

matheny **matters**

Spring/Summer 2021



Art Heals

Let's Talk About Mental Health | **Introducing Matheny's New CEO** | Vaccination Is the Only Way Out



Bill Kent
President and CEO

One Matheny

In my short time so far at Matheny, I've observed many notable attributes of staff members—compassion, commitment, warmth, thoughtfulness, reliability and collegiality, among others. When COVID-19 struck, employees built upon their strong collaborative bonds with their fellow colleagues, allowing staff to respond like a family—and those bonds strengthened in the face of incredible pressures.

This coming year will be a time of healing, also a time to think about, and plan for, our future here together. I am committed to creating the best possible environment for all colleagues to do exceptional work on behalf of our clients and their families.

I think it's helpful to describe guiding principles that we can all use as we move forward: our mission is to provide exceptional care and optimal quality of life for children and adults with special needs and medically complex developmental disabilities; our vision is to be the recognized model of excellence in the field of developmental disabilities; and our core values are compassion, integrity, professionalism, and respect.

Why do we need guiding principles? Visualize Matheny like a diamond, composed of many unique facets. The brilliance of the diamond relies on all its facets being cohesive, while simultaneously each is remarkable on its own. Much like a diamond, we will excel together.

We can consistently do our best by: living by our Core Values in every interaction, every time with everyone; discussing and debating respectfully, professionally, and open-mindedly when we meet as a team, and in our one-to-one interactions; building upon each other's expertise and talents, so the combined diversity of our individual experiences results in the most positive impact; and engaging and listening to the voices of our patients, residents, students, parents, guardians, colleagues, and all persons we serve, to enable us to make the best decisions.

I look forward to working with all of you during the coming years to create an ever-better "One Matheny."

mathenymatters

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what's in the news

Meet Matheny's New CEO

New CEO Bill Kent arrives at Matheny at a critical juncture in its history as well as his own. Matheny will celebrate its 75th anniversary next year; and its new leader envisions his tenure at Matheny as the apex of his career. Add to that the warm days, the flowers and trees blossoming, residents out and about, and visitors returning to Matheny's campus after a very hard year battling COVID-19. The healing process has begun; and the new CEO plans to be an integral part of that process.

Just take a quick glance at Kent's CV and you'll realize that he enjoys taking on big projects and relishes new challenges. Leading people and projects is clearly one of his major strengths. Matheny's new leader recognizes the hard work and huge collaborative effort that got Matheny through the COVID-19 crisis; and knowing that makes Kent feel very optimistic about Matheny's future and his own.

Working with groups to define, and reach, goals is certainly a forte of the new chief, who resides in neighboring Pennsylvania but has strong family ties to New Jersey. Kent was born on Long Island and partly raised in Middleton, Ohio, the steel town profiled in Hillbilly Elegy, which he describes as "a vibrant and generous community that was still thriving when I grew up there."

When he was 5, his parents "picked up their four kids and moved from Long Island to Ohio." His father was a corporate attorney, his mother a teacher. Both were "very generous people, active in volunteer activities—Boy Scouts, the local symphony orchestra, hospital charities," and were clearly models for their son during his growing up.

"I was an Eagle Scout," he says, "and I have always loved animals." Snakes, lizards, wild rabbits, dogs, cats, and more found their way into his heart and his family's home. In middle school, he discovered that he could draw well—and concentrated on drawing animals, and also landscapes. When he left home to matriculate at Wittenberg University

in Ohio as a biology major, he already understood "the importance of personal integrity," as well as his own "need, and desire, to work on behalf of others to make their lives better."

After graduation, Kent moved to Cleveland where he worked in a microbiology lab at Case Western University, participating in research on aging in skin

cells. Those two years "were very clarifying." He switched his intended career focus from practicing medicine to hospital administration, and applied to a two-year graduate program at Washington University. "It was a huge personal and professional leap for me," he remembers.

His leaps continued. After those "extraordinary two years," in which he did "a lot of growing up," he was accepted for a two-year administrative fellowship at Massachusetts General in Boston, one of Harvard's teaching hospitals. This marked "one of the most accelerated times in my professional and personal growth," he says. "It was wonderful."

His primary takeaway from the fellowship, and one that he has never forgotten, is: "The reason I exist [professionally] is to create an environment for caregivers to give compassionate, safe, extraordinary care. My job is to create the environment for others to do amazing things."

When he completed his fellowship in the late 1980s, the economy was difficult and there were not a lot of jobs in Boston.

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On the cover:
Artwork by Matheny Arts Access artist
Isabell Villacis
Photo by Keith B. Bratcher, Jr.



Matheny staff members lead by example—receiving their second dose of the Moderna vaccine on February 9.

