AbleNews

The Viscardi Center

THE NEWSPAPER FOR, BY, AND ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

ISSUE 26 | MAY 2026

# Celebrating Nassau County's 40th Games for the Physically Challenged

By Emily Sauchelli

Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman and Comptroller Elaine Phillips joined student cheerleaders from the Henry Viscardi School at a recent press conference announcing the 40th year of the county's Games for the Physically Challenged. Photo credit: Allan Prinstil/The Viscardi Center.

The Nassau County Games for the Physically Challenged has reached a historic milestone, as this month's event marks four decades of athletes coming together for competition.

It's a proud moment for the participants, local leaders and organizers, as the athletes look to compete May 29 and 30 at Mitchel Field Athletic Complex and Nassau Community College. The event culminates on Saturday, May 30, with a celebration dinner dance at Hofstra University's Hofstra USA dining hall.

''It is just wonderful seeing that the Games are in their 40th year,'' said Susan Maxwell, program director of the Games. ''With all the different changes we had through the years, the different areas that have taken the Games on, seeing Nassau County step up and have them keep it going — I think 40 years is quite a milestone.''

Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman highlighted the anniversary at a press conference at The Viscardi Center in Albertson in April. ''This is the 40th year in a row that we're going to have the games, and we are super, super excited,'' Blakeman said. ''People will have all kinds of fun. It's a great atmosphere for everybody.''

Sports included in the Games this year are the following: table tennis, track and field, swimming, wheelchair basketball, slalom, archery, discus, soft discus, club throw, precision throw, and distance kick. More than 1,300 athletes participated last year.

Susan Gordon-Ryan, the founder of the Games, remembers how the event came to be.

She first started with the New York State Office for Parks and Recreation and Historic Preservation in 1983, where she worked on special projects. One of the first projects she had the opportunity to be involved in was being the state liaison for the 1984 Paralympic Games, held in Nassau County.

''At that time, the Governor [Mario Cuomo] came out to the Games and was so impressed with the athletes that he gave an allocation in the State Office for Parks called New York State Games for the Disabled, and wanted us to do something with it [the money],'' she said.

Gordon-Ryan was diagnosed with polio at 1 1/2 years old, right before the vaccine was available. The activity she most got involved in as a child was swimming, located at The Viscardi Center on Long Island. She was able to establish the Games from her own personal experience, never having been in group activities as a youngster.

''I never had any [group] programs when I was a kid, so I thought let me plug this money into training young people ages 5-21 with physical disabilities and get them involved in sports and fitness,'' she said.

Gordon-Ryan shares that the Games would be nothing without the many people involved over the years.

''I think one of the things that make the Games so important is the volunteers, coaches, teachers and families,'' she said. ''They really come out to celebrate one thing and that is the athletes. It's just a very joyful event. The reason it has lasted this long is the support of State Parks and Nassau County and everyone who helps make the Games run every year.''

The structure of the Games is mostly volunteer-based, and the Games are run by Maxwell, the program director. Maxwell took over the position from Gordon-Ryan and Maxwell is committed to making the event a great turnout every year.

''I am the person that puts the whole thing together,'' Maxwell said. ''I contact all the schools, sponsors for sponsorships, and the whole entire setup of the program.''

Maxwell also works to get as many volunteers as possible to help with the Games each year. There are volunteers that have been volunteering at the Games for the past 40 years, which is quite an accomplishment.

''I start on January 1, sending everything to the schools to get the athletes, and then I have to set up transportation and housing for the schools as well,'' she said.

Any school that has a special education program is invited to apply and send kids from their school to be represented in the games. Parents who have children that are not in such programs—who have physical challenges—can also sign up their kids to participate.

The Games used to be called New York State Parks Games for The Physically Challenged and the NYS Parks department started the games in Brockport [New York] in 1986, according to Maxwell.

''My son is disabled and has cerebral palsy, and we went to the first Games in Brockport,'' Maxwell said. ''At that time, we fell in love with the program and we haven't missed a game since then.''

Maxwell is very pleased with the work she has done over the years and is grateful to see that this special event has hit 40 years.

''I think I have the most rewarding job I could ever have,'' she said.

Maxwell looks forward to the Games every year and sees the impact the Games have on the athletes.

''The highlight for me every year is to see the kids there smil-

*Continued on page 7*

## IN THIS ISSUE

*Page 3*
New NYC Leader

*Page 15*
Accessible Spring Activities

*Page 24*
Conversations with *Able News*

New York Disability News

# NYC Funds Inclusive Disability Workforce Initiative

By Joie Tyrrell

George Davis shared his personal story at an event announcing a new initiative in New York City to boost employment for residents with disabilities. Photo credit: Joie Tyrrell.

New York City has awarded $7.5 million in contracts to launch a four-year initiative to assist people with disabilities find employment in a program that will include disabled New Yorkers in its planning and execution.

This ''co-designed'' approach was announced the first day of April at the start of Autism Acceptance Month. The announcement was made at Positive Exposure Gallery in downtown Manhattan where officials from city agencies and nonprofits gathered.

The contracts will support training and employment programs as well as design to expand inclusive career opportunities. People with disabilities will be part of the process by contributing their lived experience to design and research of the workforce programs. They will work with employers and workforce providers, officials announced at the event.

The goal is to boost meaningful employment for people with disabilities citywide.

''We are awarding $7.5 million so that the community can be part of designing new training and employment programs for New Yorkers with disabilities. 'Nothing about us, without us', and today, we embrace that, not just as a slogan, but in action,'' said Deputy Mayor for Economic Justice Julie Su.

The focus will be on Service Design, Workforce Providers and Employer Collaboration. Organizations receiving awards will develop the programs over the next nine months and launch services in early 2027. The grant awardees include:

- Service Design: The firm, 3x3, will facilitate the co-design process for the two other tracks.
- Workforce Providers: AHRC NYC, Equus Workforce Solutions and Goodwill NY/NJ will facilitate the co-design of programs by people with disabilities for jobseekers.
- Employer Collaboration: Urban Institute will assist New Yorkers with disabilities to co-design technical assistance services to make workplaces more accessible and help hiring disabled employees.

A 2024 report from NYC Comptroller Mark Levine found that New Yorkers with disabilities have a ''significantly lower employment rate'' than their non-disabled counterparts and often face ''structural barriers to employment including employer discrimination, inadequate accommodations, and inequitable access to social assistance and vocational rehabilitation,'' the report read.

An employment initiative that includes people with disabilities co-designing these programs can help meet those challenges as well as increase access for employers to a pipeline of qualified talent.

Doug Lipari, executive director of the NYC Office of Talent and Workforce Development, noted that the co-design model will put workers first by the inclusion of people with disabilities in implementation and design and that will lead to good jobs.

George Davis, a speaker at the event, shared his story as a neurodivergent New Yorker whose condition was misunderstood for most of his life but, later, he was able to find meaningful employment and how much that meant to him. He now works as an Individualized Education Services Program Outreach Coordinator for the New York City Public Schools.

''It wasn't until I began working in education, supporting my students with learning challenges that my understanding shifted,'' he said. ''I learned about neurodivergence—not as a deficit, but as a difference.''

The effort announced Wednesday represents a partnership between the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity), the NYC Office of Talent and Workforce Development (NYC Talent), the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD), and the Department of Small Business Services (SBS).

Speakers at the announcement also included the new NYC Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, Nisha Agarwal, who said that ''approaches like co-design help ensure that services are more responsive to needs and experience.''

ABLE RIDE

ABLE-RIDE
PROUDLY SERVING
NASSAU COUNTY

Able-Ride is a shared, door-to-door paratransit bus service for people with disabilities. It's transportation for those unable to use fixed route bus service.

To apply for service or to find out more information, please call 516.228.4000, visit us at WWW.NICEBUS.COM

PROVIDING QUALITY TRANSPORTATION
FOR THOSE WITH DISABILITIES

nice NASSAU INTER-COUNTY EXPRESS
Able-Ride is a service of NICE, which is powered by Transdev

**ABLE NEWS**
201 I. U. Willets Road
Albertson, NY 11507
ablenews@viscardicenter.org
516-465-1416
ablenews.com

**Published By**
The Viscardi Center

**Managing Editor**
Kim Brussell

**Editor**
Joie Tyrrell

**Designer**
Neil Esposito

**Staff Writer**
Christopher Alvarez

**Contributors**
Dawn Colclasure
Anthony DiCocco
Susan Gordon-Ryan
Marcus Johnson
Ava Lefkowitz
Angelina Livigni
Katherine Magnoli
Emily Sauchelli
Warren Shaw
Joie Tyrrell
Kevin Webster
James Weisman, Esq.

**Publisher Emerita**
Angela Miele Melledy

**Advertising Sales Representative**
Wendy Kates

The Viscardi Center

*Able Newspaper* is published by The Viscardi Center, 201 I.U. Willets Road, Albertson, NY 11507. *Able* welcomes article suggestions for consideration. Submissions are the author's warranty that the material is not an infringement of the rights of others and that the material/photos may be published without further approval. Editorial material does not necessarily reflect the view of the editor/publisher of *Able Newspaper.* Advertisers are responsible for the content of advertisements. No part of this publication may be reprinted without the permission of the publisher. *Able* is not responsible for errors in advertisements beyond the price of the space occupied by the error. The publisher reserves the right to decline advertising for any reason.

# Leading with Lived Experience: A New Leader's Vision for a Stronger MOPD

By Christopher Alvarez

NYC Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, Nisha Agarwal, joined Christopher Alvarez, of *Able News*, for an interview. Photo credit: Joie Tyrrell.

Change will come with experience and dedication.

Diagnosed with brain cancer and experiencing a stroke that took away her ability to walk and eloquently speak her mind in 2017, Nisha Agarwal is ready to revamp the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) with her new perspective as a member of the disabled community.

Appointed as the fastest commissioner in MOPD history by way of a press release by Mayor Zohran Mamdani in February, Agarwal, who joined *Able News* in an exclusive interview in mid-March, understands that this time, her responsibilities must go beyond the advisory role the office is accustomed to serving.

This is the first part of the sequel interview conducted at MOPD's Manhattan headquarters where Agarwal discussed solutions to the many issues impacting the disability community.

''I really was happy that I was picked early on because it shows the respect that the mayor thinks about with people with disabilities,'' Agarwal said a month into the job.

A child of Indian immigrants, Agarwal, an attorney with a long tenure in public service, served as the Senior Advisor to the Deputy Mayor for Strategic Policy Initiatives under the Bill de Blasio administration, where she worked to boost civic engagement among New Yorkers and build DemocracyNYC's efforts on immigration, people with disabilities, and justice-involved communities.

A previous goal set by former Mayor Eric Adams' administration of helping 2,500 New Yorkers with disabilities find, prepare for, and connect to jobs was surpassed by nearly 50% in collaboration with the New York City Mayor's Office of Talent and Workforce Development (NYC Talent), the New York City Department of Small Business Services (SBS) and the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) last month.

But in Agarwal's eyes, NYC: ATWORK can do more.

Pledging more equal decision-making power and meaningful employment for disabled workers who make up less than half of New York City's workforce, due to discrimination, Agarwal wants to help people with disabilities find employment.

''We are trying to get people [into] employment and moving that forward but there are discrimination laws that we want to uphold as well,'' she said.

With a budget of only nearly $680,000, MOPD is significantly underfunded. However, on the campaign trail, Mamdani criticized the office's dysfunctionality under the prior administration for being poorly staffed. Agarwal is in agreement with the mayor that choosing the right people makes everything run smoother.

Currently, the office is comprised of four administrative positions and 20 staff members. Empowered to address intersectional discrimination head-on and expand disability-led employment opportunities, her goal is to hire more interns who can provide more than just the bare minimum to ensure disability rights.

That is why her plan is to create a staff that can be program oriented, think systematically and understand that the budget is a secondary perspective.

