

# Building Potential

ANNUAL REPORT 2024



# Smart Growth & Connections



**D**ear Friends and Supporters, this year marked a season of smart growth and deeper connections at **Adaptive Design Association (ADA)**.

With the support from the **Ford Foundation's** Good Neighbor Committee, we gave our financial systems a thoughtful overhaul—introducing a new chart of accounts, refining policies, and shifting to program-based budgeting. These upgrades have made our operations more mission-aligned and freed our team to focus on what we do best: expanding our impact and connecting with our incredible community of supporters.

We see this as a turning point in ADA's journey. With stronger infrastructure, clearer systems, and a growing network behind us, we're more energized than ever to ensure that people with disabilities have access to the tools and opportunities they need to thrive.

From the start, children with alternative communication needs have been central to ADA's work. In our Midtown Manhattan workshop, staff and volunteers craft **Tactile Augmentative Communication Symbols (TACS)**, cards about the size of a photo print, for individuals with visual or multiple disabilities. After a decade of producing this symbol set, field researchers were inspired to ask, *"Who are the providers and family members currently using tactile symbols?"* The findings are fueling the next chapter of this program with fresh thinking about trainings and curating opportunities for providers to make their own customized symbols.

This year, we also asked special educators what they needed—and delivered! Through our **corporate engagement program**, we matched classroom wishlists with hands-on volunteer sessions, inviting local businesses to help bring these custom, low-tech solu-

tions to life. The result? A win-win: schools received the tools they needed at no cost, and corporate volunteers left inspired by the tangible impact they made.

Today our workshop hums with a rhythm that's both fast and thoughtful, fast enough to fulfill over 100 custom equipment requests and produce more than 16,000 tactile symbols, and thoughtful enough to reimagine design as an act of care, creativity, and community. None of this would be possible without our board, donors, and devoted team. Thank you for being a part of our community. We can't wait to see what we'll build together next.

With appreciation,

**Jennifer Hercman**  
Executive Director, Adaptive Design Association

# Creating Initiative

**W**ith a workshop based in the heart of New York City, ADA is a nonprofit dedicated to creating custom solutions that support individuals with physical and developmental disabilities. It has been transforming the lives of individuals with disabilities by building innovative, low-cost adaptive design solutions for over twenty five years.

Under the leadership of Executive Director **Jennifer Hercman** and Fabrication Director **Antoinette LaSorsa**, and with the support of a dedicated Board of Directors, staff, and volunteer community, ADA has expanded its programmatic scope to strengthen adaptive solutions for individuals with physical and developmental disabilities. This work is carried out through our core programs—**Adapt for Access**, Creating custom adaptive equip-

ment on a case-by-case basis, **Tactile Communication**, producing tactile augmentive communication symbols and by our **Made-to-Learn** program, offering an innovative transition program for students with developmental disabilities.

Using carpentry techniques with accessible materials like cardboard and 3D printing, ADA's design practice empowers individuals and communities everywhere to reimagine care and accessibility. ♦



# Linked On Purpose

**F**or children with disabilities, timely access to the right tools can transform outcomes in mobility, communication, learning, and social-emotional growth. While we serve individuals of all ages, 70% of our projects are for children under 10, most often with diagnoses including Cerebral Palsy, Autism, Genetic Disorders, and Visual Impairments.

This year, the majority of the adaptations fell into three categories: Functional Positioning, Tables and Trays, and Miscellaneous. While each item is uniquely tailored to an individual's needs, they all share a common purpose to foster meaningful connection.

Functional positioning devices, such as supportive chairs and floor sitters, provide children with the stability they need to safely explore their surroundings, participate in learning, and grow stronger with each movement. Activity surfaces like our

tables and trays allow users to engage in shared activities, whether it's joining classmates for art, working on school assignments, or simply having lunch with friends. These designs are not only practical, but also create moments of inclusion, communication, and joy.

In the "miscellaneous" category, we include a wide range of customized tools from adapted switch toys to communication supports, all designed to help users interact with the world in ways that are personally meaningful.

