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## **THE PFAL INTEL**

All the news that's fit to email!

September, '25



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From the desk of Jennifer Harrison - Director, PFAL

I hate a goodbye but, boy, do I love a hello...

So, hello to the PFAL community! I am so happy to have joined this amazing program. For those who worked with Jerisa Maseko in the past, you know how entirely invested she was in helping kids and their families cross the bridge to adulthood. You must also have figured out that the baton she handed me is quite heavy. But the good kind of heavy – substantial, inspiring, and full of responsibility.

I want to invite you all to use my always-open door for questions, comments, requests, ideas, and maybe even just your own “hello.” Because we are all here for the same thing: tackling transitions with all the information and optimism they require and deserve. And speaking of optimism...

Few things can make the future look as bright as an **election**, full of promise and potential. Newly-minted adults (like many in our PFAL community) are able to vote in New Jersey's gubernatorial election on November 4. Now is a great time to talk to your loved one about voting – the How, the Where, and the Who's Best for You!

Some things to talk about:

- What is voting?

Voting is when people decide who they want to be the leader in their community. The person who has the most votes, wins the election. People who are age 18 or older are allowed to vote, but first they must sign up to be included, or register, which you can do here: [Voter Registration | NJ DOS - Division of Elections](#) (you will need either a current and valid driver's license or a non-driver ID card issued by the NJ MVC and a social security number). You can also sign up for vote-by-mail ballots (deadline is October 28).

- What does a governor do?

A governor is the main leader of the state. They decide on laws and make sure those laws are followed. They also decide how to spend the state's money.

- Why do we vote?

Voting is a way to make your opinion heard and change things that may need changing. It is our right, so let's do it!

- How do we know where to go to vote?

Each county sends sample ballots to homes which tells them where to go. You can also go to [NJ DOS - Division of Elections - Polling Place Search](#) and enter your address to find out!

- Who should I vote for?

It depends on what you need, what you want, and what you value. Candidates let us know what they think about issues like how much money we will pay to keep the state running, for our schools, for healthcare, and for our trains and buses. Doing an internet search of the candidates is a great way to learn and talk about what matters to you.

- How does voting work?

If you want to vote by mail, you can request the application at [NJ DOS - Division of Elections - Vote-By-Mail](#), complete it, and return it to your county clerk. Once you receive your

ballot, fill it out and either mail it in, return it to your County Board of Elections Office, or drop it in one of the secure ballot drop boxes, locations found here: [NJ DOS - Division of Elections - Secure Ballot Drop Box Locations](#).

For in person voting, you will go to your polling place on November 4 between the hours of 6:00am and 8:00pm. You will tell the poll worker your name and address, then sign your name on a piece of paper. They will then have you step into an area behind a curtain to cast your vote on the voting machine. Find out how they work here: [How Do Voting](#)

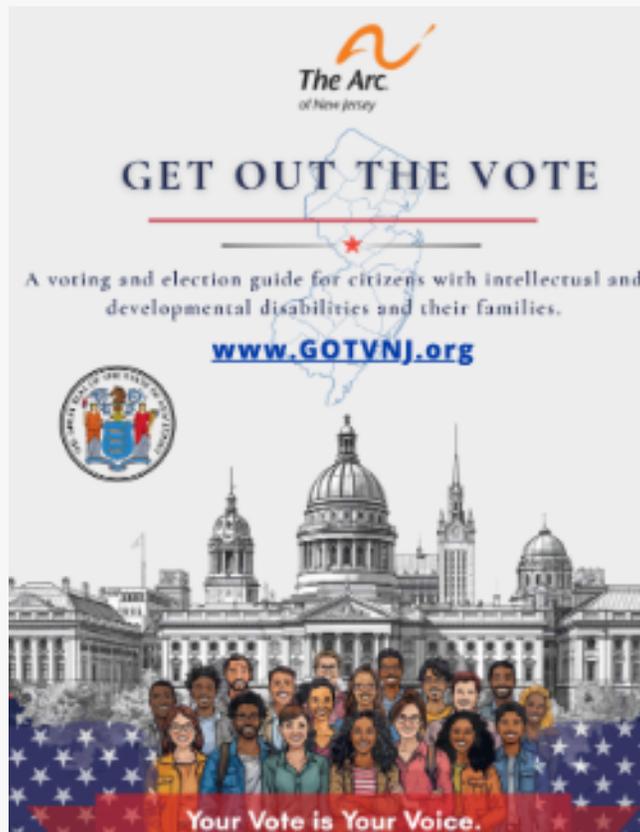
[Machines Work? | Simple Civics](#). No one should ask you who you voted for, and no one is allowed to tell you who you have to vote for - it's your private decision.

