

Bob's trip to Oz: A sister's perspective on adventure and resilience

Sadie Bergeron never expected that her brother Bob, a young man with Down syndrome who lives in one of our homes in Franklin County, would be able to take a vacation. **With complex medical needs, days away from his home seemed impossible. But in September, Mitch Valentin and Julie Clark, two Pathlight staff members, embarked on an unforgettable journey with Bob.**

The trip of a lifetime centered around Bob's passion for *The Wizard of Oz*. Their adventure kicked off with a two-day drive south, with every stop planned out, and the car packed with macronutrient-rich meals as required in Bob's diet guidelines. "Julie is an amazing planner and thinks of everything," said Sadie.

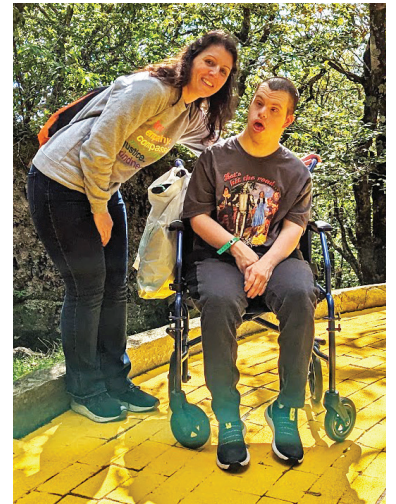
Even the AirBnB they stayed in was a sanctuary tailored to Bob's comfort, complete with his own room, bathroom, and a scenic view of a farm from the back porch.

As they journeyed through Tennessee's Dollywood and Pennsylvania's Hershey Park, Bob's excitement soared, collecting souvenirs and sugar-free treats along the way. But the highlight of their adventure was undoubtedly The Land of Oz in North Carolina.

"When I heard that Bob was going to Oz, I asked Julie if I could buy a ticket too and join because I wanted to see his reaction and walk down the yellow brick road with him," Sadie said.

Their trip wasn't just about sightseeing; it was a testament to the boundless possibilities for individuals with disabilities. Through Julie's dedication, they proved that dreams know no limits, and every obstacle can be overcome. For Bob and Sadie, it was a dream come true.

"We had a picture perfect day, and I will never forget it and what Julie helped make possible," Sadie said.



Sadie and Bob Bergeron

Longtime donor: Whole Children is a "lifeline"

We are very grateful to our community of donors who help sustain our work year after year. Some of them have been making gifts to Whole Children, for example, since its start 20 years ago. One such couple is Elaine Brighty and David Cox of Amherst. Their son, Kevin Cox, is a teacher at Whole Children, teaching Minecraft, Legos, and Dungeons & Dragons, as well as helping with the theater program. Attendees at last year's *Wonkavengers* show will remember him as Loki, a role he brilliantly stepped into with only a few days notice after the original actor fell ill.



Elaine Brighty and Kevin Cox

Kevin, 39, began as a volunteer at Whole Children after graduating from UMass and "that just changed his life," said Elaine. **"Then he was the first kid with autism who was hired as a staff member. He's part time, about 10 or 12 hours a week, but it's his lifeline. He's so happy when he can come in. During the pandemic when remote teaching was available that just saved him too."**

Elaine feels very strongly about how Whole Children and Milestones support the participants in their individuality. "I'm still in awe of this setup for the

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Pathlight faces rising costs and staffing hurdles as we strive to deliver top-notch supports and services.

**Our urgent goal:
raise \$500,000 by June 30.**

Boosted by the Eagle family's generosity, if we raise \$440,000, they'll contribute \$60,000 more. Help us reach our goal by June 30 and honor the Eagle family's deep commitment to our mission. Look for details in your mailbox soon!

New leadership at Whole Children and Milestones

As Whole Children approaches its 20th anniversary, founder Carrie McGee introduced a new generation of leaders to guide the programs into the next era of growth and innovation. **Chris Harper, who has been with Whole Children since 2010 and served as the manager of the Milestones day program, is taking on the role of Director of Whole Children, Milestones, and Whole Selves (the relationships and sex education program).**

Originally from New Jersey, Harper holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from UMass and began her career as a teacher at Whole Children. Some of you may have seen her on the drums for The Friendship Band.

Jenna Perna-Elias will be stepping into the role of the Milestones day program manager; Liana Marks was

named manager of Whole Children in February.

Reflecting on the past 20 years at Whole Children, McGee expressed gratitude for the incredible journey shared with the community. "It has been an honor, an adventure, and a fulfilling 20 years here at Whole Children," she said.

"Together, we've achieved so much, and I'm confident that our legacy will only flourish under the capable leadership of Chris, Jenna, Liana, and their team."



Chris Harper



A NIGHT OF CONNECTIONS

When Autism Connections holds a party, it means all kinds of fun for people with autism and their families and friends in western Massachusetts.

In the first such social event since the pandemic, 90 people gathered in Chicopee to make crafts, draw, play games, enjoy snacks, and dance the night away. The DJ serving up tunes also gave out hula hoops, ribbons, and noise shakers so everyone get into the music, whether sitting or on the dance floor.