While in law school, Agarwal learned that litigation was not her true calling and looking back, she told *Able News* that she does not only want to give people with disabilities the opportunity to come to that realization but also wants to share the same excitement she felt as a kid when envisioning her future, exploring all the possibilities and learning what really mattered.

''I want to hire more people with disabilities, so they get some experience working for the government and learning what we do,'' she said. ''When you're a young person, you want to explore all sorts of possibilities and that's the best time, when you're learning.''

Agarwal sees more staffing at MOPD as a means to start a more collaborative relationship with other agencies because ''no decision by the city should be made without disability folks.''

Nisha Agarwal

''I thought I understood disabilities when I was so-called able-bodied, and then I had disabilities and I understood nothing. And I realized that because I was disabled afterwards, every aspect of my life changed,'' Agarwal told *Able News* when beginning to detail her recovery process. ''I strongly feel that you can't know it unless you have it.''

Communication is key in a new agency that Agarwal has been asked to pioneer and lucky for her, she will have Councilmember Shahana Hanif as Chair of the inaugural City Council Committee on Disabilities, fighting by her side to help deliver one last promise to disabled New Yorkers—''I promise you, we will leave a legacy that's better than when I came.''

*Look for the second installment of the interview with the Commissioner in the June edition of Able News or read online at AbleNews.com.*

CELEBRATE NASSAU COUNTY GAMES FOR THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED THE GAMES

# A Field of Dreams: A Note from the Games Founder

By Susan Gordon-Ryan

Former Gov. Mario Cuomo at one of the earlier Games. The Games have grown into a powerhouse event enjoyed by thousands of athletes and their families over the 40 years. Photos courtesy: Susan Gordon-Ryan.

This year will mark the 40th Year that the Games for Physically Challenged which will take place on May 29-30 at Mitchel Field in Nassau County. We invite you all to join us.

In 1984 at the Paralympic Games, then Governor Mario Cuomo asked me: ''Does New York State have any program like this?'' At the time, I was working with New York State Parks. My response was that there were only Adult Games but nothing for young athletes with physical disabilities. The Governor responded: ''Let's do something about that!''

So, in 1985 we hosted the first Program for Fitness and Competition for young athletes ages 5-21. This first year, we brought together 240 athletes representing five different modalities: blind, deaf, amputee, cerebral palsy and Les Autres (the others).

Within two years the numbers had expanded to 1,500 athletes statewide and the experience provided many a first introduction to sports and fitness. This was an opportunity they had never experienced before. Many of the athletes as a result of these Games have gone on to compete successfully on a national and international level at the Paralympics held every four years in conjunction with the Olympic Games. One of our Super Star Graduates, Sara, even participated in Paralympics and appeared as a worthy competitor on the television program ''The Amazing Race!''

> **"Over the past four decades gratitude has grown, lives have changed, friendships have been forged and heroes have appeared!!!"**

Sara showed us that we all have untapped potential regardless of any limitations.

Over the last 40 years we have watched our athletes grow, compete and achieve great success. They work all year to prepare themselves for their competition in track and field, swimming, wheelchair basketball, table tennis and host of other athletic endeavors. There are no obstacles, only opportunities. They compete and the world applauds!

This is our Field of Dreams! Over the past four decades gratitude has grown, lives have changed, friendships have been forged and heroes have appeared!!!

I want to thank Nassau County for providing us a permanent home at the Mitchel Field Athletic Complex, Nassau Community College, Hofstra University and NICE Bus for their support. Thank you to *Able News* for their consistent support.

Thank you to our athletes, their families and coaches and all of the countless volunteers and staff who have allowed this Field of Dreams to thrive!

Merri Stanley participated as a child and volunteers today.

Students competing in prior Games.

Kate Weglikowski volunteers and still participates on Viscardi's alumni basketball team.

CELEBRATE THE GAMES

# Backed by Nassau, Built by Volunteers: The Games Continue

By Anthony DiCocco

In 1985, New York State launched the Games for the Physically Challenged, becoming the first state in the country to offer a free adapted youth sports program. Now, Nassau County is keeping the Games alive four decades later.

Each year, more than 1,000 physically challenged athletes ranging anywhere between 5 and 21 years old gather at Mitchel Athletic Complex and Nassau Community College to compete in multiple sports. When this year's competition is held on May 29 and 30, the Games will hit their 40-year anniversary.

The Games were founded by Susan Gordon-Ryan, who has polio, after the 1984 Paralympics — then known as the International Games for the Disabled — were held on Long Island. Since 2000, Susan Maxwell has run the Games.

At their inaugural competition, the Games hosted a modest 240 participants. This year, more than 1,300 athletes are expected to participate. Most come from all over New York State, but some years have drawn out-of-state and international participants.

Though the Games started 42 years ago, 2026 marks the 40-year milestone with two years lost due to COVID. The Games' other obstacle came when the state dropped them. However, Nassau County executives formed the Save the Games Committee to keep the program alive and they have since been fueled by fundraising efforts by local businesses and the community as a whole. In fact, the event raises close to $100,000 on average.

''We're very grateful for Nassau County and County Executive Bruce Blakeman,'' Maxwell said. ''He fully supports our Games each year and we couldn't do this without the County's support behind us.''

Beyond giving physically challenged athletes a chance to play competitive sports specifically suited for them, the Games are meant to educate the youth on physical fitness and make the public aware of all that the physically challenged community is capable of doing.

On top of the athletes, plenty of volunteers and coaches work tirelessly each year to make the Games happen. Below are the stories of just a few who work behind the scenes:

## Nancy Lincoln-Barangan

Lincoln-Barangan, 59, has been with the Games since 1995. The Queens native is the senior occupational therapist at Woodside's P.S. 229 and serves as the head coach of the school's team at the Games.

In addition to coaching, Lincoln-Barangan has been a prominent fundraiser, hosting events like bake sales to pay for the athletes' uniforms, tents, supplies and busing. She also helps get the event the staff it needs, busing nurses, to ensure the athletes are supported.

Despite sinking her teeth into the role for the past 30 years, Lincoln-Barangan was hesitant when then-principal Peter McNally approached her about the position.

''To tell you the truth, I was initially scared when I was asked to run our chapter,'' Lincoln-Barangan said. ''It's a lot of work but all worth it. The Games have been a joy and highlight of my career as an occupational therapist.''

Taking in the focus and anticipation on the athletes' faces at the starting line before the go-flag drops has been Lincoln-Barangan's favorite part of the Games. However, the excitement starts weeks in advance, as she is consistently impressed by the participants' eagerness leading up to the event.

Along with the friendships her students have formed through the Games, seeing kids break out of their shell and build more confidence has been incredibly rewarding for Lincoln-Barangan. One case that has particularly stuck with Lincoln-Barangan is when one of her hearing-impaired students found her own groove while watching her brother compete.

''When she realized there were athletes who were hearing impaired, she immediately asked if she could compete the next year,'' Lincoln-Barangan said. ''Do you want to know what pure joy looks like? It was on her face every year she competed. I think it was the combination of competition and finally feeling that you belong.''

## Sara Schreiber

Schreiber—a Lynbrook native—has been involved with the Games as a volunteer and an athlete. Now 42, Schreiber found out about the Games as a preschooler at the Henry Viscardi School, where the competition was a major school-wide event.

As a volunteer, Schreiber typically works at the wheelchair slalom and demonstrates the course before keeping track of the athletes' times when they go on their runs. She also collects their stickers to show that they have registered for the event, helps with the breakdown at the end of the Games and cheers on the participants from the sidelines throughout the weekend.

During her time as a participant, Schreiber was a part of the ''Les Autres'' classification with club feet and dislocated hips. Both issues are generally solved through surgery as a baby, but the operations did not work in her severe case. Though she utilizes a wheelchair for long distances and when standing for an extended length of time, Schreiber is ambulatory, allowing her to run and stand while participating in events.

Schreiber enjoyed swimming, field events and participated in track, but was usually the lone competitor in her classification, making the competition aspect second to the friendships she created.

''I get to see my friends, many of whom I only see once a year at the Games,'' Schreiber said. ''So for me, it's just a fun weekend hanging out and catching up with old friends.''

Beyond the competitions held in Nassau County, the Games have been able to open doors for many participants, including Schreiber. In 1998, Schreiber was fortunate enough to take her talents from Long Island to the international level as a teenager.

''By going to the Games, I was able to be on the Irish-American youth team and go to Ireland, which was an amazing experience.''

## Chris Sera

Sera, 69, has been with the Games through their entire 40-year history and is one of the free food committee heads. He ensures the food that has been donated from King Kullen and supplied by the county keeps flowing in order to serve breakfast, lunch and dinner to the participants.

The Huntington Station resident's passion for the Games started before their inception. In 1983, he ran into a group of Norwegian athletes in wheelchairs that were in town for the Paralympics. Sera went to watch the competition the next day, and once he saw the advertisement that the Games would be held in Nassau County in 1985, he decided to follow in his friend John's footsteps to get involved.

''We only had like 200-250 kids, but we had no idea what to do with them,'' Sera said. ''We were going to the deli and buying milk to keep them fed. One day, I was told, 'We need you to be in charge of the food tomorrow afternoon.' I was thrown to the wolves, but I never left.''

The smiles that the Games bring not only to the athletes, but also to the volunteers are something he savors.

''[The athletes] come back every year, so we get to be good friends with a lot of them,'' Sera said. ''It really is amazing.''

*Anthony DiCocco is a reporter with The SBU Media Group, part of Stony Brook University's School of Communication and Journalism's Working Newsroom program for students and local media.*

CELEBRATE THE GAMES

# Meet Some of the Student Athletes Competing in the Nassau County Games

## Ivy Nova Escotto

**Age:** 10

**School:** PS 229, The Emanuel Kaplan School

**Events:** Track & Field, Swimming, Slalom

"I like the games because they are very fun and I get to spend time with my friends. All the people there are very nice to everyone."

## Henry Giraldo III

**Age:** 10

**School:** PS 229, The Emanuel Kaplan School

**Events:** Track & Field, Swimming, Slalom

"My favorite activities are running and jumping and I love to run the race track."

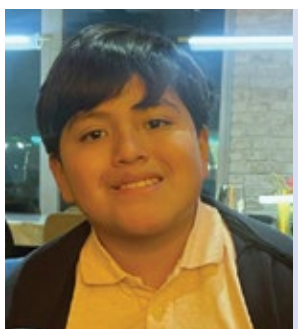
## Kendall Grant

**Age:** 10

**School:** PS 229, The Emanuel Kaplan School

**Events:** Track & Field, Swimming, Slalom

"I like to go to the games to do sports and have a lot of fun. My favorite is the long run."



## Liam Lopez

**Age:** 11

**School:** PS 229, The Emanuel Kaplan School

**Events:** Track & Field, Swimming, Slalom

"It gives us a chance to make friends and be part of a team. It's not about winning."

## Logan Lopez

**Age:** 16

**School:** Thomas Edison, Woodside

**Events:** Track & Field, Slalom

"We love to participate in the Games because it makes us feel very confident and special. We enjoy competing and seeing improvement every year."

## Alice Ren

**Age:** 10

**School:** PS 229, The Emanuel Kaplan School

**Events:** Track & Field, Swimming, Slalom

"I love the Games because they have helped me become strong and to exercise. It's not about winning. I love competing."

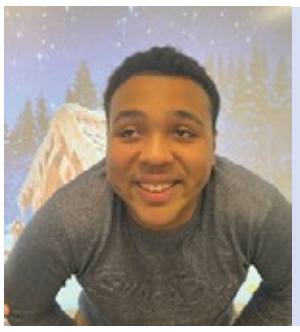
## Alisha Galan Narielsys Rodriguez

**Age:** 9

**School:** PS 229, The Emanuel Kaplan School

**Events:** Track & Field, Slalom

"I'm ready to participate, share and enjoy with the other kids. We will give our best to overcome challenges."