When you're done, you can be proud that you've made a difference in your community!

## Jen

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Click on the image below to learn more about voting and elections for people with developmental disabilities and their families!



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We want to hear from you!  
Take our [TRANSITION PLANNING SURVEY](#) from The Arc of NJ's Children's Advocacy Program to make your voice heard!



## And now a bit about...

### IDD in the Arts!

This month's blog:

#### **Echo, Narcissus, and the Importance of Being Seen**

by Jennifer Harrison

Although the stories that have overtaken my brain lately revolve around Real Housewives and their big, big Birkins, I've recently begun to reflect on a story from slightly less modern times.

Say, circa 3000-ish BCE.

It's the one about Narcissus - that guy whose name is often invoked around egomaniacs - and his spurned suitor, Echo. Echo was an ancient Greek nymph whose speech had been stolen, cursed to only repeat words that were spoken to her ("HELLOOOO!" "helloooo...helloooo...") and Narcissus was, in short, a local hottie. And Echo fell in love with Narcissus as Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a pond and that is how the two were doomed to remain: He, who only had eyes for himself, and She, who only had eyes for him.

What that story has made me think about is that the Sweet Spot, so to speak, exists somewhere in the in-between; surely we should not become so bewitched by our own fabulousness but we also should not allow ourselves to become, well, invisible.

And, like most everything has since joining PFAL, this led me to thinking about people with disabilities. How they are so often denied the opportunity to see themselves in the media. How they are so often rendered incidental.

This year's Emmy awards on September 14, however, marked a change with two winning works that highlight the experiences of people with disabilities: "Love on the Spectrum" (Outstanding Unstructured Reality Program) and "Patrice: the Movie"(Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking). The commercial and critical success of these media darlings is helping bring awareness and visibility to our friends and loved ones who deserve to know that they are here and they are seen and their experiences are important.

And why do we want them to know that?

Because no one wants to end up like Echo nor Narcissus.

University of Pennsylvania scholars Gerbner and Gross noted that "positive and nuanced representations of historically marginalized groups in the media can be particularly powerful for those whose stories have either not been told at all, or not been told well." Conversely, they continued, "*not* seeing ourselves well-represented in the media has been likened to a kind of 'symbolic annihilation.'" Even back in the 1970's it was apparent that the media can move mountains, both out in the world and within our own self-identity. And today's experts agree that authentic portrayals on TV and in film can be pivotal in leveling stereotypes and stigma.

However...

We mustn't overlook the key word in these specialists' assertions: "authentic." Because true, realistic representation can make the difference between a character who moves our collective mission forward and one that sets it back to before ancient Greece. Authentic representation brings about empowerment, educates its audience, shows diversity, promotes inclusivity, and can even bring about social change; irresponsible depictions can be insulting and harmful.

So how do we toe the line?

## **WRITE WORTHWHILE CHARACTERS**

Most characters with disabilities in the media are oversimplified or misrepresented. Ryan Murphy's penchant for portraying people with Down syndrome as oversexed and underprincipled veers from the stereotype (good!), but instead exploits, if not downright mocks (hardly good). Meanwhile, other creators feature glamorized representations - perpetually happy, impossibly inspirational, and, ultimately, one-dimensional. People with disabilities are offered as Villain or Hero, their disability hamartia or superpower.