The Governor Celebrates Vaccination Day at Matheny

Gov. Phil Murphy and New Jersey Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli watched on Tuesday morning, February 9, as Matheny staff members convened to receive their second dose of the Moderna vaccine—just one day after New Jersey reached its one million vaccination milestone. Matheny staff members had received their first dose in January.

“The patients are getting their second dose today as well,” said Vincent Barba, MD. “It’s our way out of the pandemic. It’s a way for us to protect our patients.” Those who are developmentally disabled are at very high risk of dying from COVID-19. The physician explains that not only are patients getting vaccinated, “but then we are wrapping them with vaccinated staff so we can’t transmit it among us.” Barba is Matheny’s Vice President-Patient Care and Safety and Chief Medical Officer and Safety Officer.

To emphasize how important it is for

everyone to get vaccinated, medical and administrative staff members wanted to lead by example. Tinashe Maphosa, a patient safety specialist at Matheny, said he wanted to get vaccinated for his family, especially his three children, and the patients. “With the rate of people of color dying in the community, I think the vaccine is something we have been waiting for,” said Maphosa, who received his second vaccine on the day of the Governor’s visit.

Pearl Chiang, a registered nurse at Matheny for 14 years, contracted COVID-19 in November 2020. She experienced “a very, very severe headache and body aches. It’s taken me a month to recover.” Her reason for getting the vaccine? “I really want to be healthy and be with my family and take care of my patients safely,” she said.

Tom Malinowski, the U.S. representative for New Jersey’s 7th congressional district, joined the Governor at Matheny.

Matheny Makes Headlines in 2021

The media has paid particular attention to Matheny in 2021 with much positive news coverage, including: Gov Murphy’s visit to Matheny with New Jersey Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli, in February, to highlight the importance of vaccines for all New Jerseyans; also in February, the partnering of the Bernardsville Police Department with Matheny’s Adult Services, in support of the Brave Bags project; the presentation of Arts Access writer Cheryl Chapin’s original works in March as part of Premiere Stages’ Plays by People; the welcoming of Bill Kent, new President and CEO of Matheny in March; and the always popular Miles for Matheny, a combination this year of virtual and in-person events, in early June. **To read more, go to [Matheny.org](https://www.matheny.org).**

Matheny Congratulates CFO Kathy Powers

Matheny’s CFO Kathy Powers has been named by *NJ Biz* to the “2021 Accounting Power 50”—“the most influential men and women in the profession that will guide businesses out of the pandemic and through the recovery.” Powers has been a member of the New Jersey Society of Certified Public Accountants for 23 years, and served a three-year term on its Board of Trustees, as well as participating on several of its committees. She worked in public accounting for 17 years before coming to Matheny in 2014, with a desire to “give back to the community” by advocating for those with disabilities. Since then, she has also been active at the State-level on two independent oversight boards appointed by the Governor.



Welcome Back

On Monday, May 3, Bill Kent, Matheny’s new President and CEO, joined the first group of clients returning to Matheny’s Adult Learning Center at Hillsborough for its grand re-opening. It was a happy day indeed when they could finally return to the place where, pre-COVID-19, they had gathered daily, Monday to Friday, for a wide variety of classes, group meetings, adaptive sports, workouts, computer lab, and social activities with friends and staff members.

The Hillsborough building was shut down suddenly in March 2020 due to the spread of COVID-19 nationwide; and in-person meetings and programs were halted to curb infection. By April, when it became clear that the shutdown could continue for months, the staff jumped into action, creating a line-up of virtual classes and programs that they presented via Zoom. Although clients were enthusiastic about the virtual activities, they longed to see their friends and the staff members in-person.

In early October 2020, there was much excitement when John Elliott from CBS 2 *News This Morning* popped into Matheny’s Adult Learning Center to cover the first reopening of the Center in early October 2020 and interview the enthusiastic clients. Sadly, the Center was forced to shut down again shortly thereafter, when COVID-19 cases started rising precipitously all around the State. But this is a happy-ending story: vaccinations have unlocked the doors again; and clients are resuming the programs they loved pre-COVID-19. And they hope the doors will never shut again.

CEO Bill Kent joins clients of Matheny’s Adult Learning Center at Hillsborough for its grand reopening



Breaking New Ground

June 1 marked the day when Matheny broke ground for two new group homes at 46 Peapack Road in Far Hills, NJ, a long-planned-for-event. Each home will have four bedrooms. Currently, 30 adults with medically complex developmental disabilities live in Matheny’s five group homes in the towns of Basking Ridge, Frelinghuysen, Lakeside, and Franklin. The homes are licensed by the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) and give residents the opportunity to live as independently as possible—shopping, interacting with neighbors, volunteering, working, and attending classes during the day.

Matheny’s adult services program includes two learning centers, one in Hillsborough and one on Matheny’s Peapack campus. Most group home residents attend the Adult Learning Center at Hillsborough at least several times a week, taking classes, participating in adaptive sports, socializing, and taking part in a variety of community and volunteer activities. In April, group home residents enjoyed a visit from new CEO Bill Kent, part of his initiative to get to know Matheny’s staff and residents.