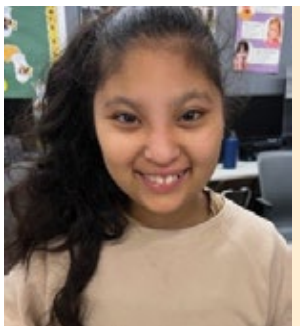
## Nevaeh Dowding

**Age:** 12

**School:** Baldwin Middle School

**Events:** Track & Field, Slalom

Nevaeh loves coming to the games and competing with his friends. Last year, Nevaeh brought home GOLD in all of his events! He is always there to support his friends.



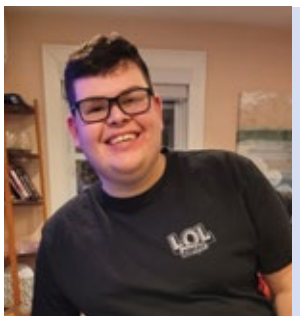
## Rachel Nunez

**Age:** 14

**School:** Baldwin Middle School

**Events:** Track & Field, Slalom

Rachel loves being outside and competing in her sports with her friends. Rachel is competitive but is very supportive and always her friends' biggest cheerleader. She has great sportsmanship.



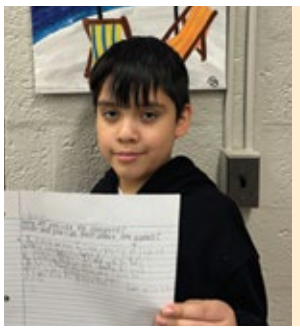
## Liam Chambers

**Age:** 19

**School:** Lindenhurst Senior High School

**Events:** Track & Field

"I like to compete at the Games because I like to run the track, do fun activities, and hang out with my friends."



## Sebastian Rojas

**Age:** 10

**School:** Valley Stream District 13, Willow Road School

**Events:** Track & Field

"I liked that my mom was there to watch me play in the games. It was fun to play bag toss with a new friend."

## Om Desai

**Age:** 18

**School:** W. T. Clarke High Schooll

**Events:** Track & Field, Swimming

"Living with Cerebral Palsy means my daily mobility is limited to a wheelchair or a few blocks with a walker, but on the track and in the pool, I feel truly powerful."

## Tommy C.

**Age:** 14 (will be 15 at the time of the Games)

**School:** W. T. Clarke High School

**Events:** Track & Field

"Every year, I go to the Games with my friends from Clarke High School. I feel happy."

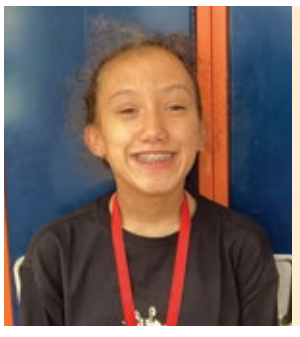
## Amin Navruzbekov

**Age:** 13

**School:** Great Neck North Middle School

**Events:** Track & Field

"I'm excited to participate in the Nassau County Games again this year. I loved competing last year and can't wait to run and throw again."



## Bella Hizon

**Age:** 13

**School:** Great Neck North Middle School

**Events:** Track & Field

"I'm excited to go back to the Nassau County Games and spend the day with my friends. I'm looking forward to trying my best and having fun again."

# CELEBRATE THE GAMES

Susan Gordon-Ryan, founder of the Games. Photo credit: Allan Prinstil/The Viscardi Center.

## Celebrating Nassau County's 40th Games for the Physically Challenged

*Continued from page 1*

ing,'' she said. ''They have peers that are like them. It's a day for them to be free, they don't have to worry about their daily struggles. Watching their faces, they all have smiles, they are all so happy. It's an inspiration for everybody and it's very rewarding.''

Each participant competes against other athletes of the same gender, age group, and ability. Athletes compete for gold, silver and bronze medals, as well as 4th, 5th and 6th place ribbons. All participants receive a personal best ribbon for their accomplishments.

To learn more about the Nassau County Games for the Physically Challenged, head to the website, https://nassaucountypcgames.com/

## 2026 Schedule of Events

**PROUDLY CELEBRATING**
**40 YEARS OF ABILITY**
**www.nassaucountypcgames.com**

NASSAU COUNTY GAMES FOR THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED
BRUCE A. BLAKEMAN COUNTY EXECUTIVE

**For more information:**
**Call: 516-903-1139**
**Or Email:**
**victorychallenge@nassaucountyny.gov**

***Join us as we welcome the Sponsors at the Games Kick-Off Press Conference***
***Friday, May 29th at 10:30 am (Near the Track)***

***Friday, May 29, 2026***

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Athlete Registration*** | 8:00am – 2:00 pm | **Mitchel Athletic Complex** |
| | 4:00pm – 7:00 pm | ***Nassau Community College*** |
| ***Volunteer Registration*** | 8:00am – 3:00 pm | **Mitchel Athletic Complex** |
| | 4:00pm – 7:00 pm | ***Nassau Community College*** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Track*** | | **Mitchel Athletic Complex (refer to Track Schedule)** |
| | 9:15 am | 800M |
| | 9:30 am | P40, 100M |
| | TBA | 40M, 400M |
| ***Field*** | | **Mitchel Athletic Complex** |
| | 8:30 am | Discus, Soft Discus, Club Throw |
| | | Precision Throw, Distance Kick |
| ***Adapted Games*** | | 10:00 am - 2:00 pm |
| ***Wheelchair Basketball*** | | ***NCC – Lower Gym - Teams Only*** |
| | 4:30 pm | Warm-up/Check-in (all teams) Competition begins at 5:00pm |
| ***Swimming*** | | ***Nassau Community College Pool*** |
| | 6:00 pm | Warm Up/Check-in (all swimmers) 6:00pm-6:30pm, Competition begins at 6:45pm |
| ***Table Tennis*** | | ***NCC - Field House*** |
| | 6:00 pm | Check-in and warm-up for all Table Tennis competitors |

***Saturday, May 30, 2026***

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Track*** | | **Mitchel Athletic Complex (refer to Track Schedule)** |
| | 9:15 am | 1500M |
| | 9:30 am | P80, 60M |
| | TBA | 200M |
| ***Field*** | | **Mitchel Athletic Complex** |
| | 8:30 am | Soft Shot, Shot Put, |
| | 11:00 am | Long Jump, High jump |
| ***Archery*** | | **Mitchel Athletic Complex** |
| | 10:00 am | Open to all Athletes age 12 - 21 |
| ***Slalom*** | | **Mitchel Athletic Complex** |
| | 10:00 am | Ambulatory/Wheelchair/PWC |

***Demonstrations Activities*** Friday and Saturday, May 29th & 30th. (8 am – 2 pm) ***Mitchel Athletic Complex***

***Celebration Dinner Dance*** *at* ***Hofstra USA*** **– Saturday, May 30th.**

*Buffet Dinner begins at 5pm (Tickets available at Athlete Registration). Dance will be* 6:30 - 8:00 pm.

**Weekend Games video will be shown at 7:30pm.**

County Executive Bruce Blakeman and student athletes. Photo credit: Allan Prinstil/The Viscardi Center.

One of Henry Viscardi School's basketball teams.

**BRUCE A. BLAKEMAN**
NASSAU COUNTY EXECUTIVE

## invites you and your family to visit the

# NATION'S ONLY MUSEUM OF DISABILITY HISTORY

## *located at The Viscardi Center in Albertson, NY.*

**Come learn about local disability rights pioneer Dr. Henry Viscardi, Jr. and explore over 125 artifacts highlighting the fight for equal opportunity for people with disabilities.**

**The museum provides an inclusive, fully accessible experience for all visitors and is the perfect place to spend a fun and educational day with your family. School field trips and group tours welcome.**

Museum of Disability History
at The Viscardi Center

**201 I U Willets Rd, Albertson | 516-465-3722**

*For more information and to purchase tickets, visit* **MuseumofDisabilityHistory.org**

# Creator Sees Neurodiversity Flag Raised in New York

By Christopher Alvarez

Joshua Mirsky (left), creator of the New York State Neurodiversity Strength Flag, stands with New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) Commissioner Willow Baer and other officials for the flag-raising at Jones Beach. Photo credit: Christopher Alvarez.

Typically, the color red on a nation's flag symbolizes bloodshed in battle for independence while gold stands for wealth and resources.

Today, those colors patterned in a diamond represent power, strength, perseverance and first place as a new flag was raised at Jones Beach State Park for all people who are neurodivergent, waving in a renewed acceptance vow to the autism community.

''In 2021, I had an idea that a society with such vast scope and diversity should have a flag–a flag to symbolize strength because we all have strength here. We're neurodivergent. We all know that. We face obstacles every single day,'' said Joshua Mirsky, creator of the New York State Neurodiversity Strength Flag. ''This is a victory for all of us, all neurodivergence. When I had a vision, I knew that I had to pursue it, not just on my behalf, but on behalf of all of us, on behalf of a massively disenfranchised population who needed hope, especially nowadays when there is so much division all over the place. We need unification as a country. It is my sincerest hope and belief that through this flag we can begin to [weave] the fibers of a blanket of unification that we could cover the world.''

New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) Commissioner Willow Baer noted that ''These are not just colors. They are a statement that neurodivergent New Yorkers are seen, valued, and essential to the fabric of our communities,'' she said. ''Awareness alone is not enough, and access, while an important first step, is not enough. People need to feel welcome. People deserve to feel respected, and most importantly, people should always feel like they belong.

''That's what Autism Acceptance Month is about, to me. Not just awareness, but informed acceptance. Not just recognition, but celebration. And that's why we're here today, to make sure neurodiverse New Yorkers know that you belong, that you are celebrated, and that you play an important role in all of our communities. New York's Neurodiversity Strength Flag is more than a symbol. It reflects the perspectives, the experiences, and the leadership of people with autism.''

OPWDD also raised the Neurodiversity Strength Flag at its office and other locations. But Jones Beach is home to Mirsky.

In an exclusive interview with *Able News*, Port Washington resident Mirsky recalled walking the boardwalk to a certain flagpole and asking himself when he would be able to see a flag he identified with.

''I'd stop there and I'd always look up and I'd go there at weird times of the year when no one was there and I'd say, 'You see that flagpole? I'm making a flag one day and it's gonna be flying there and every single other flagpole in the world,'' he said.

When there is a will, there is a way, and the 2021 dream of eradicating the stigmas that have unjustly held the neurodivergent community back, was simply started with some oil pastels, paper, a ruler and a meeting with a state senator.

After meeting with the senator, Mirsky rushed to the art shop one day after work to get the supplies he needed. The design for the prototype of this flag has been on Mirsky's mind for a while, he told *Able News*. When arriving to his desk at his apartment, the first thing he drew was a diamond to signify value because autistic people have always known the value they have that others don't see, Mirsky said. ''People who are different always get respected. Autistic people have this gift. And flying this flag, eventually society will know our value too.''

The idea that other movements like the Pride flag had a symbol to celebrate and were successful in society, but nothing was created for neurodiversity, consumed him. He said he put it at the center of everything until it became his everything.

Autism is a communication disorder that comes in three stages and affects an estimated 1 in 31 children and 1 in 45 adults in the United States today, according to Autism Speaks, an organization dedicated to helping autistic people reach their full potential.

Children with autism are bullied at three times a higher rate than those with other disabilities. Nearly 80% face disproportionate risks of physical, verbal, and cyberbullying.

Mirsky was no different; getting kicked around, choked, detention time at school and being looked down upon for envisioning a more inclusive and accepting future.

