

# Messenger

Spring 2021



WINNER

Top Christian  
recording artist

## CELEBRATING DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES MONTH IN A BIG WAY

Featuring an exclusive performance from  
Crowder

# CROWDER

# A Celebration to Remember

Friends,

Recently, we had the opportunity to celebrate people with intellectual and developmental disabilities during Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. Throughout March, we raised awareness of how far people with disabilities have come in recent years, but how much work we still have to do together to create truly inclusive communities.

I hope you saw our amazing live concert with top Christian artist Crowder, our visit to Johnny Cash's family farm, and our intimate gathering with American Idol finalist Jessica Meuse at Cornerstone Village in Minnesota. Plus, several of our ambassadors who attended a NASCAR race last March had a chance to reconnect over Zoom with racing legend Michael Waltrip. Many thousands of people were reached with a positive message of inclusion, and you can read all about the month in this edition of the Messenger.

Meanwhile, we continue to work our way out of the COVID-19 pandemic, with many of the people we support and team now fully vaccinated, allowing for visits from families and more freedom. This is exciting news and a step toward normal that has been a long time coming. I sincerely appreciate everyone's efforts and patience during a very challenging year. I am especially grateful to our donors who have made it possible for us to continue providing critical services.

We have a lot of great things on the horizon and I can't wait to share with you the new ways we will be serving people with disabilities in the near future. For now, please enjoy the Messenger, and stay healthy.

Regards,



*Mike Thirtle*

Mike Thirtle, PhD  
**President & CEO Bethesda**

*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

*- Galatians 6:2 NIV*

# ‘That was exciting!’ NASCAR legend Waltrip reconnects with ambassadors

For most of us, the dream of meeting our heroes is just that—nothing more than a dream. But for three lucky people Bethesda supports, meeting a hero became a reality. Twice.



Last March, before the world started shutting down, we partnered with Motor Racing Outreach to send five “ambassadors” including Chris, Carl, and Jordan to the NASCAR Auto Club 400 race in Fontana, California, to help spread our message of inclusion for people with disabilities. The day was a whirlwind filled with autographs, celebrity meet-and-greets and, one of their favorite parts of the day, pace car rides on the track with NASCAR legend Michael Waltrip.

And this year, the guys were able to reconnect with Waltrip virtually to reminisce, catch up, and talk about Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. And it turns out Waltrip loved meeting them as much as they did him.

“I enjoy taking folks on rides with me,” he said of taking them on the pace car rides. “But the smiles just seemed bigger that day. Sharing that with them was really special. Nothing feels better than making people smile, making people happy.”

“That was exciting!” agreed Carl.

And even though the guys had a lot of questions for Waltrip (“Are you coming back to the Cup series?” “How did you get started racing?” “Are you going to be racing this summer?”), the conversation also turned to some heartfelt topics.

As Chris pointed out, people with disabilities are no different than anyone else. “We are the same way like all these other people,” he said. “We need to be loved.”

“I’m proud of my disability,” said Jordan. “People with disabilities can bring a lot to the table.

“It’s a special message,” said Michael, “having the heart to go out and trying to influence folks in a positive way. That’s what life is all about.”



Chris, Carl and Jordan each joined the virtual meeting from their own homes—homes where they receive supports from Bethesda.

Jordan has his own apartment and receives supported living services. This is a great option for people with disabilities who are independent enough to live on their own, but still benefit from a little extra help from staff. For Jordan, that includes things like help with money management, appointment reminders, and the occasional nudge to clean up his bachelor pad.

Carl lives with his grandmother, but due to her deteriorating eyesight, he knows he needs to take on more responsibilities around the house. Carl receives one-on-one support from staff and is learning how to do everything from cooking to doing laundry. “My grandma took care of

me for 22 years,” he said. “Now it’s my turn to do the same for her.”

Chris, after spending years bouncing from one living situation to the next, finally found the place he belongs when he joined Bethesda’s host home program and moved in with Roma and Rudy. Through the host home program, people with disabilities are matched with providers who open their hearts and homes. And, as is the case with Chris, the relationships that form go far beyond the client/provider roles. “Roma is the most best mom I ever had,” said Chris.



The full video is available to watch at [IncludeAllAbilities.com](https://www.IncludeAllAbilities.com).



