

AN INCLUSIVE PLACE



LAURA GREENE | HPE

Melody Burnett, president of Visit High Point, speaks at a press conference on Wednesday at Q's Corner to announce Visit High Point as the state's first Destination Marketing Organization as a Certified Autism Center.

Local tourism group lauded for serving special needs

BY CINDE INGRAM
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HIGH POINT — Visit High Point won recognition as the state's first Destination Marketing Organization to achieve designation as a Certified Autism Center on Wednesday at Q's Corner, a N. Main Street gym and play area designed for children with disabilities and special needs.

The designation is also the first on the East Coast for DMOs completing training and certification to better understand and assist visitors who are autistic or have other sensory needs, said Meredith Tekin, president of the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards. The board has



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Brandy Humphrey, left, general manager of Q's Corner, gives Leanne Lyons with the High Point Parks & Recreation Department and Andre Nabors, partner trade relations manager with Visit N.C., a tour of the facility after Wednesday's press conference.

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worked with other organizations in Arizona, California and Indiana to provide tools and resources for professionals in a variety of occupations, Tekin said.

"Unfortunately, it's rather unique to have organizations, businesses and community members come together to have a real focused effort on inclusion and accessibility," Tekin said. "Obviously with Visit High Point we're focusing on recreation, hospitality and leisure activities. Every family deserves to have fun and make memories and feel comfortable doing so."

The initiative is a great example of taking steps for accessibility and inclusivity, said Andre Nabors, Visit NC partner and industry relations manager.

"We definitely applaud your leadership in making this happen," Nabors said. "Not only do I believe this initiative sheds light for visitors looking to make High Point a destination, I think it also provides a sense of pride for the community in taking the role that this is a safe place, an inclusive place for all travelers and all visitors."

Nabors predicted High Point would be a leader for other DMOs in taking on that role.

"Our promise is to bring our hospitality partners alongside us as we make High Point the most inclusive and welcoming city in North Carolina, not only for visitors but for our residents with children living on the autism spectrum," said Mel-

ody Burnett, Visit High Point president.

Burnett said the initiative began after she listened to a podcast of the Mesa, Arizona, DMO president describing a bad travel experience with an autistic child and soon after heard from VHP board member and County Commissioner Carlvena Foster, who told her Q's Corner was getting more calls from visitors than locals.

Foster said she was inspired by the inclusive vision of Candace Humphrey, whose 10-year-old son Quintin has autism. Humphrey opened Q's Corner in February with her husband, William Hayes, a retired NFL player from High Point. The couple wanted to create an environment where children could play and not be judged because they're different.

"I visited Q's Corner and was so amazed at the facility and what it had to offer all children," Foster said. "Candace's vision and her commitment to creating a judgment-free zone for families of children of all ability levels to learn, relax and play was so inspiring to me. It absolutely made me want to open doors for Q's Corner to be able to impact lives in this community and beyond."

Brian Canada fought tears as he described how Q's Corner has provided play opportunities for his 5-year-old nonverbal autistic daughter.

"This is Disneyland to a lot of these kids," Canada said.

Jason Davis also fought tears as he described how his 4-year-old nonverbal autistic son learned to jump while playing at Q's Corner. His wife, Peyton Davis, echoed his comments, and said Q's Corner provided a safe place for their son's birthday party.

"We need more places that have staff who understand our special needs and allow us to be exactly who we are," she said.

High Point City Manager Tasha Logan Ford said she was pleased to join Visit High Point's staff and board as the city completes these first steps to make High Point the next Certified Autism Destination, which means visitors have multiple trained and certified options to choose from when in the area, including entertainment, recreation and hotel options. She shared the experience of being with her 27-year-old autistic nephew as he navigated his fears of riding an airport escalator.

"For me, what this certification means is that people know that they are welcome here in High Point," Logan Ford said. "When I think about the vision of the city of High Point creating a safe, livable, prosperous community where everyone thrives, it's about more than just saying those words. It's actions like this that bring it into reality for so many people who live here and work here."

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—Peyton Davis

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