Along with the Neurodiversity Strength Flag raising, Commissioner Baer awarded Mirsky with a proclamation on behalf of Gov. Kathy Hochul's office declaring April as Autism Acceptance Month in New York. ''Awareness sounds like a disease and I think wording's the first part of the problem,'' Mirsky said about the importance of going from awareness to acceptance. ''If you start talking about something as a disease to be cleansed, you're never gonna address the problem.''

The problem of ''misrepresentation and people who follow the stigmas,'' he said. Autism Speaks represents itself with a blue puzzle piece as their logo, a symbol that many autistic supporters of the flag, in attendance, booed because it frames autism as a disease that needs a cure, and not representing autism the right way.

That is why the movement of ''ditching blue'' has taken force. In early April landmarks throughout New York State, including Niagara Falls, were lit in the colors of red, white and gold.

''We need to stay and show that we're not second class, we're first class just like everyone else,'' he said.

With teary eyes, Commissioner Baer said that her New York State's Autism Spectrum Disorders Advisory Board made a recommendation to change the colors because ''they saw blue as being a sad color.''

Democratic representative of New York's 3rd congressional district, Tom Suozzi has been a supporter of the flag since 2022 and displays it at his congressional office. And, the Museum of Disability History in Albertson has proudly displayed the flags outside the museum's entrance.

Despite these small milestones, Mirsky says he still feels like a ''warrior in a war, which is not yet won. I am still in battle mode until we get not just all New York State but the world,'' he said. ''So the future generations will never need to experience the hardships of today, I fight.''

His mom, Karen, is Mirsky's biggest supporter and to her, today was ''incredible and powerful, and he's going to make a difference.''

HKS Children's Learning Center

# Two New Preschools Are Coming to Long Island

***For children ages 3 to 5 with disabilities and complex developmental needs***

The Children's Learning Center is a specialized preschool program for children with autism, Down syndrome, multiple disabilities, visual impairments, and other conditions affecting learning, communication, mobility, and social development.

Every classroom is supported by a full multidisciplinary team working together:

- **Special Education Teachers**
- **Occupational Therapists**
- **Physical Therapists**
- **Speech-Language Pathologists**
- **Teachers of the Visually Impaired**
- **Social Workers & Family Support Staff**
- **Full-Time Nurse**

- Therapists and teachers working side by side every day
- Individualized support built around each child's IEP
- Purpose-built classrooms and learning environments
- Nearly four decades of expertise in complex developmental needs

**No cost to families. Services are funded through New York State's Section 4410 Preschool Special Education Program. The first step is contacting your school district's CPSE to request an evaluation.**

## Two locations opening in 2026

**Nassau County**
303 Sunnyside Blvd. | Plainview, NY 11803

**Suffolk County**
11 Oval Drive | Islandia, NY 11749

CLC Video

HKS Helen Keller SERVICES

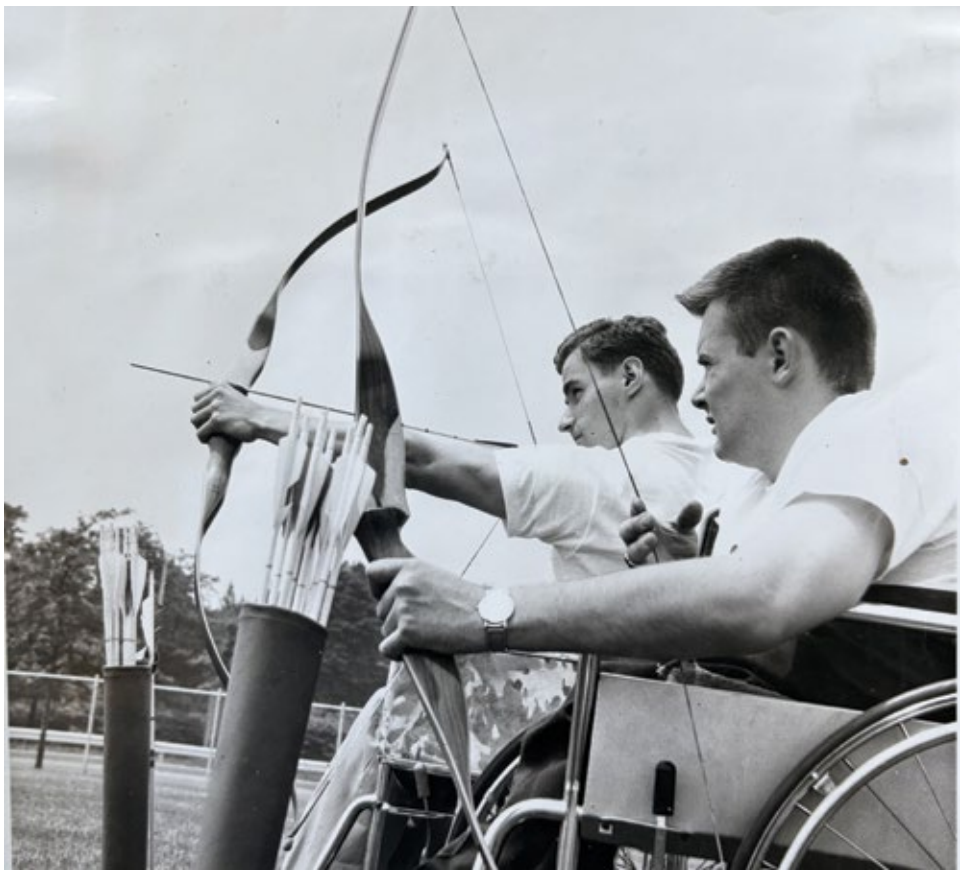
Learn More: at HelenKeller.org/CLCLongIsland | clcenrollment@helenkeller.org

## Disability History

# The Bulova School of Watchmaking

By Warren Shaw

A classroom at the Bulova School. Note the roll-under workbenches.



Two Bulova bowmen, Robert Browning and John Eppe, 1961.

You'd never guess that the Bulova Watch Company played a crucial role right at the start of modern disability activism in the greater New York area.

Bulova began in 1875 as a little jewelry shop on Maiden Lane in Manhattan, run by a German immigrant named Joseph. It eventually grew into the largest watchmaker in the world, famous for its clever marketing and the ''Accutron'' line of electronic timepieces. A very American (and very New York) success story.

The tie to disability comes via the Bulova School of Watchmaking, in Woodside, Queens. A project of Joseph Bulova's son Arde, the school opened for business in 1945, as a tuition-free vocational program for disabled veterans of World War II. As Arde put it, the Bulova School was intended to ''repay, in some small measure, the sacrifice and service of returning disabled veterans after the Second World War.''

An entire generation of watchmakers got trained at the Bulova School. Its single-story Georgian schoolhouse was then one of the only purpose-built barrier-free buildings anywhere. Entry was via a ramp which led to doors that opened automatically, thanks to an electric-eye mechanism. The elevator had doors at opposite sides, so that a wheelchair user didn't have to turn around to get out. Doorways had ramps instead of saddles, and the floors were finished with cork, to prevent skidding. Classrooms had extra-high, roll-under workbenches.

Plus, there was a fully outfitted rehabilitation facility on campus, including an on-staff physical therapist, and a gymnasium. Because of these unique facilities, the Bulova School quickly became a center for disability athletics.

As early as 1950 the school boasted a wheelchair basketball team called the ''Bulova Watchmakers.'' Students at the school had access to a number of sports, including archery, table tennis, pool, and volleyball. Beginning in 1957, the Bulova School, along with Paralyzed Veterans of America, sponsored annual tournaments known as the ''Wheelchair Games,'' which drew teams from as far away as Cleveland. All this made the Bulova School an ideal feeder for American participation in the Paralympics, which began in 1948.

Meanwhile, unrelated to the Bulova School, in 1960 a former Brooklynite named Richard Match got the ball rolling for disability rights activism in the greater New York area. Match had moved to the town of Great Neck a few years before. When he learned that a nearby middle school had an accessible swimming pool, he managed to persuade the local Board of Education to start a program of evening swimming for disabled adults—at what was then the one and only accessible swimming pool in the entire metropolitan area.

The pool randomly brought together dozens of men and women with disabilities, including Donald Broderick, a Navy veteran who went on to reinvigorate activism at the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association (now United Spinal), and Julie and Mollie Shaw, who would become among the earliest and most important founders of the New York City disability rights movement.

Among the more prominent pool personalities was Bobbi Wailes, a moon-faced Brooklyn-born chatterbox, who had reconciled her disabled lower limbs with her jock ambitions by becoming a champion archer, training at the Bulova School. She was then en route to taking the gold at the 1964 Paralympics.

As the pool people got to know each other, they began talking about architectural barriers and the many other obstacles they faced just trying to live their lives. Maybe they could actually mount some form of pushback. First things first, though, they had to find somewhere to meet—preferably on weekends, and preferably somewhere that didn't involve doffing braces and changing clothes, getting wet, then changing clothes and donning braces again.

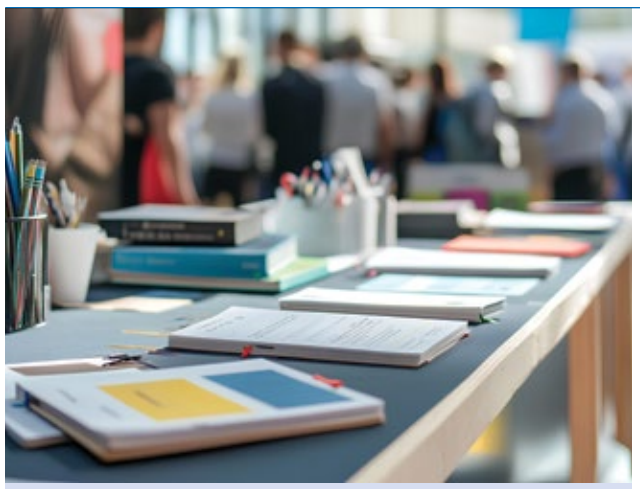
Bobbi Wailes came to the rescue here. Over the course of her archery training, she'd become friendly with the Bulova School staff. Never before had the school hosted a political meeting, but she talked them into giving it a try. The pool people assembled for the first time at Bulova on a Saturday afternoon sometime in 1961.

No one then could have known that out of this little meeting would spring organizations like the Handicapped Drivers Association, the Architectural Barriers Committee, and a whole series of pioneering efforts to pare back the barriers faced by people with disabilities—free parking at meters, accessibility amendments to the New York City Building Code, and much, much more. The Bulova School remained the principal meeting place for most of this activity, well into the late sixties. It became the springboard for the disability rights movement, both in Nassau County and New York City.

You have to wonder what the immigrant and founder, Joseph Bulova, would have made of it all.

*For more of Warren Shaw's work in disability history, please go to [www.DisabilityHistoryNYC.com](http://www.DisabilityHistoryNYC.com)*

# Connect, Learn, and Advocate



## Special Needs Resource Fair

**May 3: Noon to 4:00 pm**
**(In-person)**

Stop by the second annual Special Needs Resource Fair at the Oceanside Public Library and learn about the many resources available on Long Island. Featuring live demos of library programs, professional talks on key subjects, and information tables to browse. No registration required.

## Disabled In Action of Metropolitan New York Monthly Meeting

**May 3: 1:30 pm to 4:00 pm**
**(In-person)**

This grassroots civil rights organization committed to ending discrimination against people with disabilities holds its monthly meeting at Positive Exposure Gallery, 83 Maiden Lane, 4th Floor in Manhattan.

**Please visit disabledinaction.org for more.**

## NY Able Webinar

**May 14: Noon**
**May 28: 6:00 pm**
**(Virtual and choose just one to attend)**

Learn more about how NY ABLE allows individuals with disabilities and their families to save for qualified disability related expenses, without limiting their ability to benefit from federal benefit programs such as SSI, SSDI and Medicaid if certain terms and conditions are met. For additional information about NY ABLE, or to open an account, please visit nyable.org. Register here.