We are proud of the ways our design practice continues to support not just mobility and access, but also relationships, learning, and life. ♦



# Adapt for Access



**T**hrough our foundational program, **Adapt for Access**, we have built thousands of adaptations ranging from seating and standing devices to mobility aids, communication tools, and even a motorized car modified to hold an oxygen tank.

Each item is created in collaboration with clients, caregivers, educators, and therapists especially when off-the-shelf options are unavailable, delayed, or denied by insurance. Our process includes remote consultations, in person equipment fittings, and subsequent alterations culminating in a one-of-a-kind piece of equipment.

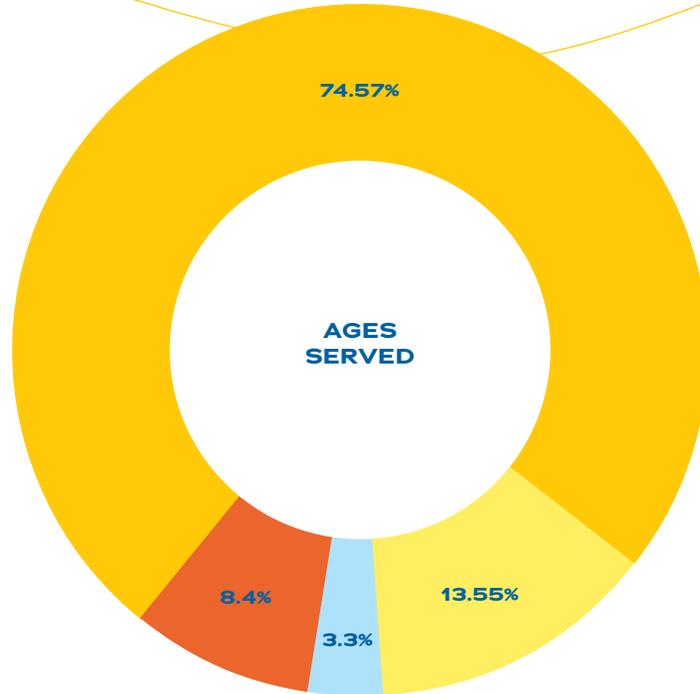
At ADA, we ask: Why, how, and for whom did this design come to be? By centering lived experience, we move beyond one-size-fits-most solutions and engage in design as a holistic, intentional act—one that expresses care in both process and outcome.

This year, we created 188 adaptations

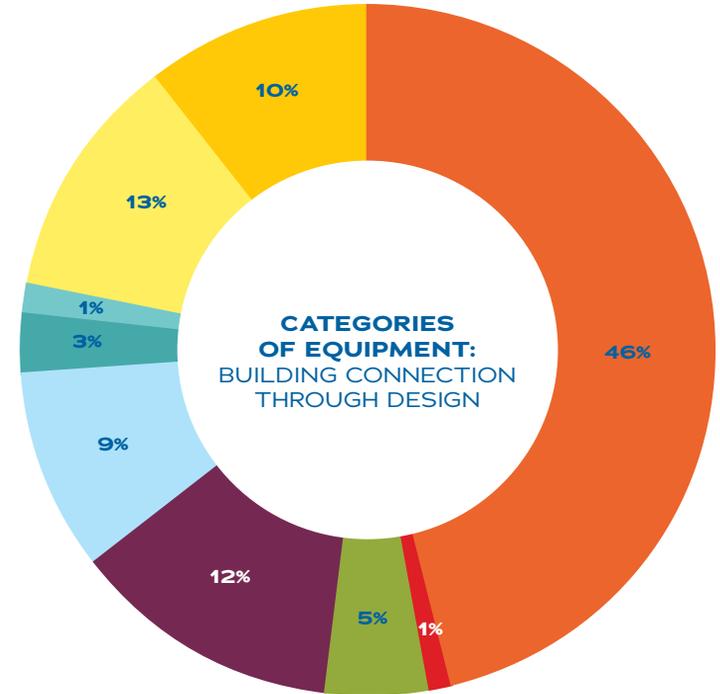
for 98 clients. Clients include individuals and classrooms. 141 of these adaptations were user-specific and made up of 233 components. Examples of components include custom belts, foot guards, and cushions: accessories that cannot stand alone but enhance the function of the adaptation. Recent examples of adaptations include a customized stander for Orla, a one-year-old diagnosed with a degenerative muscle disease, which allows her to strengthen her legs and core. With the support of her physical therapist she is now learning to stand and growing stronger, bringing her closer to joining her siblings in their everyday activities.

