

# Spotlight

Spring 2026



75<sup>TH</sup>  
ANNIVERSARY  
1951-2026

## Celebrating 75 Years of Impact in the Community!

### Honoring the Past, Empowering the Future

This year marks a milestone for The Arc of San Diego as we celebrate 75 years of fulfilling our mission to support and empower people with disabilities to achieve their life goals. Since 1951, we have been committed to fostering independence, building inclusive communities, and creating pathways to employment for people with disabilities. As we celebrate this incredible journey, our theme for the year is "Honoring the Past, Empowering the Future."

### Our Story Begins

Our story begins in 1951, when a chance encounter in a maternity ward sparked a movement that would change countless lives. Diane Stice of the Ocean Beach Junior Woman's Club met Dolly Clark, whose young daughter Jenny had Down syndrome, and this unexpected meeting ignited a determination to create something better for children with developmental disabilities. By summer, the club formed the Committee for Exceptional Children, and on October 23, 1951, they gathered



120 families and community members at the Electric Building in Downtown San Diego to imagine a new future. Just days later, on October 31, the "San Diego Society for Exceptional Children" was officially founded—planting the seed for what would become The Arc of San Diego. These early pioneers, starting with no money, no guidelines, and no roadmap, became advocates, fundraisers, teachers, lobbyists, and trailblazers, united by a shared belief that every child deserved opportunity, dignity, and a place in the community.

### Today and Tomorrow

Today, The Arc of San Diego is the largest, most comprehensive provider of services to children and adults with disabilities in San Diego County. More than 100,000 children and adults with disabilities have been impacted by our services. Through classes, employment opportunities, community living, and individualized counseling, we help individuals achieve their fullest level of independence.

With a strong foundation and a bright future ahead, join us in making a difference.



## President's Message

Dear Friends,

As we begin a new year, it's impossible to ignore the many challenges and changes happening around the world. Yet in times like these, I am continually encouraged by the strength, compassion, and unity of The Arc of San Diego community. Together, we remain a steadfast source of support for individuals with disabilities and their families; something that feels more important now than ever.

This year is especially meaningful as we celebrate a tremendous milestone: The Arc of San Diego's 75th Anniversary! Since 1951, we have been dedicated to fulfilling our mission of supporting and empowering people with disabilities to achieve their life goals. Over the past 75 years, more than 100,000 children and adults with disabilities have been impacted by our programs, each one a testament to how far we have come as an organization and as a community.

Our history is rich with progress, perseverance, and purpose, but what truly fuels our success is the people

behind it. Our devoted staff show up each day with heart and expertise. Our volunteers generously share their time and talents. And our supporters champion our mission with unwavering belief. You all help create the inclusive, innovative, and compassionate environment that keeps our programs running smoothly and allows those we serve to thrive.

As we honor our past and look ahead to the future, I hope you will join us in celebrating this remarkable anniversary year and the 75 years of impact lives touched through dedication and generosity. With a strong foundation and a bright future ahead, let us continue working together to create possibilities for every individual we serve. Thank you for standing with The Arc of San Diego and helping us build a more inclusive community for today and for generations to come.

With Sincere Appreciation,



President & CEO  
The Arc of San Diego



## Board of Directors

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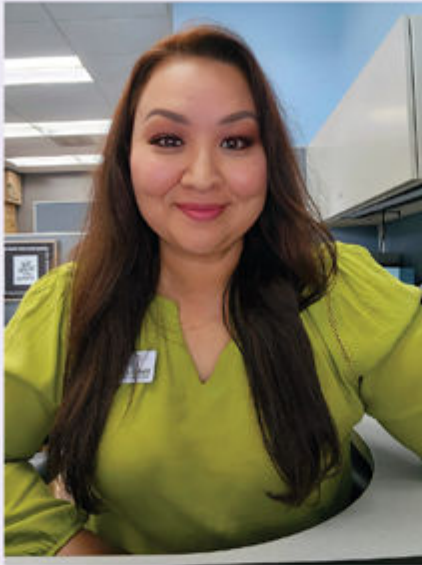
Julie Lyon,  
North County Chapter

Lupita Ruiz de Chavez,  
South Bay Chapter

## Staff Updates

Congratulations!