## Access to Independence Transportation Resource Fair

**May 17: 11:00 am to 3:00 pm**
**(In-person)**

The NYC DOT will host a transportation resource fair at Union Square Park, North Plaza in Manhattan where information on transportation services and accessibility programs in New York City will be shared. This free event is specifically for people with disabilities, older adults, caregivers, and family members, but all are welcome. Those who attend will be able to learn about transportation options, connect with service providers, and experience emerging accessibility technologies. There will also be opportunities to connect with organizations that support independent travel. The event will feature live demonstrations and cultural programming, including music performances, chair yoga, activities for kids, and more!

The event will be held rain or shine. Registration is not required. ASL interpreters and sighted guides will be available.

## All Abilities Expo

**May 30: 11:00 am to 2:00 pm**
**(In-person)**

The Town of Huntington will host the 2nd Annual All Abilities Expo, a free and inclusive community event celebrating individuals of all abilities. The event will be held at Heckscher Park in Huntington. This family-friendly event will feature therapeutic horses, therapy dogs, inclusive games, community resources and more. Admission is free and open to all.

includenyc

## Outdoors for Autism with INCLUDEnyc

**May 31: 11:00 am to 2:30 pm**
**(In-person)**

Celebrate INCLUDEnyc's 10th anniversary of sharing summer memories. This event will focus on young people with autism, age 0 – 18, and their families, but all are welcome! This free event is made possible by the New York City Council Autism Initiative. It will be held at Rev. T. Wendell Foster Park, 164th Street between River and Jerome Avenues, Bronx. Register here.

## Financial Advisement for Families of Individuals with Disabilities

**May 6: Noon to 1:00 pm (Virtual)**

This INCLUDEnyc workshop brings together an experienced financial advisor and a practiced special needs planning and guardianship attorney to give families a clear, practical understanding of both the financial and legal steps involved in planning for a loved one with a disability. Join attorney Malkie Scher Esq. and Ezekiel "Zeke" Zimmerman, MBA, CLTC, as they discuss all aspects of planning, including wills, Special Needs Trusts, guardianship and its alternatives, and tips to preserve eligibility for government benefits such as Medicaid and Social Security. Register here.

# Around Our Towns

Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman hosted a press conference at the county's executive building to raise awareness for Autism Awareness Month. Photo credit: Nassau County.

## Nassau County Lights Dome for Autism Awareness Month

On April 10th, Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman joined local schools, advocates, and community partners, as well as public officials, to raise awareness for Autism Awareness Month. County Executive Blakeman noted autism diagnoses have reached their highest levels to date – 1 in 31 children. The dome of the Nassau County Theodore Roosevelt Executive & Legislative Building was lit blue in recognition of Autism Awareness Month.

As the father of an autistic adult son, Nassau County Legislator Michael Giangregorio spoke about his family's journey and need for critical services and housing. He noted autism is a spectrum and individuals may be profoundly disabled or high functioning, but all must feel welcomed. He emotionally shared his biggest worry as a parent of a child that requires 24/7 care, ''I'm going to die. Who will take care of my son?'' He is not alone.

Following informative remarks by Nassau County Department of Health Director of Epidemiology, Dr. Tavora Buchman, parents, advocates and executives from Autism Speaks, The Nicholas Center, and Variety Child Learning Center raised the importance of expanding key services such as early intervention, therapies including speech and occupational, and most importantly safe, appropriate housing for autistic youth and adults.

While messages about the importance of acceptance, awareness, and inclusion were echoed by all and the County Executive, Town of North Hempstead Supervisor Jennifer DeSena and Town of Oyster Bay Supervisor Joseph Saladino shared the efforts they are making to meet the autism community's needs, it was clear more has to be done.

## Library Youth Abilities Fair a Success

From a calming Zen Zone to special appearances from Bluey and Super Mario, the Youth Abilities Fair had something for everyone on March 28. Hosted by Middle Country Public Library in partnership with Middle Country SEPTA, the fair turned into a lively, joy-filled celebration of community, connection and opportunity, library officials reported.

With more than 400 attendees walking through the doors, the event buzzed with excitement as families explored a wide range of organizations, each offering valuable resources, services, and engaging activities designed especially for children and teens.

The Youth Abilities Fair offered something for everyone with families relaxing and recharging together in the calming Zen Zone, while others dove into hands-on fun with crafts, games and interactive experiences. Adding an extra dose of magic, special appearances from Bluey, the fun-tastic pup, and the Super Mario characters delighted kids and adults alike, creating unforgettable photo ops and happy moments.

Bluey was at the Youth Abilities Fair at the Middle Country Public Library. Photo courtesy: Middle Country Public Library.

## Seeking Research Participants

Kessler Foundation is conducting a research study to better understand how community environments affect daily life for people living with spinal cord injury (SCI).

Adults who meet the following criteria are eligible: age 18 or older; living in the community with a spinal cord injury or disorder for at least one year; residing in the United States; leaving home several days each week; and fluent in English or Spanish. Participants should be comfortable using a Smartphone or Smartwatch and have access to a computer or tablet to complete brief web-based interviews.

**The study lasts seven months and includes three data-collection periods. Each period spans one week and is designed to capture a snapshot of your daily experiences, routines, activities, and community participation.** Information collected will help researchers better understand how environmental factors influence quality of life and independence for people with SCI.

Participants may receive up to $600 in compensation—$200 after each completed data-collection period. Participants will also have the opportunity to keep the Smartwatch used during the study. Register at https://kesslerfoundation.org/join-our-research-studies.

Visit AbleNews.com
anytime for archived issues, articles, a calendar of events, affordable housing listings, and more!

Stay Connected With Us
Able News @able_news

Interested in Submitting News Content or Placing an Ad?

Email: ablenews@viscardicenter.org
Call: 516-465-1416

The deadline for the June issue is May 15, 2026.

# START
## with The Disability Guys®

*The Choice for Your Disability and Injury Legal Needs*

SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY

LONG TERM DISABILITY

& OTHER DISABILITY ISSUES

THE DISABILITY GUYS®

MARKHOFF & MITTMAN, PC

INJURY & ACCIDENTS

DISABILITY PENSIONS

WORKERS' COMPENSATION

### The Unexpected Legal Experience

We help you navigate difficult times

Thousands of disability & injury claims handled

Real communication & cutting-edge technology to help you succeed

## CALL US TODAY – FREE CONSULTATION

# 866.205.2415

**www.TheDisabilityGuys.com · info@thedisabilityguys.com**

The Disability Guys: Markhoff & Mittman, PC· Attorney Advertising

# An Inclusive Spring

## Full Bloom: Accessible Gardens Make the Outdoors Available to Everyone

By Ava Lefkowitz

Wide, paved pathways allow for easy navigation at The New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx.

As winter fades and the first signs of spring begin to appear, people naturally feel drawn outside again. Warmer air, longer days, and blooming flowers offer a sense of renewal and restoration. Spending time outdoors is a centuries-old pastime, but we now understand more than ever its importance to both physical and mental health. Fresh air, sunlight, and green spaces can reduce stress and improve mood. For individuals with mobility challenges, however, accessing these environments, with their uneven winding pathways, can be difficult and even perilous. Fortunately, many gardens today are thoughtfully designed to be inclusive, ensuring that people of all abilities can experience the beauty and restorative effect of nature.

Across New York City and Long Island, several gardens stand out for their commitment to accessibility, while still offering rich and engaging experiences.

### New York Botanical Garden
**(Bronx)**

The New York Botanical Garden is one of the most expansive and well-known green spaces in the country, covering 250 acres. Its size might seem overwhelming, but it has made significant efforts to ensure accessibility throughout the grounds. Wide, paved pathways allow for easy navigation, and a tram system equipped for wheelchair users helps visitors move between major areas.

Key attractions like the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory are fully accessible, with ramps and elevators that make it possible for all visitors to explore its diverse plant collections, from tropical rainforests to desert landscapes. Benches are placed throughout the garden, offering rest stops along the way. While some areas still reflect the garden's historic landscape and may be uneven, clear maps and staff assistance help visitors plan routes that are easier to manage. Overall, the garden combines scale and inclusivity, making it possible for a wide range of people to experience its beauty.

### Brooklyn Botanic Garden
**(Brooklyn)**

Smaller but equally impactful, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden is designed with accessibility at its core. Its 52 acres are connected by smooth, paved paths, and all entrances are wheelchair accessible. The layout is intuitive, making it easy to move from one section to another without encountering major barriers.

One of its most unique features is the Fragrance Garden, which was specifically created for visitors who are visually impaired. Raised beds allow plants to be touched and smelled, and Braille signage provides additional context. This multi-sensory approach makes the garden more inclusive while also enhancing the experience for all visitors. Recent renovations have also introduced gently sloped paths where stairs once existed, ensuring that scenic viewpoints—like those overlooking the Cherry Esplanade—are accessible to everyone. With seasonal highlights such as cherry blossoms and the tranquil Japanese Hill-and-Pond Garden, it offers both beauty and thoughtful design.

### Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park
**(Oyster Bay, Long Island)**

Located on Long Island's North Shore, Planting Fields Arboretum blends natural beauty with historic charm. Spanning over 400 acres, it features formal gardens, greenhouses, and open landscapes. Despite its size, accessibility has been a growing priority.

Much of the terrain is relatively flat, which makes it easier for visitors using wheelchairs or other mobility aids to navigate. Recent improvements include expanded accessible pathways and better signage, helping visitors move through the grounds with more confidence. The greenhouses, filled with seasonal flowers like camellias and orchids, are also designed to accommodate a range of visitors.

What makes Planting Fields especially appealing is the variety it offers. Visitors can explore carefully designed gardens, walk through wooded areas, or simply relax on wide lawns—all without feeling restricted by the layout. It's a space that balances history, nature, and accessibility.

### Bailey Arboretum
**(Lattingtown, Long Island)**

For those looking for a quieter and more intimate setting, Bailey Arboretum offers a different kind of experience. Covering 42 acres, it focuses on creating a peaceful and engaging environment that is accessible to all.

Its most notable feature is the Secret Walled Garden, a sensory garden designed to engage sight, smell, touch, and sound. The space is fully accessible, with features that allow visitors to interact closely with plants and natural elements. This makes it especially meaningful for individuals with visual impairments or those who benefit from a more hands-on experience.

Beyond the sensory garden, the arboretum includes nature trails, bird-friendly habitats, and open green spaces. Its smaller size and quieter atmosphere make it less overwhelming than larger parks, offering a more relaxed way to connect with nature without risk of sensory overstimulation.

### Making Nature More Inclusive

These four gardens show how accessibility and natural beauty can go hand in hand. By incorporating features like smooth pathways, accessible transportation, sensory-focused design, and clear navigation, they make outdoor spaces more welcoming to everyone.

As spring continues to bloom, these gardens provide more than just scenic views. They offer a chance for people of all abilities to enjoy fresh air, explore new environments, and feel connected to the natural world. In doing so, they highlight an important idea: nature should be a universal experience available to all.

# Health and Wellness

# Where Kids Find Their Voice and Strength — One Horse Ride at a Time

By Angelina Livigni

Speech therapist Kate Scotti working with Michael Massa who is holding his toy horse named DW. Brendan Sullivan riding during a Speech and Occupational therapy lesson. Sullivan, 6, has been attending sessions for three years. Photo credits: Angelina Livigni.

When you imagine occupational and speech therapy, a horse usually isn't in the picture. But at Speech and Occupational Therapy in Motion, barnyard animals are an integral part of the process.

Located in Islandia, licensed speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists work with clients on their individual needs and goals. Incorporating animals, mainly horses, is beneficial because it keeps the clients engaged and entertained. The horses are provided by an equestrian facility called Pal-O-Mine Equestrian–a nonprofit that provides equine-assisted therapeutic programs for children and adults with disabilities, veterans, survivors of trauma, at-risk youth and many others.