Authentic characters - ones with depth and flaws and humanity - help to normalize disabilities, to challenge stereotypes and public perception, and promote social inclusion. And we need more of them. The Geena Davis Institute, in collaboration with the Ruderman Family Foundation, concluded a recent study with calls for

shows to show that Disability in no way equals Difference, highlight the realities of living with disabilities, and present a diverse, intersectional community in which people with disabilities are members of different races, ethnicities, genders, and sexuality. Because, let's face it, they are.

To wit: the character Corky Thatcher on "Life Goes On" was groundbreaking not just for his status as the first primetime main character with Down syndrome, but for his humanity, his complexity, his utter teenagerness. Corky reckoned with crushes, homework, and chicken pox. He babysat and fought with his sisters. Corky later got married (while actor Chris Burke was featured in Forbes and Us magazines).

Just another day in the life of someone extraordinarily ordinary...

## **CAST CONSCIOUSLY**

Hollywood (and Broadway!) have often come under fire for inauthentic casting, shoe-horning non-disabled actors into roles of people with disabilities. These practices often lead to "disabled mimicry" (the physical and vocal representation of disabled roles) which can be inaccurate and/or offensive.

The custom also deprives actors with disabilities of roles that they can perfectly portray without relying on guesswork or caricature. "Atypical" star Keir Gilchrist is a neurotypical actor depicting a character with autism; "HERO Elementary" features a main character with autism although there is no evidence that the actor who voices him shares the disability. Daniel Day Lewis in "My Left Foot," Tom Hanks in "Forrest Gump," and Sean Penn in "I Am Sam" all gave it the old college try but some would argue it would have been better to cast people with true disabilities. Celebrated actors like Marlee Matlin, Rick Glassman, RJ Mitte, and Bella Ramsey have enjoyed brilliant careers with disabilities, and there are countless more who have yet to be given the opportunity.

## **THE STORY'S THE THING**

IDD doesn't make characters, it rounds them out. So IDD shouldn't be its own storyline.

People with disabilities have rich, active lives - they have loved ones, they have dreams, they have struggles with some things and ease with other things just like everyone else. We need to bring this nuance to the screen, both so the viewing public can understand this truth and so people with disabilities can see themselves reflected in their stories. So, just like a tall character has a life outside of his tallness and bald characters don't have to harp on their paucity of hair (episode after episode after episode...), characters with IDD can explore love and loss and failure and success like characters throughout history have been allowed to do.

Hollywood needs to stop miscasting, misinterpreting, and outright ignoring characters who don't conform to the Television Norm. And when authentic representation becomes standard, we will see a lot more neurodiverse shows taking home that golden statuette.



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## UPCOMING WEBINARS:

### **PLANNING FOR ADULT LIFE:** October 15, 7pm

"Transitioning to Adulthood for Students with Special Needs: Guardianship, Special Needs Planning, and the DDD Application Process," with Andrew Meltzer, Esq., special education attorney from Sussan, Greenwald & Wesler.

This webinar will give a brief but thorough overview of each of these important topics for bridging the gap between childhood and adulthood.

[Click here to register](#)

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### **THE FAMILY INSTITUTE:** October 16, 6:30pm

"Beyond Group Homes: Creative Options & Residential Supports - Learn options for securing and funding residential services"

One of the most common concerns of parents is, "where will my child live when I'm gone?" Increasingly, families are looking beyond traditional group homes and supervised apartments for innovative housing supports for their loved ones with developmental disabilities. Attendees will learn about options for funding residential services, how to safeguard services for a son or daughter and how to avoid common

pitfalls in working with state agencies to obtain effective out-of-home residential services.