Matheny is hiring

in our school, hospital, and group homes
Great benefits!
Go to **[Matheny.org/employment](https://www.matheny.org/employment)**

Let's Talk About Mental Health

The mental well-being of many was sorely challenged in this COVID-19 year. Isolation, anxiety, lack of social outlets, decreased mental stimulation, a general worldwide angst, overwork, and losing beloved friends and family members. All of these, and more, were contributors.

Although Matheny's residents and school-goers face large challenges every day throughout their lifetimes, the past 15 months were harder for them, too. Some did not comprehend the enormity of the dire global situation, but COVID-19 shook up the routines of everyone's days and the regularity they had come to expect in their lives.

For Dan Balboni and the team of behavioral therapists he directs, vigilance was their watchword. In this community where most use wheelchairs to get around, where many are nonverbal, and where most have chronic medical conditions that affect their ability to breathe, swallow, and eat, and put them at increased risk of infection, Matheny's staff understood early on that COVID-19 would have a powerful impact on the patients. Depression and anxiety, says Balboni, generally surface in behavioral changes here, because most residents cannot easily express what they are feeling.

Balboni, who was born in Kansas City where his father played baseball for the Kansas City Royals, moved to New Jersey when his father, Major League Baseball player, Steve Balboni, played for the Yankees. Like his father, Dan was passionate about baseball, and played until age 18, when he incurred a severe head injury. "I was a pitcher and a line drive hit me on the right side of my forehead," he remembers. "I woke up lying on the baseball field. It took a couple of months to feel myself again, and I couldn't play sports for a year and a half." That ended his dreams of continuing to play baseball in college, but during that time, he volunteered at Children's Hospital in Fanwood.

And that's when he first became interested in health care and psychology.

At Temple University in Philadelphia, he started out as a theater major. "I absolutely love the theater," he says. "My mom did community theater."

By year two, he switched his major to psychology, and after graduating went on to the University of Hartford for a doctoral program in clinical psychology on the child-adolescent track. Although he wasn't initially sure of his decision, "When I did my first practicum and started working in the field, I knew that I absolutely loved it." He went straight through the doctoral program, and credits it with providing him with a broad range of experiences with diverse patients.

Along the way, Balboni worked with dementia patients and "learned that socialization had just as much of an impact as other therapies we provided." This was followed by a practicum in a school for students who had a behavioral diagnosis, doing assessment and therapy. "I loved working with this population, but I was unsure of continuing in a school environment," he says. He also worked in a locked psychiatric facility giving short-term care to children and adolescents, helping them through a crisis, and helping them transition back to long-term care.

He married and moved back to New Jersey to be near family. His wife, a counseling psychologist, "found Matheny," he recalls. "I had a job interview there—my first anywhere—and I loved it immediately." The feeling was mutual; and he was hired to work as a behaviorist and stayed for four years. "I absolutely loved it SO much," he says, but he still had to complete an internship to earn State licensure, so he left Matheny and spent one year working with kids in the foster care system. "There were so many

heartbreaking stories," he recalls.

But the behaviorist and Matheny had developed a mutual respect and strong feeling of connectedness, which resulted in Balboni's return. "I left Matheny in September 2014 and came back in 2015," he says, with his dissertation completed and defended, and a behaviorist position waiting for him. In January 2018, when Director of Psychology for Matheny Hospital and group homes, Dr. Carole Brown, moved to The Matheny School as Director of Student Personnel Services, Balboni was chosen to take on the directorship.

A behaviorist "interprets behaviors of residents as a form of communication. Most residents are not able to communicate how they're feeling," he explains. The director works with a team of behaviorists to come up with strategies to help decrease potentially harmful behaviors and "give clients more effective ways to communicate." All nurses, personal care assistant (PCA) staff, and other therapists contribute to this effort.

High on their list of priorities is crisis intervention. "All residents have assigned behaviorists," he explains. There are three working full-time plus Balboni, who also has a case load, plus a psychologist. "That's a small group for a lot of people," which includes residents of the hospital and group homes, participants in the Adult Services day program, and students in the school. He points out that at Matheny, the psychology and social work departments work very closely together on behalf of the clients. This is not always the case elsewhere, he observes.

Despite having more administrative duties, Balboni says, "I still like interacting directly with clients and handling behavioral crises, as well as meeting with residents and staff. I still consider that part of my job."

When COVID-19 entered Matheny, many of the policies and routines were changed in order to protect patients from the infection. Although behaviorists routinely met face-to-face with patients prior to COVID-19, "We were asked only to go on the hospital zones for an emergency," he says. "The Infection Control team was trying to limit foot traffic."