In addition to working alongside animals, the practices also offer an accessible playground, treatment rooms inside the building filled with toys, and a pool in the summer. Speech and Occupational Therapy in Motion provide services year-round.

''We had been looking, going to many, many doctors and therapists. Neurologists all over the Tri-State area,'' Adam Davi, parent of a client, said. ''At some point we found [Speech and Occupational Therapy in Motion]. Kamden took to it very well, and we've been here ever since.''

Adam, parent to client Kamden Davi, has brought Kamden to the facility for over 21 years. Kamden is 27 years old and had a stroke while in utero, which led to developmental and physical delays.

Horses, in addition to entertaining clients, help with motor function exercises as well. In order to sit up on the horse, it requires engaging your core muscles. Each horse is chosen for a client based on their physical needs.

''Being on the horse, it focuses him,'' Adam Davi said. ''It tends to calm him down. It's really good for his core strength especially because of his limited mobility.''

Tina Rocco, founder of Speech in Motion, explained how each horse is chosen to fit individual client needs.

''Sometimes kids will start on a horse that has a wider base of support and likes less movement,'' Rocco said. ''Then as they get stronger, we increase the challenge by putting them on a horse who's a little more narrow and has more movement because we're always wanting progress in therapy.''

Clients staying with Speech and Occupational Therapy in Motion for years is not uncommon, it is the norm. Colleen Kelly and her child Brendan Sullivan, age 6, have been attending sessions for three years. Sullivan is autistic and has a speech-language delay.

''It is very different from the therapists that we worked with prior to starting here,'' Kelly said. ''After Brendan's diagnosis, you're kind of thrown into what approach to take with therapy. It wasn't until we came here and worked with this team of therapists that it was child-centered. It's recognizing the child that's in front of you and not just a goal that you want them to meet.''

While the integration of horses in sessions is definitely an intriguing factor, it is the employees of the facility who make this place another safe space for these clients.

Liz Massa and her son, Michael Massa, love all aspects of the facility. Michael was diagnosed with Joubert syndrome at five months old, which causes low-tone and poor coordination.

''He absolutely loves the animals and the horses. And because of that, he's just gotten so much out of it. His speech has just exploded, and I know that Speech and Motion have everything to do with that,'' she said. ''It's the only place that I'm comfortable with him going to anyone because I know that Tina isn't just letting anyone come work here . . . they're so protective and so loving for these children and their success.''

Kate Scotti, one of the speech therapists, feels fulfilled by her job.

''I love having the opportunity to hear my kids' voices,'' Scotti said. ''Whether it's their speaking voice, whether it's the voice that their family chose on their communication system, whether it's through use of gestures or just through self-advocacy behavior. I love seeing kids make progress in ways that allow us to see parts of them that we might not be able to see before they're able to communicate with them.''

Eileen D'Amico, the founder of Occupational Therapy in Motion, talked about why she was inspired to bring horses into the therapy world.

''I just have such a passion for doing therapy,'' she said. ''Working with the kids that we serve and combining the movement of the horse during therapy, it's just a dynamic way to provide therapy. It's very different and extremely motivating for the kids.''

The land at Pal-O-Mine also offers an accessible playground and a pool in the summer. Speech and Occupational Therapy in Motion provide services year-round.

''The horse is a big part of what we do, but it's definitely not the only thing we do here,'' Rocco said.

*Angelina Livigni is a reporter with The SBU Media Group, part of Stony Brook University's School of Communication and Journalism's Working Newsroom program for students and local media.*

# Order Up! School Cafés Brew Confidence and Job Skills

By Dawn Colclasure

Students run Café Cooksey at Davison Avenue Intermediate School in Lynbrook. Photo courtesy: Malverne School District. The Hoot Café at Lynbrook North Middle School. Photo courtesy: Lynbrook School District.

When someone orders coffee at Hoot Café or Café Cooksey, the student donning an apron and offering a smile is sharpening their social skills and acquiring real-world work experience. Located in two different school districts in Nassau County, these cafés help students understand what it's like to have this kind of job.

"Hoot Café is part of our Career Development Program (CDP)," explained Lynbrook North Middle School Principal Marianne Healy and special education teacher Bryton LaMantia, who created the program in 2022 at the school in the Lynbrook District.

Café Cooksey is located in Davison Avenue Intermediate School, which is in the Malverne school district. It was created by special education teacher Angela Cooksey last year. "Café Cooksey is a student-run café experience designed to provide hands-on, real-world learning opportunities that build both academic and life skills," Cooksey explained. "Students take on meaningful roles such as preparing orders, handling money, managing supplies, and providing customer service. Through these responsibilities, they strengthen communication, teamwork, problem solving, and independence. The café also reinforces academic concepts like functional math and reading while giving students a structured environment to practice workplace readiness skills."

At Hoot Café, both Healy and LaMantia hope the program will achieve the same goals for students. "The Hoot Café helps students build a wide range of important life skills. Students develop money management skills, improve their communication, and strengthen their social interactions. It also helps foster a sense of community within the school. In addition, students gain valuable vocational training that prepares them for future work environments."

Healy and LaMantia explained that the coffee shop was set up in the school in order to "promote student independence and help them develop daily living and job-related skills in a supportive environment. While it mirrors a real coffee shop, being in a school allows students to learn and practice these skills with guidance and structure. This is especially important at the middle school level, as students are transitioning from elementary school and preparing for high school, where they will receive more specific job training. In that sense, the school setting provides a safe and effective steppingstone before entering a fully public work environment."

Cooksey shared these same goals for the coffee shop at Davison. "Schools use student-run programs like Café Cooksey to give students hands-on, real-world learning experiences in a structured and supportive environment. This setting allows students to build workplace, communication, and functional academic skills while receiving guidance and individualized support. It serves as an important bridge that prepares students for success in real community job settings."

The setting for both cafés is nearly identical to the real thing, as are the duties each student must fulfill. "Students in the program take on a variety of responsibilities that keep the café running," Healy and LaMantia explained of Hoot Café. "They manage inventory, set up the cart, and help order materials. They also pay attention to staff preferences to better understand what items are popular."

It's the same at Café Cooksey. "All students in the program take part in essential preparation and operational tasks that keep the café running smoothly," Cooksey explained. "During each café shift, two students work together and take on different roles to simulate a real workplace environment."

Both cafés are a hit. Cooksey noted that the feedback has been "overwhelmingly positive, with many sharing how the café has become a welcoming and meaningful part of the school community."

"Both students and staff love the Hoot Café," Healy and LaMantia said. "Staff members especially enjoy interacting with the students, supporting their growth, and, of course, getting a cup of coffee along the way."

To learn more, visit the websites of each school or check out Café Cooksey's Instagram page:@cafecooksey.

*For a related story, please see page 21.*

Derrek's Bags
Adaptive bags, backpacks and fanny packs for catheters and other medical supplies.
Etsy.com/shop/DerreksBags
Facebook.com/DerreksBags
Tiktok.com/@derreks.bags
derreksbags@gmail.com

## Inside Perspective

# The Unfair Advantage That Isn't: Using AI to Survive a World Built for Speed

By Kevin Webster

Kevin Webster

Your coworker uses ChatGPT to knock out a draft in ten minutes, then leaves early to catch their kid's soccer game. They're using AI as jetpacks: ways to go faster, do more, get ahead.

You need to be using the same tools to survive the day.

For a disabled professional, AI isn't a performance enhancer. It's a ramp. It's the equalizer that helps you keep your footing in a workplace designed for people with different energy levels, processing speeds, and cognitive bandwidth on any given day. They're sprinting ahead. You're just trying to stay in the mix.

> **"You have to be your own accessibility coordinator, IT department, and compliance officer."**

And here's the thing nobody wants to say out loud: that's not a moral failing. That's geometry. The playing field was never level to begin with. Think of it like glasses. People don't wear them to gain X-ray vision. They wear them just to see as well as everyone else.

The Americans with Disabilities Act grants you **rights**. Your HR department has a policy. And none of that meets your deadline.

When you need dictation software to draft the report due Friday, IT's approval process takes three weeks. The accommodation is real, but the timeline is fantasy. The legal standard says employers don't have to lower production standards. The metrics don't care about your migraine. The client doesn't care that your ADHD medication is on backorder. You still have to ship.

The system isn't designed for urgency. But your job requirements are.

This creates the need for a necessary, unauthorized toolkit you must build to function. It's not "hacking." It's survival infrastructure.

When executive dysfunction turns a simple project into an incomprehensible wall, AI breaks the work into bricks you can actually lift. Whether using specialized apps like **Grammarly** and **goblin.tools** or general powerhouses like **ChatGPT** and **Gemini**, you aren't looking for the "approved" solution that arrives next quarter. You're looking for the lifeline that exists right now.

The risk assessment: Let's be adults about this. We all know that you should never paste confidential client data or personally identifiable information (PII) into a public web tool. If you can manage to redact or anonymize it, however, you carve out a grey area in a black-and-white world. Breaking down a personal to-do list or checking an email's tone is probably safe. Unfortunately, perfect **security and perfect accessibility** rarely coexist. You have to weigh that tradeoff while fighting for your survival.

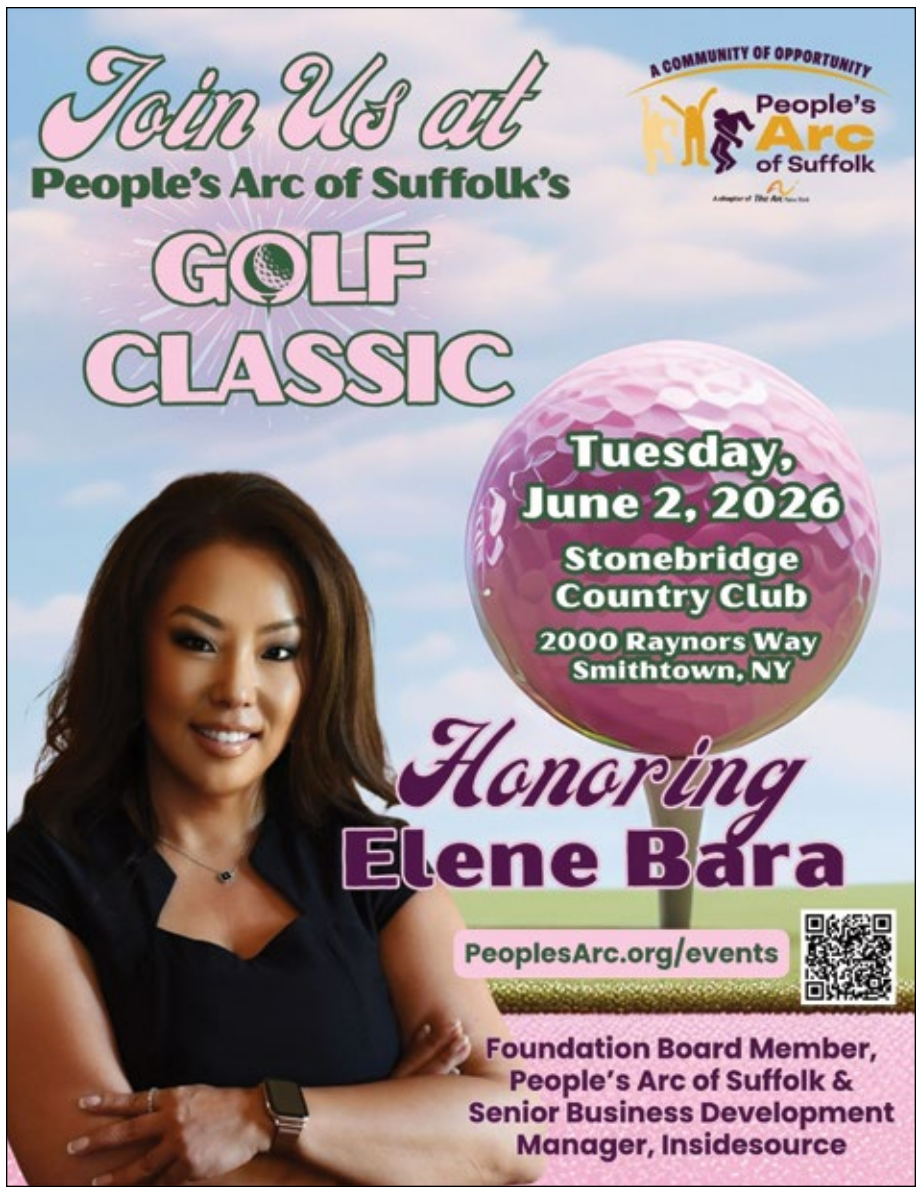
The world isn't slowing down. It's not going to pause while you justify, quantify, and certify your accommodation to HR.