**Maria Espinoza**  
**Program Administrator,**  
**Sulpizio Family Center**



Congratulations to Maria on her well-deserved promotion to Program Administrator! Maria's journey into the field began not as a profession, but as a parent. Being the mother

to her son with an intellectual disability was the most important role, offering a firsthand view of the challenges families can face and the incredible strength they possess. This deeply personal path fueled a career that began in 2011, leading her to The Arc of San Diego in 2013.

Every role has been a new chapter in this story. Starting as a Direct Care Professional (DSP) in Tailored Day Services, the work felt deeply personal, and a move to the Adult Development Center (ADC) further broadened this understanding. As an Administrative Assistant II, the focus shifted to supporting the larger mission, and becoming a certified First Aid and CPR instructor was an opportunity that allowed her to contribute to staff development and safety. The most fulfilling step was becoming a Case Manager, where the opportunity to advocate for families and connect them with vital resources was a privilege. Today, as a Program Administrator, her commitment remains just as strong, using both a lived and professional understanding to support our clients and continue making a meaningful impact.

We are very fortunate to have you, Maria! Thank you for your dedication to The Arc of San Diego.

**Esli Medrano**

**Program Administrator, North County Center**

Esli's work began in 2009 as a teacher's aide supporting children with autism, later growing into roles with Easterseals in El Centro where she served adults in day program settings. During this time, she also worked alongside motivational speaker Nick Vujicic, an experience that deepened her commitment to dignity, inclusion, and empowerment.

Esli's leadership spans youth development, community services, and nonprofit management.

As a Branch Manager for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater San Diego, she led a team of 20+, designed original staff training, developed innovative educational programs, managed major grant portfolios, and strengthened partnerships with families and community stakeholders. Previously, she managed a team of 30+ while overseeing ILS, Tailored Day Services, Adult Family Home Agency, and Out-of-Home Respite programs. Her background also includes providing one-on-one ABA therapy for children with autism and consulting nonprofits and ministries nationwide in leadership development, donor engagement, and organizational strategy.

Across every role, Esli is known for her strong leadership, deep empathy, and unwavering belief that every person—regardless of ability—deserves the opportunity to learn, thrive, and live independently.

We are thrilled to have Esli on board and look forward to the leadership, energy, and expertise she will bring to North County Center.



## San Diego Seals

# Teaming Up with The Arc of San Diego to Champion Inclusion

The Arc of San Diego is thrilled to celebrate a new partnership with the San Diego Seals, marking an exciting step forward in promoting inclusion and expanding opportunities for individuals with disabilities throughout our region.

What began as a conversation in November 2025 quickly grew into a meaningful collaboration. The Seals approached The Arc of San Diego with a simple but powerful question: How can we make a lasting impact together? From that moment, it became clear that both organizations shared a commitment to building a community where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

This commitment came to life in the form of a generous \$25,000 contribution from the San Diego Seals to support inclusive programs offered by The Arc of San Diego. These funds will directly benefit individuals with disabilities by strengthening programs that foster independence, social engagement, personal growth, and community connection.

For The Arc of San Diego, the partnership represents more than financial support—it demonstrates what can happen when community-minded organizations come together with a shared purpose.

“Our organization is grateful for the San Diego Seals’ investment in our mission,” said Anthony J. DeSalis, Esq., President & CEO of The Arc of San Diego. “This partnership not only highlights their dedication to community involvement,



but it also helps us continue providing essential programs that empower individuals with disabilities every day. We are excited to see the positive impact this collaboration will bring to the people we serve.”

The Seals share this enthusiasm and view the partnership as a natural extension of their values.

“We are honored to support The Arc of San Diego and the remarkable work they do across our county,” said Paul Speaker, CEO of the San Diego Seals. “Our team is committed to fostering an environment where everyone feels welcome, included, and valued.