But members of Matheny's Green

Team—those staff members trained to respond to crisis events—kept two members on site throughout the COVID-19 year. Others in the department "reached out all the time through iPads and telephones. Isolation is very hard for our clients."

When isolation was required because a patient had tested positive for COVID-19, or had potential contact with an infected person, "We had two behaviorists and all six social workers calling residents and their families. Isolation is terrible for mental well-being," he says, "but isolation was necessary and it took its toll."

He says that throughout the COVID-19 year, the recreation therapy department talked to families about purchasing anything



"During the worst times, we sometimes see the best in humanity. Our staff made people laugh...they found ways to give our residents, and other staff members, a reason to smile."

—DAN BALBONI, PsyD

that residents needed in their rooms. "We did not want any resident sitting alone without anything going on," he says. Residents were linked with family and friends on a regular basis via iPads.

"And when we as a community lost someone, it was important that the director of Social Services and I go into the rooms. We were all grieving at the same time, and residents needed to feel that we were grieving together," he explains.

Balboni says we all rely on seeing facial expression, but when masks were required, facial expressions could not be

seen. "Sometimes, Skype was better than in-person visits for that reason," he explains. "But it became more complicated to give emotional support to a client."

With the weather getting warmer, and COVID-19 infection declining, residents are gathering outside, and family members can even visit indoors. "We know how critical it is for residents to see family in person," he says, "and for families to visit with our residents."

"Things have not returned to normal, but they have certainly gotten better," he states. "Residents are still separated based on zones, but they can finally go home to be with their families, if all criteria to protect their health have been met." Balboni is enthusiastic about the resumption of recreation therapy activities, "but we are still being very cautious," he says. "We don't want to let COVID-19 back in the building."

"I've never been so happy to see a spike in behavioral incidents, which has occurred recently," Balboni says. Although that seems a strange statement for the behaviorist to make, he explains by saying: "It's because there was cognitive slowing during the COVID-19 year. More behaviors are a positive sign in this situation. We fought hard to remind residents that this was NOT the new normal. Now, we are happy to see that they are getting back to themselves pretty quickly."

"Our residents are unbelievably sensitive to the moods and feelings of those around them," he explains. "Now we are seeing more residents interacting and laughing with each other."

Balboni thinks we can "cautiously move forward, while still appreciating that this virus is dangerous. We are walking a fine line of finding balance together."

He observes that at Matheny "during the worst times, we sometimes see the best in humanity. Our staff made people laugh; they were a calming presence when needed; sometimes they sang a quiet song to soothe someone; they found ways to give our residents, and other staff members, a reason to smile. All through this crisis, our staff was very much here for the people they serve." **MM**

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Vaccination is the only way out



A Look Back

When COVID-19 began its advance through New Jersey in March 2020, there was little known about the infection. The world watched closely as the new virus, dubbed SARS-CoV-2, moved quickly across the globe, causing severe disease and sometimes rapid death, particularly among the most medically vulnerable. Matheny’s pediatric and adult residents, and day students, certainly count among the medically fragile, many having chronic medical conditions, often affecting the respiratory system, which put them at higher risk for the most damaging health effects of infectious disease.

That’s what the hospital’s leadership team, headed up by Vincent Barba, MD, was facing. They were on high alert, intent on keeping this dangerous virus out of the Matheny environs. However, knowing that was highly unlikely, they started to prepare.

Matheny’s Infection Prevention Team and medical staff began planning their approach to COVID-19 in January 2020, in the height of flu season, according to Barba, who is Vice President-Patient Care and Safety, and Matheny’s Chief Medical Officer and Safety Officer. The influenza precautions that the hospital puts in place each year during flu season were not dismantled; and additional precautions were rapidly put in place. When Matheny had

its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 31st, 2020, the staff and facility were as ready as they could be, but they were moving into largely uncharted territory.

The stricter infection control measures, begun in early March, escalated rapidly. By mid-March, Matheny-life had changed dramatically: the Hillsborough Adult Day Center—the go-to learning and activity place for adult services and group home residents—was shut down; Arts Access—the heart and soul of the lives of many Matheny and community artists—halted its programs; outpatient clinics were closed; non-essential staff began telecommuting; visitors, vendors, and volunteers were no longer allowed inside the building; and home visits were discontinued.

Next, staff were instructed to practice and enforce social distancing; hand-hygiene was heavily stressed; proper PPE training was reinforced for clinical staff; and 30 staff members were moved into “reserve status” for two weeks—preparing to help provide direct patient care in the event staff began getting sick from COVID-19. These “reserve staff” were requested to try to stay out of places where groups of people congregate—in an attempt to keep them COVID-free.

By March 31st, a new set of measures were started: temperature screening and infection prevention screening questions began for all staff entering the building; wearing of surgical or procedure masks was mandated; and nebulizer treatments for respiratory care were discontinued to limit virus particles in the air and were replaced with meter-dosed inhalers.