You have to be your own accessibility coordinator, IT department, and compliance officer.

So here is the permission you didn't ask for but probably need. This isn't about cheating. It's about ensuring that when everyone else crosses the finish line, you're still in the race.

Use the tools. Keep your job. Fight the bigger battles when you're not drowning.

*Kevin Webster is a neurodivergent business intelligence professional and independent researcher focusing on the practical intersection of artificial intelligence, human rights, and corporate logistics. His website is https://kevinwebster.my.canva.site/.*



## Civics Leagues Conversation

# Mental Health Equity Must Include People with Disabilities

By Marcus Johnson, Disability Activist, Co-leader Civics League for Disability Rights

Marcus Johnson

Mental Health Awareness Month invites us to talk openly about wellbeing. But for many people with disabilities, the deeper issue is not awareness. It is access to a system that was never fully designed to support their mental health needs.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Across New York State, public buildings glow green and campaigns encourage conversations about mental health.

Awareness matters. But awareness alone does not fix systems.

For people with disabilities across New York and the United States, mental health care remains one of the most overlooked gaps in an already fragmented health system. The public conversation frequently centers on visibility and stigma, while the structural barriers that prevent people from receiving care remain largely unchanged.

I know this not only as an advocate, but as a clinician.

I am a Black African American man who has practiced in the mental health field for more than two decades. During those years I have witnessed remarkable resilience from individuals navigating disability and mental health challenges. I have also seen how frequently the systems meant to support them fall short of meeting even the most basic needs.

The data confirms what many of us experience every day.

More than 61 million Americans live with a disability, representing roughly one in four adults in the United States. In New York alone, nearly 3 million residents live with some form of disability, while millions more experience mental health challenges each year.

Yet the intersection of disability and mental health remains one of the least addressed gaps in our healthcare system.

Adults with disabilities report frequent mental distress nearly five times more often than adults without disabilities. Roughly one-third of adults with disabilities report frequent mental distress, compared with about 7 percent of adults without disabilities.

As both a clinician and an advocate, I believe quantitative data must be part of how we confront inequities faced by people with disabilities.

But data alone does not change systems.

The lived experiences of people with disabilities — the stories of navigating inaccessible clinics, fragmented care, and stigma — are the qualitative evidence that gives those numbers meaning. Those narratives anchor the urgency for policy reform and help ensure that policy solutions reflect the real lives of the communities they are meant to serve.

The problem begins with access.

Despite decades of disability rights progress, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, people with disabilities continue to encounter significant barriers when seeking mental health care.

Even when services are available, they are rarely designed with disability in mind.

Across the country, and here in New York, there is a severe shortage of mental health providers trained to work with individuals who have physical disabilities, intellectual or developmental disabilities, or complex medical conditions.

Another challenge lies in the fragmentation of our health systems.

Physical health services, disability support programs, and behavioral health systems frequently operate in separate silos. The result is a model of care where individuals must coordinate their own treatment across multiple systems, often without the resources or support to do so.

Yet mental health and physical health cannot be separated.

People with disabilities experience higher rates of trauma, chronic pain, abuse, and social isolation. Each of these factors is strongly associated with anxiety, depression, and psychological distress.

When resources are scarce, physical survival often takes priority over mental health treatment. Medication, therapy, and supportive services become luxuries rather than necessities.

As a result, many people with disabilities rely heavily on public programs for care.

People with disabilities frequently encounter a double stigma. They face discrimination related both to disability and to mental health conditions. In healthcare settings this can translate into dehumanizing attitudes, where individuals are seen as problems to be managed rather than people deserving dignity and comprehensive care.

As a mental health practitioner, I have watched how these attitudes discourage individuals from seeking help.

When someone already navigating structural barriers is made to feel invisible, misunderstood, or dismissed by the very systems meant to support them, the message becomes painfully clear. Their mental health is not treated as a priority.

But it must be.

Mental health care for people with disabilities cannot remain an afterthought in policy discussions. It must be integrated into the core design of healthcare systems.

That means investing in disability-competent behavioral health training for clinicians.

It means designing healthcare environments that are physically and digitally accessible.

It means integrating mental health care into disability support services rather than treating them as separate systems.

And it means recognizing that mental wellness is not optional. It is foundational to full participation in community life.

Until people with disabilities can access mental health care with dignity, expertise, and equity, awareness will remain only the beginning.

*Marcus D. Johnson, CRC-CVE, LMHC, is a disability rights activist, certified rehabilitation counselor, and mental health practitioner with more than two decades of experience. He serves as Manager of Advocacy Programs and Initiatives at Independence Care System and co-leads the Civics League for Disability Rights, where he works to advance disability-competent healthcare policy and systemic reform for people with physical disabilities.*

**May is Mental Health Awareness Month**

# Legal Lens

## A Best Friend, Lifelong Lessons, and a Privilege

By James Weisman, Esq.

James Weisman, Esq.

I write on my 75th birthday.

In June 1967 I volunteered for the summer at Human Resources Center Day Camp, now The Viscardi Center, as a lifeguard/camp counselor. I do not have a disability. I met people with disabilities my own age. As we aged, we became not just summer acquaintances, but lifelong friends, colleagues, and supporters.

That summer I was sixteen. I met Paul Hearne, who was seventeen, had osteogenesis imperfecta (also known as brittle bone disease) and was the amateur radio counselor. Paul was funny, hadn't gone to school until he was thirteen years old— graduating from Henry Viscardi School, was very interested in girls and had a driver's license. We stayed friendly through high school, college and law school and, with a little help from Sen. Jacob Javits and Congressman Mario Biaggi, opened an accessible legal services corporation poverty law office in Manhattan.

The three summers I spent at the camp on Long Island made me into a disability rights lawyer and directed the rest of my life. Dr. Henry Viscardi, Jr.'s influence on me (he was my father-in-law for years) and his influence on thousands of others is so profound and so broad it cannot be estimated. When I was a teenager I understood only part of his message though—that people with disabilities can do a day's work for a day's pay. I witnessed it every day. But it was really Paul, not Hank (as Dr. Viscardi was known by those close to him), who taught me the most about people with disabilities, perhaps because we were contemporaries.

It was Paul who pointed out how the majority of the disabled kids he went to high school with were not working because they needed Medicaid and had to be poor to get it. It was traveling with Paul that showed me that without accessible transit New Yorkers were destined to remain poor forever; that people with disabilities want everything that people without disabilities want but always must settle for less and that their families want everything for them too, and most importantly that the capacity to love and be loved is undiminished by diagnoses. It was Paul who taught me that there was humor in everything, including disability. I learned a lot about needs, and a lot about needed rights, from Paul.

Once, Paul, who used a wheelchair, told me he could get an operation, or a series of them, and, after the insertion of rods in his back and legs, he might be able to walk. I said, ''Hey, that's great.'' He dismissed the idea and when I seemed surprised, he said, ''Do you think everyone with a disability wants to be just like you? You've got a lot to learn. Today, when I roll into your office I shake your hand, we sit across the desk and my disability disappears as we discuss who's a jerk and who's not.'' He might not have said ''jerk,'' exactly. ''If I could walk, I'd always be small, use crutches, and be slow. It's not who I choose to be.''

I was involved in the efforts to make transit accessible because I was a counselor at a camp. I was involved in drafting the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) because of my teenage summer job. I've met presidents and worked with governors, elected officials and industry leaders on rights and access issues because I had my Senior Life Saving certificate and volunteered. I've been all over the world discussing ADA, appointed by Bill Clinton to the U.S. Access Board, and have had the pleasure of working with and for the most noble and tenacious advocates and community members.

After carrying Paul and/or his chair up or down stairs countless numbers of times I knew firsthand that the inaccessibility of the built environment was so overwhelming that it would take generations to overcome, but that it was necessary if people with disabilities and aging baby boomers were to be active community members. After being told one too many times, ''Don't put him there,'' as Paul propelled his chair into a restaurant, I knew attitudes as well as the built environment needed to change and that the law could be used to accomplish both.

Paul died at 48 years old. We worked together to found the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) and on getting the ADA passed. When we were young lawyers he said, ''You take transportation, I'll take employment.'' And we did.

I remember that Hank once said that the scene in the movie ''The Best Years of Our Lives,'' in which World War II veteran Harold Russell reluctantly reveals his artificial limbs and stumps to the girl he came home to, did as much for people with disabilities in one scene as legislation and litigation ever could. The lovers embraced and disability was understood by millions around the globe.

It has been my privilege to have been involved in this movement all these years.

Opinions expressed are solely those of the writer(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of *Able News* at The Viscardi Center and/or The Viscardi Center. Submissions should be on topics affecting the disability community, maximum 600 words, and must include the writer's name and phone number for verification. *Able News* reserves the right to edit for grammar, length, and factual accuracy. *Able News* cannot respond to all submissions and publication of submissions is not guaranteed. To submit an op-ed for consideration, please email a full draft to ablenews@viscardicenter.org.

# Classified Ads


### REPAIRS

**Smithy's**
Stair lift and wheelchair repairs.
516-406-5937

### HAIRCUTTING

**Haircutting**
Haircutting in your home.
917-363-6834

### APARTMENT

**STUDIO APARTMENT AVAILABLE IN THE BRONX**
Disability set-aside unit for an individual with a hearing or visual impairment.
Please contact 212-665-5500 ext.104

# Real World Training

## A Sip and a Smile and Training for the Future

By Joie Tyrrell

It's hard not to be happy at the Sip & Smile Café.

The staff is always smiling. The customers are too. And the coffee and cookies provide a nice break during a busy day.

The café hosted at The Viscardi Center and staffed by students from Roosevelt Middle School offers a way to experience real-world vocational training in a supportive environment, focusing on building independence, responsibility, communication skills, and confidence while preparing students for future employment opportunities, said Jenny Portuallo, Youth Transition Services Vocational Instructor.

In the Youth Transition Services program, what started out as a simple idea has evolved into something much more meaningful. Last year, the program launched its first café, the Sunshine Café. This year, it rebranded as the Sip & Smile Café. Most participants now come from Roosevelt Middle School, while a small number of older transition students from the program join them.

Behind the scenes, preparation for the café begins the afternoon before. By the time students arrive, everything is ready for them to step into their roles, Portuallo said. They are assigned specific responsibilities and coached through each task. Each student manages a station—greeting customers, serving items, or maintaining the space—while learning how to interact appropriately with guests. At the same time, a staff member works alongside an older student to practice handling money, helping build another essential skill.

"The goal of the Sip & Smile Café is to give students meaningful, hands-on work experiences that build confidence, independence, and real-life job skills," Portuallo said.

When the café opens, it becomes more than just a place to grab a snack. Customers can sit, relax, and enjoy beverages and treats, while students gain hands-on experience. They clean tables, set up, sweep, and restock items, all while building confidence in their abilities.

Although the Sip & Smile Café operates once a month, the experience doesn't stop there. Each week, students run the Sip & Smile Coffee Cart throughout the building, serving coffee, fresh baked goods like brownies and cookies, and prepackaged snacks. During the holidays, a Holiday Enterprise Cart adds a seasonal touch, offering special treats and merchandise.