The rest of the adaptations (47) can be used by multiple users, including students in classrooms. For example, reading easels that raise reading material to eye level and folding study stations that improve focus and attention to tasks, can be used inter-

changeably by many students. An exciting highlight among our multi-user adaptations was a series of custom music supports: four drum stands, a djembe stand, and two xylophone easels, all designed for the music room of an independent private day school serving students ages four to twenty-one with a range of neurodevelopmental differences. These adaptations not only promote participation and inclusion but also make it possible for multiple students to engage in music-making comfortably and independently. ♦



- Early Intervention, 0 - 33: **8.47%**
- Children, 4 - 11: **74.57%**
- Youth, 12 - 24: **13.55%**
- Adults, 25 - 64: **0.00%**
- Older Adults, 65+: **3.38%**



- Functional Positioning: **46%**
- Perches and Stools: **1%**
- Stations: **5%**
- Tables and Trays: **13%**
- Easels: **9%**
- Steps: **3%**
- Standers: **1%**
- Mobility: **12%**
- Miscellaneous: **10%**

# Hello, Hannah!

**A**DA has been helping Hannah navigate her world since she was 6 months old. Over time, ADA has built countless rockers, bikes, and chairs for Hannah, designed for her developing needs, to help strengthen her limbs and mobility. Today, Hannah is a vibrant 21-year-old who knows New York City like the back of her hand. She has favorite museums that she visits frequently and enjoys Broadway musicals. She never misses a concert when her favorite bands come to town, and loves to play basketball.

Hannah approached us requesting a device to help her play basketball. She needed something that would allow the ball to land in her lap, making it possible

for her to shoot and actively participate in the game. The team designed a customized sling that fits over her chair arms, and it worked! Hannah is now able to join in games and express her competitive spirit.

ADA follows every client over time and will be there for Hannah whenever she needs assistive equipment to help navigate her busy world. We love that we have had the honor of watching Hannah blossom into young adulthood and take on New York in her own special "Hannah style." ♦



# D-Money's Rocket Chair

**D**ylan, who likes to be called 'D-Money', loves to lay on the floor and play with his favorite toys, especially his squishy octopus. At 18 months, D-Money is learning to navigate his ever-expanding world with a little help from ADA. "D-Money was supporting himself with one arm so that he could play," said Tamara, D-Money's physical therapist. "Sitting up and developing torso strength is a big focus. There wasn't any equipment available that could help him to become stronger, so I contacted ADA," said Tamara.

D-Money is at a key stage in his development for building core strength, so ADA designed a floor sitter that is easily adjustable to support his growth. The goal is for him to gradually gain strength and become less reliant on the floor sitter over time. For now, it offers crucial support for his torso, head, and neck as he continues to grow.

Delivery day was momentous. As soon

as he was seated in the floor sitter, he instantly reached for his favorite toys on the tray. This was the first time that D-Money was able to play with both hands; he no longer had to prop himself up with one hand to play. His mom, Kara, beamed with joy as she watched him discover his expanding world in a whole new way.

D-Money will outgrow his floor sitter fairly quickly (as he should!), and ADA will be with him and his family every step of the way as he matures and needs different adaptive devices to help him develop and grow. ♦



# Chuckie's Chair



Chuckie is an active teen who recently hit a growth spurt. His strong arms are now the power center of his body. His care team at the local special-ed school works with him regularly, helping him harness the power of his upper body. To support this goal, they requested a chair designed to encourage Chuckie to use his body more independently and provide a safe place for him to recover when he has seizures.

"We had a real challenge thinking about what would be best for Chuckie," Adaptive Design Fabricator Eric shared, "the design needed to be sturdy and comfortable, encouraging him to use his arms, it also needed to recline quickly and provide

support when he has unexpected seizures."

The custom chair designed for Chuckie, had a sturdy wooden frame and cushions to support the more vulnerable parts of his body. The design was made to be intuitive and easy to adjust, ensuring that any member of his large, dedicated school care team could work with it confidently and comfortably.