# Bethesda kicks off Developmental Month on a high note

It was a cold, clear morning in Victoria, Minnesota, when Jessica Meuse arrived at Bethesda Cornerstone Village. She shivered as she got out of the car, smiling and ready for the day ahead—ready to help Bethesda kick off Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month on a high note.

Jess is a singer/songwriter and American Idol finalist and, over the last few years, she's become a truly loving and welcoming member of the Bethesda family and a faithful supporter of our mission.

*“I’m a firm believer that music is a tool to do something bigger than yourself. So if you’re good at something, you should do it to help other people.”*

– Jessica Meuse

“I’m a firm believer that music is a tool to do something bigger than yourself. So if you’re good at something, you should do it to help other people,” she says.

That’s why the Alabama native found herself bundled up against the frigid Minnesota air with her guitar in hand, excited to learn about Cornerstone Village and to provide an exclusive performance for its residents.

The day started with a tour led by none other than one of Cornerstone’s first residents, a young woman with disabilities named Lauren who moved in with a roommate when the community first opened in 2020.



# Disabilities Awareness



Lauren and Jessica talk about Cornerstone Village and what it means to live there.

“It’s amazing,” she told Jess. “Opportunities like this wouldn’t exist 20 years ago.”

And she’s right. Cornerstone Village is a first-of-its-kind residential community that combines people with developmental disabilities with seniors 55+ in a welcoming, inclusive, Christian environment. Designed for fully independent living, Cornerstone Village offers a much-needed option for people with disabilities—an accessible space that allows for both

independence and community integration.

“Without Cornerstone, I’d still be waiting for options,” said Lauren. “I’d probably still be living at home with my parents. But this such a unique situation and I love it.”

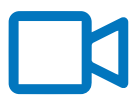
Something else Lauren appreciates about Bethesda is our dedication to spreading awareness about disability issues and the need for inclusion.

“We should be treated like anyone else would,” she said. “And Bethesda is getting that out there.”

“They certainly enlightened me,” Jess agreed. “It really helped me a lot, just to be able to see and understand people overall. And now I get to meet people like you!”

On that day, Jess did more than meet the residents of Cornerstone Village—she also gave them an exclusive, socially-distanced performance right in the development’s community room. It was an intimate, emotional performance for all, especially when Jess wrapped up the event with a very special song. Called “Because You Love Me,” Jess wrote the song just for Bethesda after visiting our headquarters in Watertown, Wisconsin, last year and meeting some of the incredible people we support.

“Because you love me, I can do anything, anytime, anyhow, anywhere,” she sang, and there was hardly a dry eye in the room—not even hers.



⋮ **Jess’s full performance, along with her conversation with Lauren, are available to watch at [IncludeAllAbilities.com](https://www.IncludeAllAbilities.com).**

**Cornerstone Village in Victoria, Minnesota**, is our first development—but it’s far from our last. We have several other projects in the works, with more on the horizon.

**Oakdale, MN:** Breaking ground in fall 2021, available for occupancy spring 2022

**Milwaukee-Highland:** Breaking ground spring 2022, available for occupancy fall 2022

\*dates are tentative and subject to change





# Bethesda partners with Johnny a message of inclusion

From our very beginning more than 116 years ago, our Christian faith has been an inherent part of our DNA. And this year, we were lucky to be able to share those roots and spread awareness of our mission through an exclusive, exciting performance with none other than Johnny Cash's family, right on Johnny's legendary farm.

Located just west of Nashville, the farm served as Johnny's hideaway—his place to relax out of the view of the public eye, spend time with his family, and bask in the picturesque nature surrounding him. Today, the farm is a popular tourist attraction paying homage to the musical icon—the Storytellers Hideaway Farm & Museum.



This March, Bethesda CEO Mike Thirtle paid a visit to the farm, along with Johnny's sister, Joanne Cash; daughter, Cindy Cash; and nephew, Mark Alan Cash. After a tour of the grounds and the home, the trio settled in for a show.

In between touching renditions of religious standards like How Great Thou Art and Johnny Cash favorites like I Still Miss Someone, the gang shared stories





# Cash's family to spread



of growing up with Johnny—one of which included Johnny and Cindy emptying their guns shooting at the ceiling. (The house still bears the bullet holes.)

They also talked with Mike about their faith.

