



March, '26: the *Celebrating You!* issue

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From the desk of Jennifer Harrison - Director, Planning for Adult Life

There are so many things to celebrate this upcoming month: Spring break! Earth Day! April Fools! (Just kidding - April fools!) And great as those may be, they don't hold a rain-shower-soaked candle to World Autism Month, in which, according to [American Autism Association](#), "we focus on sharing stories and providing opportunities to increase understanding and acceptance of the autism community."

But, despite the official designation, this month doesn't have to focus solely on autism...and it doesn't have to take place just this month. Bringing all forms of IDD to light - and equity - has been our mission throughout the year, every year, for 75 years! And while there are a number of ways we all know we can show our support (like [donating to The Arc of NJ](#) to keep our programs working for people with IDD and their families), there are other ways that we may not immediately think of. Things like:

- Looking. Notice the people around us who have a disability, recognize their talents, their accomplishments, their efforts. See them working, learning, and enjoying life out in the world.
- Listening. Hear what self-advocates have to say about what they want and need. There's a saying, "Nothing about us, without us." It means, everything having to do with disabilities should be done with the input and expressed sanctions of the people it affects. There's another saying, "Nothing without us." It means, whatever people without disabilities can do, we can do, too. So, let's work on removing barriers and bringing people with disabilities into all spaces!
- Opening. Open your mind to the capabilities and contributions of people with IDD, open your doors to include them professionally and socially, open your world to the possibilities of full inclusion.

It's wonderful to designate a point in time to recognize and celebrate communities, but it's even better to embrace that practice every day!

So, in celebration of people with autism, Down syndrome, and all other types of IDD today, tomorrow, and from now on, let's dance:



Summer swimming safety

According to the National Autism Association, the risk of a child with autism drowning is 160 times that of the general pediatric population, per a 2017 study from Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health.

Even for adults, the leading cause of death among people with autism who wander is drowning.

Before this summer opens up pools and draws us to the beach, plan for water safety for your loved one. It will not only put your mind at ease and your child in a more secure place, but can open up their world to fun in the waves!

[Click here or the image to the left to view the NAA Swimming Lessons Guide](#)



Disability EmpowHER Network Art Contest

In honor of Women's History Month and International Women's Day, we are so excited to share that we are now accepting artist submissions for Disabled Women Make History (and Art), an art show hosted by DEN and the Toledo Museum of Art celebrating disabled women!

We invite women with disabilities to submit their art for consideration to be displayed as part of this unique event. We will select a total of 30 artists for the in-person event, with the possibility of selecting additional artists for a virtual component of the show. Artists selected will be invited to display their work at this event and receive admission to two exclusive workshops to enhance their skills in marketing themselves and their artwork.

The opening reception for this show will be on June 20, 2026, and the show will remain on display through July 31, 2026 in celebration of Disability Pride Month! For more information, visit <https://www.disabilityempowhernetwork.org/dwmha>

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS:
11:59pm ET on April 19th, 2026

If you have any questions, please feel free to email event organizers, Katie Shelley and Sophie Poost, at KShelley@toledomuseum.org or sophie@disabilityempowhernetwork.org

[Click here for original Instagram post](#)



And now a bit about...
Giving ourselves something to celebrate!

THIS MONTH'S BLOG:

Showing Up is the Thing to Celebrate!
By Jennifer Harrison

Long ago, in a simpler time – a time when Dolly the Cloned Sheep emerged into the world and the Macarena was the dance on everyone’s hands, heads, and hips – sportswear uber-brand Nike launched an off-key TV ad: “You Don’t Win Silver, You Lose Gold.” The point being that the only person ever to be celebrated is the one who defeats all the others...and all the others can just go scratch. It was a very Nike-y mantra (with all due respect to the swoosh), built on a foundation of sweat and hubris and unforgiving expectation. But, while meant to encourage athletes, to push them harder to push themselves harder, the message landed very differently with the Average Joe. Because instead of inspiring others to try their best, it shamed those who fell short of first, taunted those who deigned to even attempt it. It made a mockery of the process and a threat of the dream. Nike’s marketing missed the point entirely, because the reality is this: No one ever loses *anything*, we win simply by having shown up.