Early April 2020 saw many changes to the building itself, in order to minimize contagion among patients and staff: Facilities Management put windows in the doors of patients’ rooms, so staff could observe patients when the doors were closed. They installed negative pressure systems and air scrubbers in patient-rooms; bedrooms holding three patients were “decompressed” to hold two; and space previously used for therapy and other clinical purposes was retrofitted for patient bedrooms.

In addition, the medical staff took

action, and chemoprophylaxis with azithromycin and zinc was started for all eligible inpatients in an attempt to prevent infection. Some “reserve staff” members returned to Matheny to perform personal care assistant (PCA) duties, carrying out activities of daily care and helping the nursing staff, temporarily replacing patient-care staff members who could not work due to illness or exposure.

The staff was all onboard: they understood that heading off the deadly spread of COVID-19 in the Matheny community was a life-and-death matter. Many took on new job duties, worked additional hours, and supported the patients, as well as their colleagues, both physically and mentally in every way they could. Barba’s chemoprophylaxis plan was supported by Matheny’s medical and nursing teams, and pharmacy leadership, although evidence for its potential success was not available, since the disease was just emerging.

Looking back at this critical time, Barba says: “Most of our patients did well if they caught the infection. Many patients living in close proximity to those who had contracted the infection did not get sick. Though some of our inpatients did get sick, require hospitalization or pass away, our teams managed to keep most of our patients safe. I think that our Matheny colleagues did all the right things.”

Surbparkash Singh, MD, Director of Pediatric Medical Services at Matheny Hospital who is in charge of the health of inpatients, age 5 to 21, agrees. After hearing about COVID-19 in early 2020, she remembers feeling “an overriding fear. Our children, teens, and young adults have a range of medically complex conditions, including cerebral palsy, Spina Bifida, Lesch-Nyhan syndrome, and Angelman syndrome, which make them particularly vulnerable to infectious diseases. I was so concerned for our patients.”

She credits the positive outcomes to a host of changes that were made even before the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed at Matheny. “All the children made it through, so our prophylactic treatment and infection control protocols seem to have worked. The kids mainly had fe-

ver and gastrointestinal symptoms—their symptoms were much milder than my adult respiratory patients.”

The children’s mental health was a primary concern for this pediatrician. “We tried to optimize face-to face communication between the children and their families with Zoom and Facetime; and nurses stepped up communication with families, who were desperately worried and could not come to see their children.”

“We were learning as we were going along, but I think we did a very good job,” she says. “Now, we can focus again on quality of life.”

A Look Forward

Prevention is key to infection control, according to Kristen Manthey, RN, who has been Matheny’s infection control nurse for the last 10 years. “You have to prevent before there’s a full-blown outbreak.” She is a member of a team that includes a physician and an employee health nurse who work closely together to prevent and stamp out any infection threatening to affect this extremely vulnerable population, and simultaneously to protect the staff.

But she recognizes that “some things are unavoidable.” And COVID-19 was certainly one of them. She explains that in mid-March 2020, the infection control team activated its emergency plan, restricting patients to a single unit; restricting staff to a single unit; only allowing essential staff on campus; and following all infection control protocols.

Right after the first two Matheny patients were diagnosed with COVID-19, “All patients were restricted to their rooms, and some patients in three-bedded rooms were moved into other spaces converted into bedrooms,” she says.

She ensured that all staff were apprised of the latest advisories issued by the CDC and the NJ State Department of Health, which frequently changed, necessitating “a daily email and sometimes two or three emails daily. And I made sure

that all employees had what they needed to do their jobs safely.” On the top of that list was acquiring sufficient PPE.

Manthey accomplished all her tasks by making herself available to Matheny’s clinical staff both night and day during the height of the crisis. Some of those were reserve staff, employees whose jobs do not generally call for direct “activities of daily living” patient care, but who stepped up to be trained and work with patients during the period of staff shortages.

All of this was in place as part of Matheny’s pandemic planning. “We were better prepared for this than most organizations because we have an outbreak plan, which all of our staff and reserves are familiar with. We know how to restrict movement of patients and staff. The outbreak plan proved effective.”

Now, as summer 2021 approaches, the world is finally opening up again. However, at Matheny, caution has not been thrown to the wind.

“There’s only one way out of this and that’s vaccination,” says Barba. “We need as many people vaccinated as possible—inpatients, group home residents, adult day program participants, day students of Matheny School, family, and staff. We want to envelope and protect our clients.”

In an effort to do just that, the Moderna

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Patient safety specialist Tinashe Maphosa receives his second dose of the Moderna vaccine.

COVID-19 Vaccination Record

Please keep this record card, which includes medical information about the vaccines you have received.

Por favor, guarde esta tarjeta de registro, que incluye información médica sobre las vacunas que ha recibido.