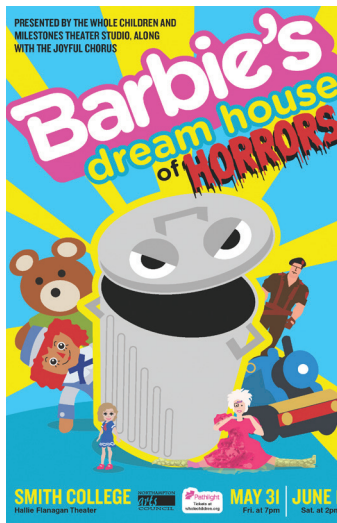
Between the dancing, singers belted out their karaoke favorites to a supportive crowd. In case anyone needed a break from the sensory load, a special area had dim lighting, soft chairs, and fidget toys. "The night was a great success, with a wide range of ages from young kiddos, to people in their twenties, to families with older caregivers," said Kansas Brown, Autism Connections Regional Program Manager. "Many families have asked us if we could do this event again, so we are planning one for this summer."

Coming soon: *Barbie's Dream House of Horrors*

Fasten your seatbelts for a theatrical mash-up that promises to flip your perceptions of dollhouses and musical horrors on their heads. *Barbie's Dream House of Horrors* is the latest one-of-a-kind production from Whole Children and Milestones, slated for May 31 and June 1 at Smith College's Hallie Flanagan Theater.

Crafted by the creative minds of our students and teachers, this isn't your typical Barbie scenario. In their twist, Barbie enjoys all the limelight and riches, leaving the other toys feeling less than chipper. Things take a darker turn with the arrival of a voracious, singing trashcan that starts munching on the discontented toys!

Students are already deep in preparation, honing their acting chops, stitching up



costumes, and constructing a set that's bound to be as eclectic as the plot.

"It's going to be weird, too weird, but I can't wait for the theater production. I'm so excited!" said Lucie Pasche, who will play a Troll doll.

Be sure to add this event to your calendar—tickets are available at pathlight.life/Theater2024Tickets.

This production would not be possible without the generous support from The Fafard Family Fund, the Emily List Foundation, the Northampton Arts Council, and the Department of Developmental Services.

If you want to get a peek behind the curtain, check out our video at pathlight.life/BarbieSneakpeek.

Warm winter escape



Jill Johnson

Jill Johnson and her intrepid crew of Pathlight's Shared Living caregivers found a little slice of summer this past winter at Great Wolf Lodge. Thanks to support from the **Darren FUND**, the trip to the indoor water paradise turned a cold weekend into a warm escape, complete with accessible accommodations and an ocean of activities.

Jill is already planning her next getaway, proving that a little support can go a long way in making big smiles.



Whole Children and Milestones' Friendship Band rocked their Feb. 28 show at the JERICHO/ Bureau for Exceptional Children & Adults dance in Chicopee, MA.

An empowered journey

Pathlight's Autism Connections organized another successful autism conference on April 10. Titled "A Whole Life: The Empowered Journey," this 33rd annual gathering was held at the Sheraton Springfield Hotel. The 350 attendees were individuals with autism, family members, educators, and professionals from across Massachusetts and surrounding states.

The keynote speaker, Jennifer Brunton, Ph.D., gave a talk on "Amplifying Acceptance, Building Independence: How #ActuallyAutistic Perspectives Provide a Strong Foundation for Growth." People lined up to get their signed copy of her book *#ActuallyAutistic Guide to Advocacy*.

Everyone spent a day learning from expert speakers on topics ranging from early diagnosis to sexuality to meaningful employment. A sensory friendly room at the hotel featured dimmed lights and sensory gadgets.

Among the standout sessions, Jaqueline Williams-Hines spoke candidly about the challenges faced by autistic people of color, intertwined with issues of violence and racism. The session took a personal turn when she introduced her son Joshua, who shared his experiences and passion for dance, giving a voice to his own journey.

Between breakout sessions, attendees enjoyed lunch and visited a variety of exhibitor tables highlighting supports and

services throughout the valley. We are grateful to these exhibitors and to our corporate sponsors for their support of this event.

From thought-provoking discussions to personal stories and professional insights, the conference was a day of learning and a step forward in empowering and understanding the diverse lives within the autism community.



Jaqueline and Joshua Williams-Hines



Jennifer Brunton

What does your donation do?



\$2,500	Provides programs for adults with autism to help develop friendships and community connections
\$1,000	Provides scholarships to ten students in Kung-fu, Theater, or Joyful Chorus classes
\$500	Underwrites a bus rental for a Red Sox game round trip for 50 residents
\$250	Provides art and craft supplies for residential enrichment programs
\$100	Supports gardening programs throughout Pathlight for plants, supplies, hats and sunscreen
\$50	Buys groceries for students in Whole Children and Milestones to use in cooking class



Visit pathlightgroup.org/EagleChallenge to support the critical work of Pathlight, Whole Children and Autism Connections.

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kids and for the adults who use these services,” she says, “because it’s not always the neurotypical person in charge. So much of life for kids with autism and Down syndrome, it’s somebody else’s ideas you are supposed to conform to, and it’s painful to watch that. **In these programs it’s about having interactions that encourage you to be able to go out and be who you are, and to know that you’re accepted.** I must admit that the plays have been some of my favorites—the joy is so palpable.”



Kevin as Loki in
Whole Children’s 2023
theater performance

Over the decades, Elaine and David have increased their yearly gift. Elaine says, “Pathlight is definitely an organization I want to support and luckily, I am retired and comfortable enough that we can. We know supporting kids with neurological differences is so critical for everybody because it’s making sure that they can grow as much as they can and have a world that is so supportive. They can interact with the rest of the community in ways they couldn’t before.”

Elaine says that people often ask for advice about family members and she says, “I always tell them about Pathlight.”

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