Chuckie is a cautious guy. At first he was not thrilled with the chair, but with time, his care team helped him to learn to trust and relax in it. Chuckie now loves his chair. He's learning to transition in and out of the seat using his arms and is getting stronger by the day. Much like Chuckie, his chair is absolutely unique. There is not another one in the world like it. ♦



# Community Building

**A**DA envisions a day when every partnering community has its own adaptive design workshop, ensuring inclusion and accessibility for all. To accomplish this goal ADA offers

in-person and virtual community-building programs to educate constituents, build awareness, and create strong organizational networks. ADA made presentations totaling 89 hours to 867 individuals from over 50

organizations and 6 different countries, 2 states, and 5 boroughs of NYC.

**Made-to-Learn (M2L):** This in-school and community-based program teaches youth with autism pre-vocational skills in design and fabrication. Now in its 8th year, M2L translates the techniques we use in our fabrication process into a curriculum teaching hands-on cardboard carpentry skills and soft skills. We provide

once-weekly transition-skill-building experiences to local high schools, bi-annual training sessions for their teachers, and help participating schools set up their own adaptive design workshops. This year, we taught 31 sessions to 6 youths and 9 of their staff. They worked with our team to create floor-sitting chairs for Paulina and her classmates referenced below.

**Internships:** As part of ADA's educational mission, we accept interns from high school through graduate school. Seven interns participated in 873 hours of learning, working with our team and clients to identify, design, and build person-specific adaptations.

**Reimagined Communities (RIC):** Our Reimagined Communities program targets accessibility and inclusion by creating new connections between people with disabilities and their communities including colleges and corporations. This year we collaborated with a research team from the Institute of Education at University College London to understand the strengths and gaps in our M2L program. The UCL team is conducting research on equitable practices in makerspaces (Making Spaces), and Adaptive Design's M2L program was selected as one of 6 makerspaces worldwide to be a part of this ongoing study. ♦

# Paulina & Her Friends



**T**his year, Adaptive Design's M2L program empowered students to become creators of change. When Paulina's teachers hoped to get her and her classmates out of their wheelchairs and onto the classroom floor, the ADA team supported by M2L students got to work.

Together, they designed custom "double triangle" floor-sitters made of cardboard simple, portable, and individually tailored. Students from a local District 75 school, who bring their own lived experience with disability, helped build the chairs weekly alongside ADA staff.

When Paulina tried her bright blue chair for the

first time, her joy said it all. She could touch the floor, sit with her peers, and engage fully in class activities.

The impact reached far beyond one classroom. The chair design and the M2L model received international recognition from **University College London's Making Good Prize**.

For Paulina, the chair means she can sit with friends and fully participate in classroom life. For the students in the M2L program, it's a powerful example of how their creativity and effort can change lives. ♦

**[LINK: Our students' experience was captured through the lens of a documentary filmmaker](#)**

# Tactile Communication

**A** DA has been creating these for individual clients since 2001. This year was monumental, with 1,465 custom cards being created on order for 27 organizations. We worked with a dedicated team at **iHope** to design a library set of high contrast symbols for school wide implementation. This year, we fulfilled renewed orders from the **American Printing House for the Blind (APH)** for a standardized set of 16,038 cards. APH, a national distributor of learning and communication materials for children who are blind or visually impaired, will distribute these sets nationwide.

We hosted a hands-on card-building workshops for professionals serving the visually impaired community, an opportunity for direct service providers to design and create symbols they could begin using with their students the very next day. Sixty-six participants collectively crafted 100 custom cards tailored to their learners' needs. ♦



# The Lifelines

Communication cards (also known as tangible symbols) are responsible for approximately one-third of the ADA budget, and a small, dedicated team of two ADA staff members and a team of volunteers creates mountains of cards, year after year. This team has worked together for eight years and this year, they meticulously assembled 16,000 cards for sale to APH. In the first step, the cardboard is cut down to size in the workshop by Arthur Gordon, a volunteer with ADA for eight years. Next, Charles Cohen, ADA Fabrication Assistant, covers the edges of the cards with heavy masking tape to make them strong and durable. Charles has covered tens of thousands of cards over the past five years. The cards are then painted by Antoinette and finally ready to transform into communication cards. Tangible symbols are embedded to the cards and volunteers Angela Marvin

and Erin Cantor apply finishing touches, making sure that each card is ready to be used by a child who is eager to have their needs understood by others. Erin shared, “after decades as an interior designer, I thought I had seen all the ways creativity could make a difference. But here, every week, I get to use my hands and eye for detail to help children communicate—some for the first time. Labeling and finishing these cards may seem small, but I’ve come to see how deeply it matters. I feel more useful and inspired than ever.”

