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VALLEY

Kids

WHOLE CHILDREN

evolves with the community around them

BY EMILY THURLOW

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around them*

PHOTO COURTESY OF WHOLE CHILDREN



Practicing balance and self-control in Kung Fu
Left to right: Amanda Kent (staff), Blake Weybrew, Emily Masamitsu, Julian Adam, Morgan Kent (staff), Jack Winston

By Emily Thurlow
For Valley Kids

Like so many parents of children with special needs around the turn of the millennium, when Carrie McGee received a diagnosis of Williams syndrome for her firstborn, she was presented with limitations and restrictions.

Medical appointment after medical appointment, McGee was told time and time again

what her son Alex Mody couldn't do and would never be able to do.

But she didn't want to accept that the diagnosis of Williams syndrome – a rare neurodevelopmental, genetic condition that is characterized by symptoms like delayed development, learning challenges and cardiovascular abnormalities – would be a hindrance to her son's future.

"Sometimes you just need to be in a place where people will say, 'Oh, he's wonderful. Isn't he just

beautiful and perfect and wonderful and look at all the things he can do,'" she said.

At that time, McGee says, there were few inclusion opportunities and much fewer opportunities for people like Mody to learn core relationship and friendship skills that would help them find inclusion in local organizations.

So, she decided to fill that gap in existing services and create a path toward those opportunities.

With the help of eight other parents of children with special

needs, McGee founded the Whole Children center in 2004. The hour-long, after-school programming included yoga, gymnastics, creative dance, and aikido.

During the then-nonprofit organization's first year, McGee said Whole Children ran about eight classes for 26, 7- and 8-year-old children in a small building in Hadley.

Nearly two decades later, Whole Children has expanded to provide recreational, social and



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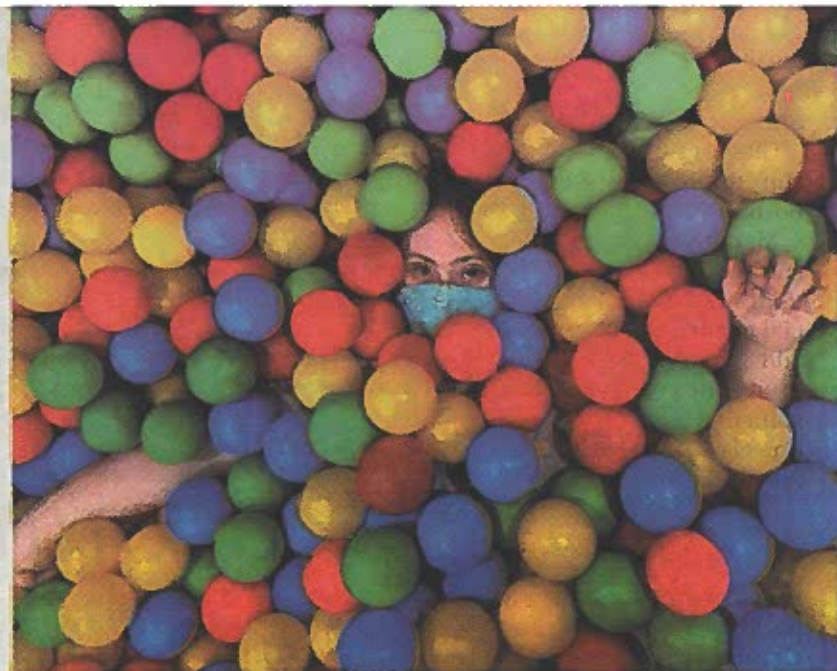
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Always a favorite - The Ball Pit. Pictured: Alice Hawley

enrichment programs for children and teenagers of all abilities. The smaller classes incorporate social skills and skill-building training into feature arts, movement-based activities and performing arts.

“Over time, many of the parents became employees,” she said. “And the next generation of teachers have come on board and are adding a whole new perspective, so we’ve had this organic evolution over time.”

Whole Children’s performing arts program helped support inclusion efforts for Mody, said McGee. Through that program, her son learned background skills that led to him performing in two of Amherst Leisure Services’ productions.

In 2010, the nonprofit merged with the former Association for Community Living, now known as Pathlight. The Springfield-based nonprofit organization that offers services to people with developmental and intellectual disabilities and their families.

McGee credited Whole Children’s continual growth to both the merger with Pathlight as well as having parents and families be an important driving force in the programming offered. Whenever a parent suggested a new activity or potential interest, staff would work to ensure that programming evolved to suit those needs.

“I think the main reason we continue to grow is because we were started by parents, who are inte-

gral to all layers and levels of what we do. And our kids, we live it and breathe it,” said McGee. “That recognition of evolving with the community around us is key.”

As the program’s participants grew older, programming also evolved to include a community-based day program for adults, called Milestones. The program offers weekly evening classes that focus on recreation, self-advocacy, movement, social events and performing arts with an emphasis on building skills and finding and celebrating individual strengths, as well as making and sustaining friendships. Among the skill-building activities including shopping, cooking lunch, money management, using transportation and civic engagement.

The two programs are now located at 11 Village Hill Road in Northampton.

Another challenge came when children in the program entered into adolescence.

“When our kids hit puberty, we realized that there was nothing out there. Nothing. Nothing in the schools – our kids were not included in the conversation, so we went on a hunt to find people who could teach our kids and a curriculum and came up empty-handed, so we wrote one,” said McGee.

That program is called Whole Selves, an evidence-informed, healthy relationships curriculum geared toward participants with

intellectual abilities and autism. The curriculum teaches participants about self-esteem, consent, sexual safety, and boundaries.

Summer schedule

Classes for the summer session runs until Aug. 10 and will be held both in-person and virtually.

Membership is \$120 for the summer and includes two classes; unlimited online access and special events. For those who want to add on a class beyond the two, each additional class is \$45. For someone who only wants to take one class, it is \$70. Scholarships are available for families who cannot afford the fees.

On Mondays, Whole Children is offering Minecraft programming, yoga dance, video game club and performance singing group, Joyful Chorus.

Among the classes offered on Tuesdays is an introduction to the basics of voice acting. From 4 to 5 p.m. weekly online, students will learn about the building blocks of character creation, vocal warm-ups, and how to become more comfortable using distinctive voices. Also on Tuesday is Pokemon Club.

On Wednesdays, movie club and

book club will be offered as well as programming for those over 18 years old, including a men's group and a boundaries and relationships class.

Photography, miniatures painting and a Dungeons and Dragons group will be offered on Thursdays. All Thursday classes are geared for those 13 and older.

On Fridays, two sessions of Indonesian Kung Fu will be offered – one for those between the ages of 6 and 12, and another for those 13 years and older. Additionally, cooking classes for those over 16, and a Dungeons and Dragons group for those 13 and older will be offered.

Saturday classes include movement and play for 3-7-year-olds; art exploration for those 13 and older; Two Legos, trains and more classes: for kids aged 6-12, and 13 and older; gardening; comic writing for those 13 and older; Anime Book Club for 13 and older; Video Game and Minecraft Club for all ages.

With new generations of children either born or having grown up during the COVID-19 pandemic, Whole Children will be looking to rebuild programming suited to new children and families. As the autumn months near,

PHOTO COURTESY OF WHOLE CHILDREN



Learning cooperative play during Legos, Trains and More. Pictured: Rene Brown

McGee encouraged parents and families to reach out and inquire or suggest classes and interests.

“Our core mission has not changed, but our classes do change based on the evolving interests of the participating population,” she said. “What we do is find common interests, find common ground

and build community and friendships around it.”

For more information about upcoming classes or programming, call 413-585-8010.



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