: "The connections you will make, the people you will meet, and the places you will go will change your life forever."

International travel is a unique and highly valued employee benefit offered to staff after two years with TILL. Beneficiaries of this excursion included Lisa Cook, Emiliya Ryaboy, Dawn Lemay-Dube, Rutendo Gomwe, April Schindler, Susan Moody, Carol Ejindu, Wafaa Mansour, Renee Brunelle, and Dafna Krouk-Gordon.

RENEW, REFRESH, RECHARGE

Grant Funding Brings Respite Innovations to Family Caregivers

From high tea, yoga, and spa dates to inclusive personal trainers, house cleaning and overnight getaways, TILL Respite Innovations is true to its name, providing family caregivers with rejuvenating, practical and creative services and activities. Respite options have included overnight stays at the Residence Inn in Burlington and Natick, where family caregivers also had the chance to participate in a social connections group, run by a TILL clinician, to share challenges and experiences. Over 60 families signed up for another therapeutic benefit: monthly housecleaning services. Although not a typical respite offering, house cleaning provides much needed relief to families who have their hands full caring for a loved one with a disability.

Funding from an Executive Office of Health and Human Services Respite Innovations Grant has enabled TILL and 40 other organizations to expand the delivery of free respite services throughout Massachusetts. The grant runs through March of this year.

On December 14th, more than 40 family caregivers enjoyed a pre-holiday afternoon of golf, lunch and companionship at Topgolf Boston-Canton.



“It was one of the best days,” raved Shannon who attended with her daughter and fellow caregiver, Kinz. “She really loved being a part of something wonderful. We will never forget it.”

Following a spa day, the parent of a son with learning differences, Karen, emailed TILL Respite Innovations Project Coordinator Ilana Gordon-Brown. “I can’t tell you how great it was to have an opportunity to get some self-care without the guilt of taking a service or a tutoring session away from my son,” she wrote. “As a mom, I think we tend to put our family’s needs ahead of our own, and rarely do we take the time to consider our own needs.”



When Ilana was planning grant programming, she prioritized services for family caregivers like Karen.

“I think a lot of respite programming while in name is for the caregiver, in reality focuses on the individual who needs care,” she explained.

“While this is technically time away from caregiving, we wanted our programming to not only give them time away but have the focus of the programming be on them. So, we designed different activities for



the caregivers that would be fun or relaxing and give them a chance to meet other caregivers to help them feel less isolated.”

Families who have been participating in TILL’s respite programming gathered for a Winter Party at the Sheraton Needham in late January, where they were treated to a sit-down dinner, live music, spray art, a photo booth, and take-home treats. Ilana, who orchestrated the event, is already fielding thank you messages.



“I really appreciate all the respite opportunities that you and TILL have been setting up,” wrote Ellen and Doug whose son, Tim, said the highlight was the music. “The ‘joy’ in caregiving sometimes needs a little boost!”

TILL WAVE GALLERY EXHIBITIONS:

Of Birds and Bees, Arts and Hearts

Approaching its first decade, TILL’s innovative, inclusive gallery in Watertown has a history of thought-provoking themes for its shows. Last fall was no exception, beginning with **New England Pollinators** in collaboration with Massachusetts Pollinator Network (September 26-November 22), followed by **Art with Heart**, a collaboration with the Watertown Art Association (December 5 - January 18).



THEY TOOK ABOVE AND BEYOND TO NEW HEIGHTS

TILL's Professional Development Committee announced the recipients of TILL's coveted Above and Beyond Awards. From July 1 through December 31, 2024, they included:



Pierre Casimir, Residence Manager, Brockton
Theresa Whitford, Therapeutic Assistant, Billerica Day Hab
Danielle Sampson, Relief Staff, Dedham
Kingsley Brown, Assistant Director, Community Connections
Lisa Cook, Senior Operations Coordinator, Clinical and Support Services
Andrew Jegede, Residential Support Professional, Woodland Respite



AN ANNUAL TRADITION TO PROVIDE RECOGNITION

Staff Luncheon Honors Service Milestones

“Welcome to my favorite occasion of the year.”

In an organization known for signature events, celebrations and traditions, this is quite a statement, particularly coming from TILL Founder and President Dafna Krouk-Gordon. Yet a quick survey of the 26th annual staff recognition luncheon makes a strong case for why this is the most special of special occasions. On October 9th, TILL celebrated the tenure of 114 employees at the Salem Country Club in Peabody. The festive lunch included staff marking their 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th, 25th, 30th, 35th, and 40th year of service—plus the first to make the 45th year milestone—the founder herself. “It is a time when we can celebrate the people who make TILL what it is,” Dafna told the honorees and guests, “who influence the mission, who are the ones in this room and the people who are not able to be here today who turn our rhetoric into reality.”