“I love that we are making tools that help children to express themselves.” said volunteer Angela Marvin. “We work together as a team and are able to produce a product that is unique, truly artisanal, and a low-tech way to help others to communicate. We are a team that feels like family.” said Angela “I love coming in twice a week to work

on the cards and visiting with my ADA friends. It’s the best volunteer job I could have ever had.” ♦



## WEEKLY VOLUNTEERS

Angela Marvin  
Erin Cantor  
Arthur Gordon  
Cheryl Geliebter  
Emily “Em” Aggrey  
Cindy Silveira  
Belle Horwitz  
Sasha Ross Becker

Alex Barrone  
Tamara Ewoldt  
Aisha Frampton  
Lisa DiPietra  
Manuela Coelho  
Cate Hackett  
Anita Perr

# By the Numbers

## INCOME: \$753,598

Program Revenue: \$402,899 (53.46%)

Foundations: \$133,500 (17.72%)

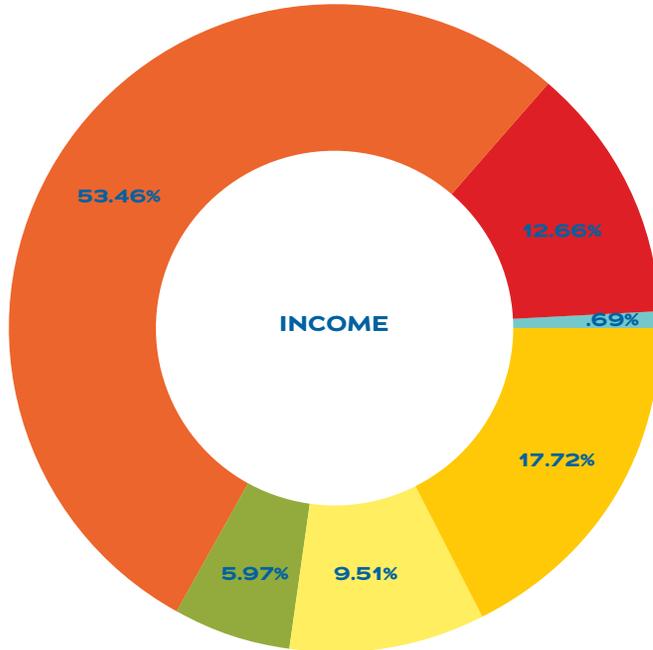
Government: \$45,000 (5.97%)

Individual Donors: \$71,653 (9.51%)

### OTHER REVENUE

Employee Retention Credit: \$95,371 (12.66%)

In-Kind: \$5,175 (.69%)



ADA ended FY 24 with an operating deficit of \$92,211. This was primarily due to the infrastructure cost that went into the organization in terms of building more financial insight to the organization as well as developed budgets, procedures and such. ADA also had releases for FY 24 in terms of restrictions of primarily Ford Foundation grant. However, without donor restriction ADA had a surplus of \$69,737.

ADA is committed to financial transparency. The NYS Office of the Attorney General provides access to charitable organizations' annual filings.