COVID-19 Vaccination Record Card

Please keep this record card, which includes medical information about the vaccines you have received.

Por favor, guarde esta tarjeta de registro, que incluye información médica sobre las vacunas que ha recibido.

Last Name		First Name
Date of birth		Patient number (medical record #)
Vaccine	Product Name/ Manufacturer Lot Number	Date
1 st Dose COVID-19		mm / dd / yy
2 nd Dose COVID-19		mm / dd / yy
		mm / dd / yy

SPRING

Opens Doors at Matheny

For most of us a day at the beach is quite literally just that—hours of sun and sand and lolling around, a hotdog and ice cream from a boardwalk stand, a swim to cool down, and then home with a sense of relaxation. But for many at Matheny, it is substantially more. Getting out and about in the world, seeing and doing something new and different, melding into “the scene” with others can be critical to mental health.

During this year dominated by the effort to keep COVID-19 at bay, recreation and programmatic activities were forced into the shadows. Most venues enjoyed by Matheny residents were closed; much-loved events were cancelled; trips to the library, to malls, restaurants, and sports competi-



tions were backburnered; the beloved Matheny pool was shut down; even home visits were curtailed for fear of contagion. Those cancellations left a deep hole in the lives of many Matheny residents.

Spring has finally come to Matheny. The campus is green, the flowers are blooming, the residents are out and about on the lawn and paths, visitors are being welcomed onto the campus. And planning has begun for a line-up of activities that will once again generate enthusiasm and a sense of participating in the world for Matheny’s hospital and group home residents.

During the COVID-19 year, all of us have learned that isolation, or a serious reduction of social interactions and activities, can have a deleterious effect on mental health. While Matheny’s staff did everything possible to keep everyone physically healthy, they also worked to “fill in” for family and friends who were not allowed to visit, and provide at least some measure of social interaction, but

the recreation therapy “fun” was sorely missed.

Put the emphasis on therapy, simply because it’s that aspect that’s frequently misunderstood or overlooked. Developmental disabilities often result in lifelong communication and mobility issues. Many of Matheny’s residents are non-verbal and use a wheelchair for mobility. But they still have a need to communicate with others, to participate in group activities, and to get out in the world and develop a sense of independence and usefulness.

Therapy comes from the Greek word meaning to minister to and/or to heal. Sean Bielefeldt, CTRS, MS, Director of Recreation Therapy and Adult Day Health Services at Matheny, is a firm believer in the healing powers of “recreation therapy.” He and his team know that their specialization is about far more than providing leisure activities. For Matheny’s residents, pre-pandemic, that meant a whirlwind of athletic and social activities, events, purposeful work/volunteer activities, classes, adapted sports, anything “to bust out of the everyday routine,” he says, and into a normalcy we have all come to appreciate more during COVID-19.

Bielefeldt, who has worked at Matheny for more than 19 years, is such a staunch believer in the importance of recreation therapy and programmatic activities that his department actually “began resuming services in August 2020. But we were very limited in what we could do,” he recalls. Infection control protocols were the prior-

ity, but in the summer of 2020, the department could at least offer scenic drives and short trips to Liberty Park in Peapack with just one or two residents at a time; and they did manage several scaled down events, such as the Halloween costume parade and haunted houses. “These activities were a collaborative process highlighting the talents of a great interdisciplinary team of instructors, therapists, nurses, social workers, behaviorists, and PCAs,” he describes. “But once we got to winter, our trips were further scaled down because of weather.”

With the arrival of vaccinations in March 2021, “the department started to ramp up community activities,” Bielefeldt says, of course working closely with the Infection Control team. Eight trips, each with eight residents, went to the Bernardsville Cinema, which every Matheny group had entirely to itself, to see a movie. “This was a big step forward,” he states. “Residents could get out and do something.”

And there were lots of mini-celebrations for any and all holidays, Cinco de Mayo, Easter, St. Patrick’s Day, Whacky Wednesday on Green Zone to name a few. “We try to keep things fun,” he explains.

Then the zone-based teams started showing newly released movies in the Arts Building on the Matheny campus, with 15 people at a time attending. This was followed by trips to other parks, among them Duke Island Park in Bridgewater Township. Optimism began stirring once again.

“As things improve, we’re hoping to be able to plan trips to restaurants for outdoor dining, shopping, the zoo, the Grounds for Sculpture. It’s so exciting—we’re doing things we haven’t been able to do in so long,” Bielefeldt says. “Summer BBQs, picnics at the park, kayaking trips are all on the roster for vaccinated residents.” Everything is done in small groups and is zone-based, meaning individuals only participate in activities with those residing in the same area of Matheny Hospital.

“We won’t be able to participate in sports, such as Challenger Baseball, yet. But we do hope to open Matheny’s swimming pool this summer—a favorite for so many residents,” he says.



