



January 25, 2013

To whom it may concern:

The University of Miami-Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (UM-NSU CARD) is pleased to offer its support to Nature Links for Lifelong Learning. UM-NSU CARD serves approximately 7000 constituents with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and related disabilities in Miami-Dade, Broward, and Monroe counties. Among the individuals we serve is an ever-increasing number of teens and young adults in need of post-secondary educational opportunities.

While some students with ASD are able to navigate more conventional paths such as attending college or a vocational program, a great many are in need of alternatives. Without new program options, the 22-30 year olds which Nature Links for Lifelong Learning targets will continue to leave high school without the skills needed for work and with no programs through which they can gain valuable vocational skills. A 2007-2008 CARD Statewide survey found that only 55% of adult or transition-age constituents hoped to receive some post-secondary education or training in the future. However, only 16% of those surveyed were attending such institutions. For many youth with ASD, the gap between where they are now and the independence they would like to achieve requires a supportive adult learning environment. Currently, there are no vocational education programs in our community focused on preparing individuals with disabilities for the world of work.

Culinary training provided by Nature Links for Lifelong Learning would give these students marketable skills and vastly improve their ability to find employment. Additional instruction in organic gardening, nutrition, and independent living skills round out the curriculum and foster personal, as well as professional growth. Partnering with the City of Miami and the Miami Culinary Institute of Miami Dade College gives the program access to hands-on learning environments and relevant academic and community experiences. UM-NSU CARD will also be available, as needed, to provide training, technical assistance, and resources to support the program in meeting the needs of its students with autism spectrum disorders. Additional



community partnerships will be mutually beneficial, providing learning experiences while also raising awareness and changing the perceptions of adults with disabilities.

Nature Links for Lifelong Learning is at a pivotal point in its development. With the support of community organizations it can build on its Summer and Fall sessions and expand to a 5-day per week model, providing a much-needed option for youth with disabilities. It is with great pleasure that UM-NSU CARD provides its continued support for this program.

Feel free to contact me to discuss UM-NSU CARD's involvement with this valuable program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Alessandri'.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deborah Chin'.

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