This collaboration allows us to give back in a meaningful way and help create more opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate fully in community life.”

The partnership aims to inspire continued engagement between the two organizations through special events, shared activities, and ongoing opportunities for the Seals’ players, staff, and fans to connect with the Arc community.

As The Arc of San Diego continues its mission of empowering individuals with disabilities to achieve their goals and live vibrant, fulfilling lives, partnerships like this illustrate how much stronger we are when we work together.

To learn more about The Arc of San Diego and how you can support programs that promote inclusion across our region, visit [www.arc-sd.com](http://www.arc-sd.com).

## A Stylish Celebration with Purpose: Winter Wonderland Fashion Show & Luncheon



The Arc of San Diego's annual *Winter Wonderland Fashion Show & Luncheon* on December 5, 2025 brought together San Diego's most stylish and philanthropic community members at The US Grant Hotel. This captivating event celebrated the season with boutique shopping, a silent auction, an elegant luncheon, and a dazzling runway fashion show produced by renowned style personality Leonard Simpson. The enchanting theme, "Shimmer & Glimmer," set the tone for a spectacular afternoon of fashion and philanthropy.

Thanks to the incredible generosity of attendees and sponsors, the event raised a total of \$240,000, exceeding expectations! At the event, The Arc of San Diego was honored to announce a remarkable gift of \$100,000 from the David C. Copley Foundation to support Early Intervention Services.

Guests enjoyed a lively program featuring a live auction led by Auctioneer Clint Bell and it was wonderful to have Mary Murphy, acclaimed ballroom dance champion and television personality, return as this year's emcee. The event was chaired by Maria Stanley, Laura Applegate, Cici Drummond, Erica Ram, Malissa Sanfilippo, and Jenny Seligmann. Honorary Chairs were Dr. Howard and Barbara Milstein.

We are thankful for our generous sponsors whose support makes this event possible. Special thanks to our Gold Sponsors Dr. Howard & Barbara Milstein, The Kurtin Family, and Barona Band of Mission Indians; Silver Sponsors Emma Zuckerman, Judi Gottschalk, Esther Williams-Demers, and Sycuan Casino Resort; and Bronze Sponsors Susan J. Fuller, Pamela Beckett Stahl, Nayda Locke, Yanir & Erica Ram, San Diego Foundation, and California Bank & Trust. Their commitment ensures that Winter Wonderland continues to be a cherished tradition of fashion and philanthropy.

"The Arc of San Diego is deeply grateful for the continuous generosity of our community at Winter Wonderland Fashion Show & Luncheon. These contributions allow us to expand critical programs that empower individuals with disabilities to live more independent and fulfilling lives," said Anthony J. DeSalis, President & CEO of The Arc of San Diego.

Winter Wonderland continues to be a cherished tradition that combines glamour with giving, ensuring The Arc of San Diego can provide essential services such as day training, employment, residential living, and early intervention programs to more than 2,000 children and adults with disabilities across San Diego County.



March 2026

## National Disability Awareness Month

Each March, communities nationwide recognize National Disability Awareness Month. It is a time to celebrate inclusion, highlight the strengths of individuals with developmental disabilities, and reaffirm our commitment to helping everyone thrive.

People with developmental disabilities enrich our communities as students, employees, artists, volunteers, and neighbors. When they have access to support, respect, and opportunity, everyone benefits.

This month encourages us to look beyond labels and focus on each person's unique talents and perspectives. It's also a reminder of the importance of accessible workplaces, inclusive programs, and communities that empower independence and belonging.

Throughout the month, we honor the achievements and stories of the individuals we

serve. Their determination and growth show what's possible when people are given the chance to truly shine.

### Emerson's Journey to Independence

Six years ago, Emerson Camacho stepped into his role at Sycuan with determination, a strong work ethic, and a desire to grow. Today, he stands as an inspiring example of what persistence, opportunity, and inclusive employment can achieve. As an Environmental Services (EVS) Technician, Emerson has become a valued and respected member of the team; someone known not only for the quality of his work, but for the pride he takes in doing it well.