And during the week of June 14, each zone celebrated with spring formals planned by the interdisciplinary teams. Last year’s prom sadly did not happen. “It’s an opportunity to dress up, eat a special meal, gather together, enjoy music and dance,” says Bielefeldt.

And more important than all the other activities, “Home visits started up in late spring,” he says. “This will have a big impact on the lives of our residents; they haven’t gone home in 15 months.” Also, the much-loved Adult Day Program at Hillsborough officially reopened on May 3. Attendance is starting with limited

capacity with plans to increase over the summer.

“Clients are happy to be back there doing interesting things with their friends,” Bielefeldt says. “During the past year, we saw how really important all of these activities are for our clients. They look forward to doing everything they loved to do before COVID-19; and we are so happy to be able to provide them with that.” MM

Art

Against all odds, Isabell Villacis has survived to tell her story. Born 41 years ago at just over one pound, she managed to cling to life and grow into an adulthood full of purpose and activity. Then, in February 2021, she contracted “the monster COVID-19 disease, couldn’t breathe, was in the ICU, had pneumonia bad,” but beat the odds a second time. “I didn’t think I was gonna make it through,” she says in her powerful essay about that harrowing time. “It was a terrifying experience. I thought I was going to pass away due to this COVID-19.”

“I don’t know how I contracted COVID-19,” she writes. “I’m clueless because I used to get tested regularly and everything used to be negative. And then one day I went to the urgent care and when I got the test result, it was positive.” She was admitted to the hospital and was very sick, also scared and lonely since her family could not visit. “The COVID messes up your lungs,” she writes. “I couldn’t breathe.” When she was released from the hospital, Isabell was still on oxygen.

Happily, Isabell is home now in Bound Brook, NJ, still not quite recovered, but feeling pretty healthy, and has returned to her former life and her passion, creating art in many forms—painting, digital sculpture, choreography, and writing. She’s acutely aware that while she managed to survive COVID-19, millions have died so far from this infection worldwide. Isabell has cerebral palsy, which has impacted her ability to use her arms and legs, and has affected her speech; she gets around in a wheelchair. But she is so, so happy to be back with her family and able to create art again.

Her essay, detailing her experiences fighting the virus, is a wonderful testament to her survival and her ability to write about that chapter of her life. Those experiences also fueled a painting, which

will be showcased on November 6 at the annual Arts Access Full Circle event.

Isabell started painting at age 16 and explains that she is “self-taught. I did not go to school for this.” But she wanted to learn more, expand her technique, develop more skills, and be part of an arts community. She did an internet search and found Matheny’s Arts Access program 11 years ago, and decided that it sounded perfect for her.

The program, established in 1993, gives individuals with disabilities the opportunity to create fine art, using innovative techniques and processes. Choice is the key word here. These artists work “side by side” with staff members called “facilitators,” who are artists in their own right; and serve as the clients’ arms and legs. But it is the artist-clients who make all the choices, from paint color and thickness of brush strokes to the steps of a newly choreographed dance. The facilitators maintain “neutrality” throughout the creative process, meaning they don’t criticize, or judge the artists’ choices, or even make suggestions.

Arts Access also provides a place for artists to go and the opportunity to meet and interact with other artists, as well as

“When everything shut down in March 2020, we owed it to our clients to figure out a way to continue. These are artists; this is part of their lives; and this is our job.”

—EILEEN MURRAY

furnishing the artists with performance and exhibition space and the chance to show, and sell, their work. For Isabell, the program is a perfect fit. “The professional team believes in me, and I believe in myself as an artist and a person. I’m astonished at how far I’ve evolved as an artist. Art is freedom,” she says.

So, what happened to this program—where artists and facilitators work face-to-face in the Arts Center on Matheny’s campus in Peapack—when COVID-19 struck? “Initially, the virus shut us down last March,” says Heather Williams, Performing Arts Coordinator and a facilitator in the dance program, which offers creative movement, choreography, and performance opportunities. Her professional credits include Jacobs Pillow, Full Force Dance Theater, The Connecticut Opera and Hartford Ballet. She is also on the Board of Directors for the Dance Innovations Performance Foundation.

“We hoped everything would reopen within two to three weeks,” she remembers. “When that seemed unlikely, we started reaching out to clients asking if they would be interested in doing the program virtually.”

Although some clients did not have a computer or were concerned about their ability to communicate virtually, “We started with a small group of clients from the community and group homes who had the technical equipment and support at home to help them access online platforms,” she says, “and now we have more than 20 clients, many of them new to the program.”

“We brainstormed about how to do this,” Heather recalls. “We asked: ‘How can we retain the intimate, one-to-one quality of the in-person meeting using technology?’” It took the facilitators several weeks to teach themselves how to translate the in-person experience and process to Zoom; and then several more weeks to make sure that clients had the right computer set-up. Then they were ready to go and re-launched the visual arts and dance programs.