Students sell baked goods and coffee at the Sip & Smile Cafe. Photo credit: Theresa Schaefer.

"It's been incredibly rewarding to see how proud the students are of their work," Portuallo said. "They are highly engaged, motivated, and truly enjoy interacting with customers. Watching them grow in their communication skills and take ownership of their roles has been an amazing experience."

### Youth Transition Services at The Viscardi Center

Our programs provide individualized and customized supports aligned with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals of students ages 14–22 with a variety of disabilities and focus on building workplace readiness, independence, and practical life skills through hands-on learning and real-world exposure.

**Services can be provided on-site or district-based:**

- Internships and community work experiences
- Travel training to build independence in navigating public transportation
- Culinary and horticultural skills training
- Practical Assessment and Exploration System (PAES) Lab
- Hands-on learning in our fully accessible Independent Living House
- Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)
- Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) programming
- Job coaching and post-secondary vocational pathways

**For more information, contact: Barry Tussman at btussman@viscardicenter.org or 516-465-1529.**

# A New Accessible Electric Vehicle Could Redefine NYC Taxis and Rideshares

By Christopher Alvarez

Buckle up and click it, because the integrated tiedown rear retractors and occupant restraints are the most talked-about features of the new PV5 E_WAV, which is looking to make its way into New York City's taxi and rideshare business.

In early April, *Able News* was invited to an on-site briefing of the unveiling of a BraunAbility concept vehicle, in collaboration with KIA, that reimagines New York City taxis and rideshare transportation as an ADA-compliant electric, purpose-built vehicle designed around riders, wheelchair users, drivers, and the city, at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center's annual New York Auto Show.

Seat and shoulder belts on the PV5 are synced to a monitor that alerts both passenger and driver when a wheelchair user is fully strapped in, supporting a quicker and more consistent securement process.

Designed with extra space in mind, an 88 x 34-inch lightweight wheelchair ramp that folds out from the rear of the vehicle's 56-inch-tall roof makes for a spacious cabin. A green laser beam light that is also visible at night helps guide wheelchair drivers onto a straighter, more controlled path to the rear end of the vehicle, with ultrasonic sensors providing audible feedback for optimal positioning. The interior features a two-row, five-passenger layout with a second-row bench seat.

''This solves two problems for the city: It increases accessibility and it's electric. So, it's a game changer for the city,'' said BraunAbility Senior National Account Manager Jake Craig, who gave Able News a sneak peek inside the next potential taxi vehicle for New York City.

''I look forward to leading a TLC that proactively protects its drivers, improves safety and accessibility for passengers, and works in harmony with the larger transportation ecosystem to ensure that the mobility needs of all our communities are equitably met,'' said the newly appointed Chair and Commissioner of the Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC) Midori Valdivia in a press release that confirmed her nomination in late March.

During her initial stint at TLC, Valdivia played a vital role in building a yellow taxi, wheelchair-accessible fleet alongside a formidable disability advocacy coalition to achieve 50% accessibility.

From its initial planning stage, BraunAbility, North America's leading provider of mobility solutions for people who use wheelchairs, hopes to bring the Kia PV5's dedicated EV platform into service, enabling conversion partners to deliver optimal quality while reducing costs.

The goal is to set the price equal to the current Toyota Sienna model's $70,000 price, even with tariffs, according to BraunAbility.

Proposed legislation (Senate Bill S8113) aims to establish a state tax credit of $7,500 for new and $4,000 for used EVs.

A week before the Auto Show, members from the disabled community and different city agency departments were invited for a free testing of the vehicle. Building on ''phenomenal'' feedback gathered from wheelchair users and mobility advocates, Kia and BraunAbility reps understand that the car still needs some accommodations to be right for the market and are willing to implement real-world evaluation inputs, such as accessible car hearing loop systems via Bluetooth and Braille, by 2028.

Other feedback and concerns from the disabled community that they will need to address are the installations of flip-down jump seats in the back for non-wheelchair users and personal care assistants to ride with their patients who are critically in need and lowering the height of the cab's seats for users who use walkers or crutches.

''We're trying to do everything in accessibility'' to convince TLC, fleet operators and New York State to bring this all-electric, wheelchair-accessible vehicle (E_WAV) to one of the most significant taxi and rideshare markets in the world, Craig said.

TLC implemented the Green Rides Initiative in 2023, mandating that all high-volume For Hire Vehicles (FHV) trips be in either zero-emission electric vehicles (EVs) or WAVs by 2030. However, only 7% of the fleet are wheelchair accessible vehicles, creating disparities in waiting times and vehicle availability for New Yorkers with disabilities and leaving them out of the benefits of the transition to more efficient, safer, and less polluting transportation, according to a recent report from New York Lawyers for the Public Interest.

A current effort by state and local government officials are calling on Gov. Kathy Hochul to pass A.6635A / S.5552A, which would implement a surcharge as a means of financing and increasing the number of accessible vehicles in the Uber and Lyft fleets, while also mandating that all vehicle models for new taxis and FHVs be both accessible and zero-emissions.

That would mean taking over 103,000 vehicles currently in the system out of service and replacing them with cars accommodating this condition in four years, a move that people with disabilities are concerned about.

Jean Ryan, president of New York-based disability activist group Disabled In Action, said, ''we care about the climate but removing and replacing all vehicles to be electric by that timeline, there's no way,'' she said. ''The system is already discriminating and this will only limit our transport methods even more.''

Another community member asked to trial run the cab, loved this new model that demonstrates how accessibility and sustainability can coexist, moving electric transportation options forward, while keeping accessibility at the center of innovation, but also noted that fully electric vehicles are not safe, ''it's placing a disabled person tied-up in a blender without control,'' Julia Yepez said.

''If they're gonna get to a hundred percent, that means a lot of vehicles have to be retired and then replaced,'' Craig told *Able News*. ''It's a big challenge. That's a lot of vehicles in four years. So I, I don't know if it's a realistic goal, but you have to have a goal, right?''

A TLC spokesperson told *Able News* in an emailed statement that it is too soon to speculate when the Kia EV_WAV model will be brought into market, but incoming leadership looks forward to examining universal design standards to increase accessible options.

The vehicle's rear wheelchair ramp. Photo credit: Christopher Alvarez.

When asked by City Council if she fully supported the mandate for all EVs to be accessible in mid-March, TLC Commissioner Valdivia said, ''accessibility should be the center, but an EV vehicle that's a wheelchair accessible vehicle in today's market is very expensive. So, that's going to be top of mind for me,'' she said. ''I do value the disability community and I mean it when I say I want everybody to be able to access our trips regardless of ability or zip code.''

Lastly, the PV5-KIA taxi car aims to reduce street hail discrimination through its built-in technology. The seat belt monitor that notifies the wheelchair is secured, helps tell accessible dispatchers when drivers are picking up wheelchair rides, allowing them to get paid correctly and decreasing the number of drivers who drive by.

''I learned about the high prices of wheelchair-accessible vehicles. So I know how that can be a burden to our small businesses, to drivers. And so maybe this is something where we really have to start thinking about: 'What does the public, what does government need to do to think about closing this gap?''' Commissioner Valdivia said regarding the yellow cab fleet ignoring wheelchair-accessible street hails. ''I've actually been really interested in improving vendor pools for transportation agencies, in particular the MTA. Service really matters. It's not just about whether the cars are on the road.''

# Don't Risk Your Medicaid Benefits

## Renew Today on ACCESS HRA

nyc.gov/accesshra

**If you receive a renewal notice, you must respond! Renew on the ACCESS HRA app.**

ACCESS HRA | NYC Department of Social Services

GET IT ON Google Play

Download on the App Store

# Conversations with *Able News*

## Meet Joseph Pancari—A CEO with a Lifetime of Advocacy

By Katherine Magnoli

Joseph M. Pancari, President & CEO of CP Unlimited. Photo courtesy: CP Unlimited.

Joseph Pancari is an accomplished advocate for people with disabilities. As President & CEO of Constructive Partnerships Unlimited (CP Unlimited), he works hard to ensure that people with disabilities not only receive services that provide accessibility but also promote equity in all aspects of life.

Throughout his thirty-seven-year career, he has worked with several organizations and found his home at CP Unlimited where he has served as President & CEO since 2022, after joining the Agency in 2007.

**Q: Can you share a little bit about your background and what inspired you to become an advocate?**

A: Well, I started out in college working towards a Bachelors of Arts degree in Psychology. When I realized that there wasn't much out there for someone who had obtained a BA in psychology, a friend of mine suggested that I look into working as a direct care staff member at a group home. Instantly, I knew my friend was right when he said that it was fulfilling work because I instantly fell in love with it. I felt like I was really making a difference when I would help people who were living with severe communication issues, mental health issues, and those who were living with autism manage the obstacles they faced.

Now, thirty-seven years later, here I am as the CEO of CP Unlimited. An agency that started, 80 years ago, by families of loved ones with CP because back then there weren't a lot of services offered to those living with disabilities. Over the last 80 years, we have served people with disabilities throughout the entire state of New York. This began as just advocating but in the late 1970s/early 1980s, after a Staten Island institution was exposed and shut down for its inhumane treatment—we broke into two sectors and began delivering direct services such as transportation.

**Q: What words of encouragement would you give to those of us living with a disability who may feel discouraged? What advice would you give them to begin advocating for themselves?**

A: First off, I would say 'Never give up hope!' Hope is a driving force for all of us, regardless of our abilities. I think the best way to start is to find what it is that you are passionate about and find communities that share that same interest.

Here at CP Unlimited, we meet with decision-makers on both a local and state level to ensure that services stay intact and to show that we are providing for those that take part in the services we provide.

**Q: Recently there has been talk of nine states looking into reversing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, a federal law that ensures equitable treatment in all areas including: education, healthcare, and jobs. What are you and the other members of CP Unlimited doing to ensure that this does not happen?**

A: Well, luckily, we are in New York State, and we have a strong advocacy group that will fight against going backwards into institutional living. We have made tremendous strides to ensure that our participants have full access into their communities. We do this by meeting with advocates, taking trips to Albany, and attending rallies.

**Q: Does CP Unlimited only serve people within New York or is it a national organization that has several chapters?**

A: One of the reasons for our name change in 2019, when we dropped the New York State portion, is we have been in discussion with a group in Ohio who believe that we can truly make a difference and help strengthen the services needed for people with disabilities within their state. We have also put in an application to help those living with cognitive and developmental disabilities in the state of Connecticut.

**Q: That is beautiful, it truly is about teamwork that can make a difference. Now, with that said, is there a specific area of Section 504 that those of you at CP Unlimited are fighting for the most?**

A: There is a law that we have been working on, for a few years now, that will help people with disabilities travel with dignity. This first came about when several of our participants faced obstacles when wanting to attend a rally in Albany. Two of the obstacles that stood out the most were those concerning people who use large wheelchairs and adults who were in need of privacy during times of taking care of their personal needs. Such as, tending to themselves or getting assisted in the bathroom. This prompted us to look into what several states already have which is an adult changing station in local bathrooms. It is really a low-cost addition to any existing public space.

**Q: What advice would you give to a person who is not such a seasoned advocate as yourself but would like to go out and start advocating for themselves or in their community?**

A: There are many groups out there that you can join that are able to understand issues on a deeper level. Each of our boroughs has a DD Council that serves people with Developmental Disabilities. There's also national advocacy organizations joining with others. So, go out and advocate for yourself, understand what the issues that you are fighting for are, and make sure your voice is heard! So, once you take those steps then go out and ''Advocate, Advocate, Advocate!''

We're proud to share news for, by, and about people with disabilities. As a registered digital reader, you'll receive *Able News* in your inbox each month. **Sign Up Today!**