This lesson resonates even more within the IDD community, where stepping out of the comfort zone can be intimidating for the individuals and, particularly, those who love them. It is tempting to succumb to worry about our children in general, but when they have a disability or difference, the concern multiplies. We want to keep them secure and shield them from harm, both physical and emotional, protecting them with whatever resources we have on hand. But even bubble wrap breaks after a while and what remains within is softer and weaker and more fragile than before we entombed it in plastic. And the flipside is ironic, as well: like damaging skin produces protective calluses, getting knocked around a little by life builds resilience. And that is what, ultimately, makes us stronger. Imagine, getting pushed down and standing up taller from it!

There’s a philosophy in these parts called “The Dignity of Risk,” which highlights all there is to gain just by allowing ourselves – and our children – just to show up, even if it's scary. The term was introduced by Robert Perske in 1972 and features these key principles:

1. **Autonomy and Choice:** Individuals have the right to make their own decisions, even if those choices carry potential dangers. This includes the ability to refuse certain types of care or engage in activities that may pose risks.
2. **Balancing Risk and Safety:** Care providers must find a balance between ensuring safety and respecting an individual's right to take reasonable risks. This involves supporting individuals in understanding the risks associated with their choices and helping them make informed decisions.
3. **Supported Decision-Making:** It is essential to assist individuals in analyzing potential risks and benefits associated with their decisions. This includes discussing options with them and involving their families or support networks in the decision-making process.
4. **Empowerment:** The dignity of risk promotes empowerment by encouraging individuals to take control of their lives and make choices that reflect their values and preferences. This approach fosters independence and enhances overall well-being.

And there is so much to gain by taking risks. We build up our Confidence Muscle, we strengthen our resilience. We relish feelings of hope and visions of crossing proverbial finish lines, the roar of the adoring crowd clattering in our brain. We don the robes of our own best friend when things don’t go our way. We learn to lick our wounds with a mighty swipe. Because there is an inherent dignity in *doing* things, whether on the slopes at the Milan-Cortina winter games or in our own backyard, taking our unique long jumps despite the threat of falling short, and laying ourselves bare in the pursuit of accomplishment.

Billion-dollar sneaker titan or not, we all need to reframe what it means to compete, whether against others or our diagnoses or the persistent, insistent voices in our heads that tell us, “You shouldn’t, you can’t, you won’t.” Because there are so many people who don’t win a gold medal in their Olympic event, but they all get to call themselves Olympians. We deserve the same.

UPCOMING WEBINARS:

PLANNING FOR ADULT LIFE: Wednesday, April 15, 7-8:00pm
"Strengths-Based Transition Planning: Honoring differences, reframing deficits"

Speak with the professionals at PFAL about traditional expectations of “success” in adulthood which often fail to consider the diverse realities of adults today. This presentation invites professionals and parents to critically examine societal expectations, challenge the one-size-fits-all narrative, and develop individualized, meaningful goals for success!

Planning for Adult Life's MEET US IN THE MIDDLE WEBINAR SERIES

The 3rd Wednesday of every month, 7pm

April 15: "Strengths-Based Transition Planning: Honoring differences, reframing deficits" Wednesday, April 15, 7-8pm

With Planning for Adult Life Transition Specialists
Rebecca Nash and Catherine Lucey-Meagher

Speak with the professionals at PFAL about traditional expectations of "success" in adulthood which often fail to consider the diverse realities of adults today. This presentation invites professionals and parents to critically examine societal expectations, challenge the one-size-fits-all narrative, and develop individualized, meaningful goals for success!



Register here!



[Click here to register](#)

CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY: Wednesday, April 15, 6-7:30pm
"From School District to Start Up: Empowering Families"

What happens when professional expertise meets personal experience? In this inspiring and practical webinar, a former LDTC and school district case manager, Kate Panfile, shares her powerful journey from working inside the system to navigating it as the mother of a child with higher needs — and ultimately building a business dedicated to supporting and empowering parents of children with autism.

Drawing from both her professional background and lived experience, she offers a unique behind-the-scenes perspective on special education, IEP advocacy, and what truly makes a difference for families. Attendees will hear one family's story and how their struggles manifested into the creation of a business whose mission is to redefine autism and to support and educate families.

Whether you're new to the autism journey or looking to strengthen your advocacy skills, this session will leave you informed, encouraged, and empowered with practical tools you can use right away.