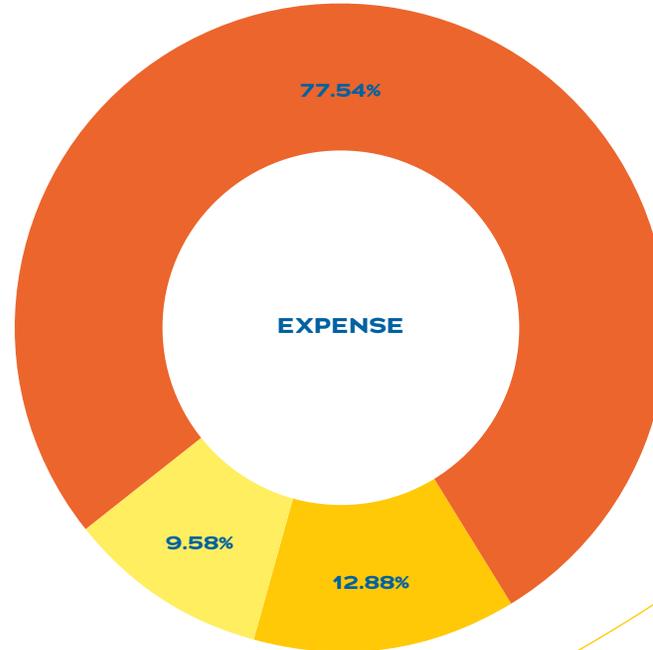
[Click here for the FY24 990.](#)

## EXPENSE: \$858,545

Program: \$655,595 (77.54%)

Mgmt & General: \$108,947 (12.88%)

Fundraising: \$81,003 (9.58%)



# Community & Funders

## INTERNS

Sophia Rose Ferrone, *Design, Boston College*  
Nur Hayyu Supriatin, *Social Work, Columbia University*  
Alyssa Lyon, *Occupational Therapy (OT), NYU*  
Amber Zedeck, *Mechanical Engineer, TOM Fellow*  
Sofia Yu, *Design, Parsons School of Design*  
Davyn Jones, *Development, Cornell University*  
Annabeth Presley, *Nonprofit Mgmt, Auburn University*  
Rahm Bharara, *Senior, Scarsdale High School*  
Ben Kaller, *Design, Bucknell University*

## CORPORATE GROUPS *(total 175 participants)*

Bank of America  
Raised by Us  
Shutterstock  
Regeneron

## FOUNDATIONS AND GOVERNMENT

Barker Welfare Foundation  
City Council of New York, Autism Awareness Initiative  
and Speakers Initiative  
DJ McManus Foundation  
Edna Wardlaw Charitable Trust  
Ford Foundation Good Neighbor Committee  
Harry S. Black & Allon Fuller Fund  
Lavelle Fund for the Blind  
Mary Alice Fortin Foundation  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation President's Fund  
Sheila E. Daley Foundation  
West Side Community Fund

## BOARD MEMBERS

Carole Gordon, *Chair, Interim Secretary*  
Tracy Ehrlich, *Vice Chair*  
Zach Clem, *Treasurer*  
Ronnie Eldridge, *Director*  
Laura Taub, *Director*  
Lisa Yokana, *Director*  
Karla Ruiz, *Director*  
Matthew Goodman, *Director*  
Kathy Goldman, *Director*  
Sarah Cook, *Director*

**Adaptive Design Association, Inc.**  
501(c)(3) Nonprofit Organization  
#134170232

## STAFF

Jennifer Hercman, *Executive Director*  
Tamara Morgan, *Community Partnerships Coordinator*  
Michelle D'Mello, *Grant Writer*  
Antoinette LaSorsa, *Fabrication Dir.*  
Adam El-Sawaf, *Senior Adaptive Designer & Fabricator*  
Eric Gottshall, *Adaptive Designer & Fabricator*  
Charles Cohen, *Fabrication Assistant*

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# Kathy Goldman

**A**daptive Design Association wishes to honor **Kathy Goldman**, a longtime board member who helped shape ADA into the thriving organization that it is today. Kathy, a pioneer in fighting hunger in New York, was also a staunch supporter of adaptive designs that could provide accessible equipment for disabled New Yorkers. Kathy was with ADA at the very beginning, twenty-five years ago when cardboard equipment was being built in a basement. She helped to find the workshop in mid-town where ADA is now housed.

Kathy was a leader at ADA where she served on the board for over twenty years. Kathy loved that equipment was made from cardboard. She understood that the methods used by ADA to create adaptive equipment from affordable resources, could be adapted by impoverished communities throughout the world. We at ADA

will all miss the bright light that Kathy brought to ADA. She was a true visionary and helped us to grow and thrive. ♦