[Click here to register](#)

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**THE FAMILY INSTITUTE:** October 30, 12pm

"Community Safety and Prevention of Elopement for Children and Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities"

It is essential for everyone, including individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, to understand and practice community safety skills. Adhering to common safety rules and practices is vital for preventing unnecessary harm. This webinar will cover potential unsafe situations and provide strategies for community safety, injury prevention, and obtaining help when needed.

Attendees will learn about various topics, including pedestrian and passenger safety, water safety, as well as prevention and response strategies for individuals who may have eloped or wandered. Additionally, the webinar will address internet safety.

This webinar is hosted by The Arc of New Jersey Family Institute and presented by Adrienne Robertiello, a Special Health Care Educator at Children's Specialized Hospital.

[Click here to register](#)

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**CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY:** October 9, 6:00pm

"Dropping the Rope: Letting Go So Your Children Can Fly"

This webinar explores the importance of the "Dignity of Risk," the importance of letting our loved ones take chances even if it risks failing. We'll explore how this practice increases self-esteem, improves performance, and can strengthen your bond. We'll also discuss how to address the anxiety that accompanies risk - for both parent and child!



[Click here to register](#)

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**HEALTHCARE ADVOCACY:** October 9, 6:00pm

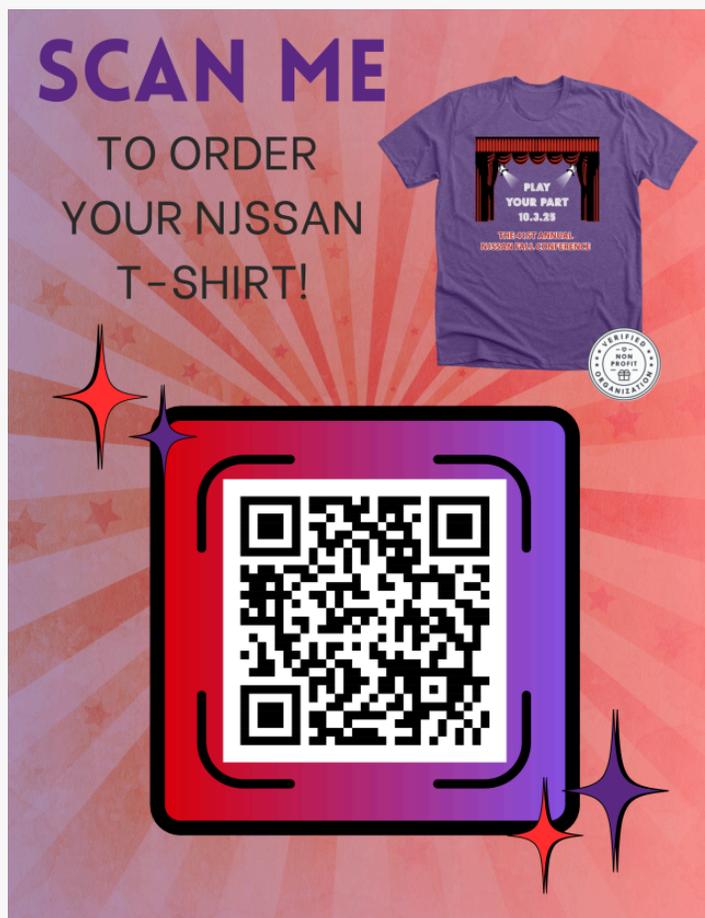
"Oral Health Care for Special Needs Populations"

This webinar will cover home care tips and helpful information regarding oral health and dental care for adults and children with disabilities. Learn about common oral health concerns, how to encourage good oral hygiene at home, and specific advice when visiting the dental office. Parents and caregivers of individuals with disabilities are highly encouraged to attend!

[Click here to register](#)

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And for the self-advocates among you, check out this offer from NJSAP...



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Thanks for reading! We'll see you next month... The Team at PFAL

How did you like this email?



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