[Click here to register](#)

HEALTHCARE ADVOCACY: Thursday, April 16, 1-2:00pm

"Oral Health for Women with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)"

Men and women are different. Their mouths are different, and the issues that affect their mouths are different. This talk will discuss the effects of hormones on the female mouth as well as other sex-based issues including body dysmorphism, bulimia, osteoporosis, autoimmune disorders and diet issues. Join Dr. Evan Spivack, DDS, to discuss problems, solutions and how to plan for maintaining oral health throughout the lifespan.

[Click here to register](#)

And join us for these **LIVE** events!

Join Planning for Adult Life for The Great College Fair

The Arc
of New Jersey



The Arc
of Monmouth

- ✓ Talk to professors and students
- ✓ Come when you want. stay as long as you like!
- ✓ Figure out which schools and programs work for YOU
- ✓ Dinner and swag
- ✓ For more information and to register. click here or scan below!



A LIVE EVENT!

Wednesday, April 22, 5:30–7:30pm

at The Arc of Monmouth

1158 Wayside Rd, Tinton Falls, NJ 07712

[Click here to register](#)

THE FAMILY INSTITUTE: Wednesday, April 29, 11:30 am-2:15 pm
"The College of New Jersey: Tour with Us (**In Person**) - Spring Information Session for CCS (Career and Community Studies Program)"

Join us to learn more about our inclusive, four year, certificate-based, college experience for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Learn about our coursework, internship and career development opportunities, campus involvement, housing options, and social activities. Hear from CCS students, staff, mentors and TCNJ Faculty.

This information session is geared towards prospective students and families.

[Click here to register](#)

[Click on the images below to learn more about these resources!](#)



Speech Therapy Plus LLC **DEADLINE**

Speed-Dating Event

for neurodivergent adults
Ages 21 - 35

REGISTER BY: April 5th

Hosted by ASHA certified and licensed Speech Language Pathologists

Make a Romantic CONNECTION

- Sunday, April 19th
- 11:00 AM - 1:30 PM
- The Front Porch
- Hawthorne, NJ

Includes 2-Drink Open Bar

Registration Required \$25 per person

DM the word "register" to @speechtherapyplus on Instagram for the link!

<https://my.chaddarup.com/c/speed-dating-for-neurodivergent-adults/118ms>

Essex County Children's Interagency Coordinating Council (CIACC)

Grandparenting on the Spectrum

A Journey From Both Sides of the Desk

Jennifer M. Kaufman, M.S.E.T., M.A.Ed.L.

OFFICIAL SITE OF THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY

Department of Human Services

Division of Developmental Disabilities

The NJ Council on Developmental Disabilities

Family Support Planning Councils

BLUE LIGHT MUSIC PROGRAM

DO YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW LOVE MUSIC?

The Blue Light Music Program is an inclusive music program for youth and adults of all skill levels and abilities hosted in professional recording studios located in Mount Holly and Blackwood NJ. Virtual Sessions for adults are also available.

create

Work with **experienced** professionals to make your own original songs and compositions. Learn about the creative workflow of the recording process in a **real studio environment**.

express

Develop your **musicality** under the guidance of our **experienced instructors**. Fun, instrumentally engaging lessons and learn music production.

empower

The Blue Light Music Program is for **all ability levels**. Lessons and activities are adapted by instructors to **accommodate the needs of each individual**, ensuring each subject is **highly engaged** in an **empowering experience**.

Ready to Get Started?

Youth & Transition Age

Sign Up for All Day Sessions

Adults

Sign Up for All Day Sessions

For more information on in-person and online enrollment, visit www.blmproject.com

In a world that looks like this every May 1...



it can be tough to get excited about the future if college is not for you.
That's why Planning for Adult Life is launching its new initiative:

Forget Decision Day, it's all about **direction day!**

This May, we invite all of you to decorate your beds with things that excite YOU about YOUR future! Going to work? Taking the bus alone?
Attending a new program or class?
We want to see and hear about it!

Send photos to: helpdesk@planningforadulthood.org and we will feature your photo in our summer newsletters.

**Be loud and proud about what you are planning for the future -
because everyone has a direction!**

[Click to send in your DIRECTION photo!](#)

Thanks for reading! We'll see you next month...



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