“Johnny tried to walk with God as strong as he could, a very strong Christian. I think that helped him a lot,” said Mark. “My walk has gotten so strong too. If it wasn’t for God and my faith, I don’t think I’d be here today.”

“This was truly an amazing day,” said Mike. “I’m so grateful. For you, and grateful for the work we do to celebrate people with developmental disabilities across the world.

Mark agreed. “We’re honored to be here and to be able to do this for you.”



The full performance is available to watch at [IncludeAllAbilities.com](https://www.IncludeAllAbilities.com).



# Crowder caps off Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month with exclusive performance for Bethesda College

Even after all the excitement of our 2021 Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, we still weren't done celebrating. That's why we capped off our month with the biggest event yet—a virtual concert featuring Crowder, a Christian artist, Grammy nominee and Dove Award winner.



These virtual concerts were spurred in part by COVID and our desire to continue spreading our mission far and wide, even if we couldn't get together in person. And they've been a huge blessing, both for us and for people with disabilities.

This particular concert was unique from our others in that it was also a fundraiser. Our goal? To raise \$10,000 for a scholarship fund to help students with disabilities pay for a higher education at Bethesda College.

Offered at Concordia University Wisconsin, Bethesda College gives students with developmental disabilities the chance to have a true college experience, while teaching them the adult-living skills they'll need to live independently after graduation, like cooking and cleaning, transportation, money management, and more.

"Bethesda College helped me grow as a person to be more independent and to believe in myself," said Lauren, who graduated the two-year program recently. "I'm very proud of my progress."

But the students with disabilities aren't the only ones who benefit from living on an inclusive campus. Their presence brings joy and a deeper level of education everywhere they go.

"They've influenced my life so much, and they are capable of such great things," says Micah Hill, a resident assistant for the Bethesda College students.

Eugene Pitchford, the Assistant Professor for the Department of Education, says he always asks for Bethesda College students in his classes.

"At times, they will get concepts quicker than anyone else. Or at times, their experiences are different, like, 'Oh, I never saw it this way.' And now, because of that experience, I'm able to take that to the next class. It's just a circular thing where we all learn and grow from each other," he says.



*Bethesda CEO Mike Thirtle presents Crowder with a Power of a Vision Award, recognizing contributions to the I/DD community.*

Providing those kinds of experiences for people with disabilities and for the rest of our communities is what drives us. And it's what suffused the Crowder concert with such incredible energy as he rocked the night away.

The star-studded night also featured a special emcee, NBC's NASCAR announcer Rick Allen, along with appearances from several people we support from around the country to joined in to chat with Rick and ask him a few questions.



# Disabilities Awareness Month Bethesda

And after an unforgettable evening of music, camaraderie, and spreading awareness of the need for inclusion, independence and community for people with disabilities, we finished off the night with an amazing announcement. We hadn't just reached our goal of \$10,000 raised—we had shattered it. Thanks to the incredible support of donors old and new, we raised more than \$17,000 for the Bethesda College scholarship fund.

Altogether, this was an incredible month celebrating people with disabilities. But the celebration isn't over—and never will be.



At Bethesda, we continue to work as hard as ever to ensure people with developmental disabilities have access to everything they need to live full, independent lives, both today and in the future.



The full performance is available to watch at [IncludeAllAbilities.com](https://www.IncludeAllAbilities.com).



# Six decades of generosity bring countless blessings to people we support

In the middle of Minnesota lives a man who loves life and everything God created. If you drive by his home, you might see him tending his plants or just taking in God's amazing beauty. He used to sit and paint the masterpiece his sparkling eyes viewed. At 93, Howard doesn't paint anymore, but still loves the beauty of it all.



Howard has long been inspired to give because of his faith, and because he believes each of us have the responsibility to look out for each other. His first gift to help the people of Bethesda was in 1955 when he was 27 years old. And now, 66 years later, he is still giving. And even though Bethesda has changed significantly since 1955, serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is still our core mission.

Howard's way of giving has changed too. In 1955, Howard would send a check to Bethesda. But today, he's giving

through his IRA—something he had no idea he'd be able to do when he first opened the account in 1977, but which has turned out to be a convenient and effective way for him to continue his charity. Besides, as he says, "It's not mine to keep."

Howard's faithfulness to his Creator and his generosity have changed many lives, and we at Bethesda are so thankful for Howard and the many others who honor us with the blessings they have received.

