

# Giving Autism a Voice



Students in a public-relations writing course create communication plans and tools for nonprofit clients including Autism Society of Alabama.

BY DYLAN WALKER

**O**n the first day of her public-relations writing course, Chandler Shields admits she might have cried.

Shields, a senior from Madison, Ala., majoring in public relations, is passionate about communications, politics and advocating for those with special needs. APR 332, a course with a service-learning component that requires students to develop communication plans for nonprofits, united these three passions.

“This course was really special to me, and I just couldn’t believe that I was going to get class credit for it,” Shields says.

Each semester, students in the course collaborate with a local nonprofit to assess its communication needs. They then create messaging strategies, tools and campaigns for the organization.

The course has been partnering with the Autism Society of Alabama since 2011. Tracy Sims, who teaches the course and is an instructor in UA’s department of advertising and

public relations, says the partnership is a development opportunity for students that also provides a service to the community.

“My goal was to set up a win-win situation,” Sims says. “Over the years, I really feel like I’ve become an advocate for the organization myself because I’ve learned so much about the organization and what it does and who it serves.”

The Autism Society of Alabama represents individuals with autism and their families. “Our goal and mission is to improve services for those on the spectrum through education and advocacy,” says Melanie Jones, executive director of ASA.

The society’s programs educate those directly affected by autism as well as the public. ASA also assists caregivers and works with the Alabama Legislature to protect citizens on the autism spectrum.

**In Spring 2016, APR 332 Public Relations Writing**



Members of the Spring 2017 APR 332 class created promotional materials for Alabama’s Regional Autism Network.



Autism Society of Alabama staff members meet with students at the beginning of the semester and explain their organization’s public-relations needs. [l-r] Melanie Jones, ASA executive director, and students Bry Rivera Burrows and Meg McGuire. photo by Dysen Neeb

students created a media kit for the Autism Society of Alabama and promoted the Tuscaloosa Walk for Autism, ASA’s largest fundraising and awareness event in the western part of the state, and the first 5K Race to Solve the Puzzle. They raised \$8,600 for ASA, and approximately 2,000 people participated in the events. Students garnered news coverage by the Tuscaloosa News, the Crimson White (UA’s student newspaper), Tuscaloosa television station WVUA-23 and the city’s iHeart Radio station. In Fall 2016, students promoted ASA’s respite program, which provides funds for families to hire temporary helpers, giving those caring for a loved one with autism a break or assistance. They also developed promotional campaigns for the Autism Spectrum Disorder Identification Card, which facilitates interactions between first responders and individuals on the spectrum, and for ASA’s more than 30 networking groups across the state. A previous APR 332 class planned, promoted and implemented a “Drive Away Autism” event that helped ASA secure the 1,000 purchase commitments the state of Alabama needed to produce an autism-awareness license plate. License-plate sales are now one of ASA’s most successful fundraisers.

“I’m very humbled, thankful and honored to be given the opportunity to work for this cause,” says Mary Catherine Molay, a senior from Birmingham, Ala., majoring in public relations. “It meant a lot to me because the granddaughter of a close family friend is affected by autism.”

Students with no previous connection to autism developed a passion for the issue as well.

“Even if I don’t necessarily struggle with or fully understand something, it’s still nice to help others in your community,” says Jada Culver, a senior from Woodstock, Ga., majoring in public relations. “I felt very purposeful doing it all, and honestly that made me want to do better in the class. This stuff matters for real people here in the community.”

Promotional materials students produce include

fliers and posters, scripts for public-service announcements and social-media and blog posts. They also write press releases, advertisement copy and letters to media professionals and potential fund-raising partners. Representatives from the Autism Society work with students throughout the semester to teach them about communicating with clients.

“It was really cool because we were able to apply everything that we did in class into making something for them to use,” Molay says. “When you’re a small nonprofit that has a very big impact, you wear a lot of hats.”

Jones says she is always impressed with the students’ work. “It has been a great collaboration,” she says.

Sims says she hopes to instill in her PR writing students – all majoring or minoring in public relations – a lasting passion for community service and social responsibility.

“I do not expect all of my students to become practitioners in the nonprofit sector,” Sims says. “But I do hope that at least they do understand the social responsibilities that any organization has, whether it’s for-profit or nonprofit.”

Some students, like Shields, want to continue working in nonprofit communications. She hopes to get a job in Washington, D.C., lobbying for special-needs organizations. Molay is considering working with the ASA’s junior board.

Sims also teaches a section of APR 332 that works with the Sassafraz Center for Arts and Environment, a startup organization developing a sustainable park in East Tuscaloosa and city-wide bike routes.

**For more information about APR 332 Public Relations Writing, contact Tracy Sims at 205-348-5166 or [sims@apr.ua.edu](mailto:sims@apr.ua.edu).**



At the end of each semester, students formally present their projects to Autism Society of Alabama staff. [l-r] Students Scott Zipperle, Jason Wasserman and Justin Oliver