With the support of his job coach, Larry Paris, Emerson has built a solid foundation of reliability and professionalism. He is trusted to carry out an essential range of EVS responsibilities, including maintaining casino cleanliness, restocking and cleaning restrooms, sweeping the casino floor, emptying ashtrays, collecting beverage containers, picking up trash, sanitizing slot machines, and ensuring guest spaces remain welcoming and safe. Emerson also plays a key role behind the scenes, gathering EVS supplies and stocking team closets to help operations run smoothly.

Over the years, Emerson has continued to grow in confidence and capability. He has now taken on additional duties with enthusiasm, demonstrating initiative and a readiness to expand his role. Management has noticed. His increased communication, something he has worked hard on for the last two years, has opened the door to more independent work. Emerson checks in with staff regularly and communicates clearly with coworkers and supervisors.

Perhaps one of Emerson's most heartwarming areas of growth has been his connection with guests. Once more reserved, he now greets guests, interacts warmly with those around him, and brings positivity to the casino floor.



## The Arc of San Diego Receives \$100,000 Grant from David C. Copley Foundation to Support Early Intervention Services



His presence enhances the guest experience and uplifts the team he works alongside.

Emerson's journey at Sycuan is a powerful reminder of what happens when someone is given the opportunity to shine. His dedication, growth, and commitment to learning have shaped him into a skilled, confident, and valued employee.

Emerson's story isn't just inspiring; it's a testament to the strength of inclusive employment and the incredible potential found in every individual. Emerson continues to prove that when someone is supported, believed in, and encouraged to grow, they can truly thrive.

The Arc of San Diego is thrilled to announce a generous grant of \$100,000 from the David C. Copley Foundation to support our Early Intervention Services. This remarkable gift will enable us to provide critical therapies and resources for children with autism and developmental delays during their most formative years.



Early Intervention is essential in helping children reach their full potential, and thanks to this funding, we will broaden access to enriching therapies such as music therapy, art therapy, physical therapy, and other developmental activities. These services are designed to foster growth, communication, and independence for children at risk for autism and other developmental delays.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Phyllis Parrish for her assistance in securing this generous gift. For many years, Phyllis has been an advocate for people with disabilities and philanthropic leader whose efforts have profoundly impacted our San Diego community.

In recognition of this meaningful support, one of the preschool classrooms at The Sol and Ruth Gerber Family Center will be named in honor of the David C. Copley Foundation, celebrating their enduring commitment to empowering children and families in our community.

### About The David C. Copley Foundation

The David C. Copley Foundation's mission is to carry on the Copley family's legacy of giving by funding nonprofit organizations that make a difference in areas such as human services, youth development, education, arts and culture, and medical research—especially those improving opportunities for the underserved in San Diego. Their support will help ensure that children with autism and developmental delays receive the care and resources they need to thrive.

Thank you to the David C. Copley Foundation for making this possible. Together, we are building brighter futures for children and families across our community.





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## The Arc of San Diego

3030 Market Street, San Diego, CA 92102-3230

Tel (619) 685-1175, Fax (619) 234-3759

[www.arc-sd.com](http://www.arc-sd.com)

## Now Hiring!

If you are a dedicated and passionate individual who wants to make a difference, join our team today! For more information, call (619) 685-1175, ext 1234 or email [jobs@arc-sd.com](mailto:jobs@arc-sd.com).

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**Providing services for  
people with disabilities  
and their families since 1951.**

A vertical poster with a red background and a golden, starry, nebula-like pattern at the top and bottom. The text is white and centered.

*Save the Date*

THE ARC OF SAN DIEGO PRESENTS

**Joie de Vivre**  
2026 ANNUAL GALA

**MAY 16, 2026**

**Marriott Marquis San Diego**  
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[www.arc-sd.com/gala](http://www.arc-sd.com/gala)