## Giving through retirement plans

Are you among the millions of Americans who have chosen to save for retirement with an Individual Retirement Account (IRA), 401(k), or other tax-favored retirement plan? Retirement plans offer many benefits when making charitable gift decisions. Recent increases in the federal standard deduction may reduce the deductibility of charitable gifts for income tax purposes.

### Why is this important to you?

First, most funds withdrawn from IRAs are considered ordinary income, meaning applicable taxes apply on these distributions as part of total income in the year the withdrawal is made. Under the recent SECURE Act, minimum distributions must be taken



from a retirement account upon reaching age 72. Those distributions can push taxpayers into a higher bracket or result in a higher Medicare Part B premium.

## How can charitable gifts help?

Using funds within retirement accounts to make charitable gifts may be a financial benefit because:

- IRA funds transferred directly to qualified charities do not count as income, so there's no need to itemize for a tax deduction.
- Charitable gifts made from an IRA will count toward the required minimum distribution for the year.
- Charitable gifts of up to \$100,000 total can be made yearly directly from an IRA (\$200,000 for a couple with separate IRAs).

## Consider these aspects of retirement accounts:

Individual retirement accounts, 401(k)s, and other tax-favored plans feature income tax savings when contributions are made and amounts in the plans then build tax-free over time but will be subject to income tax when funds are withdrawn. Upon the death of the owner, any funds remaining are included as part of the owner's estate for state and/or federal estate tax purposes. In addition, individually named beneficiaries will generally be taxed when funds are withdrawn, reducing the actual benefit to individual heirs as these taxes can consume a large portion of the remaining funds in an IRA. One way to maximize assets is to consider making gifts from a retirement account directly to qualified charities and naming qualified charities as the beneficiaries of retirement accounts while leaving other more tax-favorable assets to heirs, such as life insurance, cash accounts, and property.

### Here's an example:

David, 72, has retirement assets of an IRA and a savings account, plus income from Social Security and a pension. David is concerned that his required minimum distributions from his IRA will move him into a higher tax bracket and increase the Medicare Part B premium withholding from his Social Security check. In addition, David is now widowed and has learned when he dies and his children receive the assets in his IRA, those funds will be subject to both income and estate taxes.

David has been a longtime supporter of Bethesda and has included Bethesda in his will. How can David maximize his assets to benefit both his family and achieve his mission to support Bethesda?

- After consulting with his advisors, David decides to make his annual charitable gift to Bethesda directly from his retirement account so the distribution will not be taxable income to him and the withdrawal will count toward his annual minimum required distribution.
- Also in consultation with his advisors, David names Bethesda as the beneficiary of his IRA, leaving other assets to his children. Upon his death, the remaining funds in his IRA will pass to Bethesda without any tax consequences.

If you have discussed the charitable aspects of your estate and financial plans with advisors and have decided you would like to make an immediate or future gift from your retirement assets, please contact the administrator of your plan for the forms necessary to carry out your wishes. If you have selected Bethesda to benefit from your charitable plans, please contact us so we may appropriately thank you and acknowledge your generosity and faithfulness.

Information and examples provided in this newsletter are not to be considered legal or tax advice. Please consult your legal or tax advisor to review your personal circumstances and for deductibility of your charitable gifts.

# Bethesda College: A beautiful example of inclusion

On May 8, eight young men and women took 10 steps across a stage—and a huge step forward in their lives—as they celebrated their graduation from Bethesda College.

Bethesda College is a postsecondary program hosted at Concordia University of Wisconsin that immerses students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in a true college experience, including living in the dorms, while teaching them valuable adult living skills.

“Bethesda College has helped me become an independent woman,” said Lauren, who completed the program last year. “I’m very proud of my progress.”

At Bethesda College, it’s not only people with disabilities who are given a chance to grow and flourish—it’s everyone who comes into contact with them.



Eugene Pitchford, Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Concordia, loves working with students with disabilities so much he requests them in his classes.

“At times, they will get concepts quicker than anyone else,” he said. “Or at times, their experiences are different, like, ‘Oh, I never saw it this way.’ And now, because of that experience, I’m able to take that to the next class. It’s a circular thing. We all learn and grow from each other.”

The environment at Bethesda College is a perfect example of inclusion. Of how supporting people with disabilities lifts us all up. Of how disability, when seen and embraced as a natural and beautiful part of human diversity, enriches us all.