“The process we use with our clients translated well,” Heather says. “Many of them have participated in one dance session and one visual arts session each week. I transformed my basement into a dance space.”

What Heather noted first and foremost was the expression on the clients’ faces when they were able “to return to their creative outlet. They were so happy that they could be productive, doing things. They had freedom of expression, rather

than just sitting in front of a TV.”

All of the clients who started the virtual Arts Access program in the Spring of 2020 have continued with the program. And many new clients have joined them. “One of the biggest obstacles to our programs, under normal circumstances, is getting to the Arts Center,” Heather observes. “I feel this virtual program eliminates transportation hurdles. I’m pleasantly surprised that something so physical could be translated to a screen.” But she looks forward to the time when many of the clients can return to the Arts Center, where the dance spaces are bigger, the in-person interactions more satisfying.

Andrew Edge, a graduate of the Joe Kubert School of Cartooning and Graphic Art, worked for Comic Images whose clients included Topps Trading Card Company, Marvel Comics, and McFarlane Toys, as a prototype painter before joining Arts Access as a visual arts facilitator, which he finds deeply satisfying. When COVID-19 shut the program down, “It made me realize how much I love my work and how much I missed the clients,” he says. Andrew also publishes a comic book series, Grizzly and Caticus.

Andrew worked out how to use the Arts Access facilitation process over Zoom for the visual arts. “I did trial sessions for painting with a few of our community clients and they liked it, and wanted to continue. Then we added Matheny group home clients, with participants increasing through the summer.” The facilitators first did a trial run with long-time clients who were familiar with the line of questioning and the charting system used by Arts Access; and then added a number of these new clients who had never been part of the program before by reaching out to support coordinators.

He points out that using this system on Zoom created a number of challenges: some Internet connections are not as good as others; the connections can go down; the screen can freeze, for instance, and while discussion about the problem works with a verbal client, it often does not with a nonverbal one; in some instances, the client needs someone helping at home, which can change the close interactions between facilitator and client. The virtual



Artist Isabell Villacis (r) and her mother, Ana

process also doesn’t always work well for those with a visual impairment.

“But we made do,” Andrew says. “We did the best we could, and the clients were excited that they could still do art and also for the human interaction.”

As COVID-19 numbers continued declining, Arts Access staff began conducting programs for Matheny Hospital patients, with small groups of residents working together on their zone. While this had limitations, the staff reported seeing many smiles. “All around, it was still an opportunity for artists to surprise themselves,” he says.

Andrew thinks the Zoom program will continue for some community clients, because transportation and traffic issues sometimes resulted in the cancellation of a client’s session. “Zoom really benefits those individuals,” he says. “But in general, clients like to see other clients working;

this is an arts community. Virtual was the solution to the problem, but the process of creating art is more challenging for these artists when they are using the computer and working from their homes.”

For Eileen Murray, who has been Director of Matheny’s Arts Access program since 2001 and a fine artist for all of her adult life, this year has been challenging, but also has brought many rewards. “Over the years I’ve thought it would be great to work with people who couldn’t get to the Matheny campus,” she says. “When everything shut down in March 2020, we owed it to our clients to figure out a way to continue. These are artists; this is part of their lives; and this is our job.”

Once the technology was up and running, and staff and clients were onboard, Eileen said, “It lifted my spirits to see how

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The Monster COVID-19 Disease

By Isabell Villacis
March 16, 2021

On February 19th, I was admitted to the freaking hospital because I didn't feel myself, like my normal self. So, I told one of my family members to call the ER as soon as possible because I couldn't breathe. Then the ambulance came, and I was in the hospital for almost two weeks. So, it turns out I had COVID, then I had pneumonia bad. I was in ICU for a while fighting for my freaking life like a lion. I had negative thoughts going through my freaking mind because I didn't think I was gonna make it through! Because it was a terrifying experience. I thought I was gonna pass away due to this COVID-19, this is no freaking joke for everyone in the world. This is a reality check damnit.

This could take away your life in an instant and you know what really hurts? The inside. The fact that I couldn't have no visitors around me during this tough time. So, I had to deal with this myself, it was one of the toughest things that I have been through, and I don't want anyone else to go through this crap. No. It's very hard. I had to go through three treatments to breathe, three different masks, three different medications, and to get back to normal, I just found out today, it's gonna take a long time. And the freaking side effects of the medications are not fun.

So, this is a wake-up call for everyone, this COVID-19 is like a nightmare. You wouldn't wanna go through this thing. No way in heck. This will change your life because I've learned when I was in the hospital, this is what I learned, the



fourteen days or whatever it was, I've learned to appreciate everything that I have because life could change in an instant, in 1-2-3. I've learned to appreciate my family and my friends and to take care of myself because the thing that I know is that I don't know how I contracted the COVID-19. I'm clueless because I used to get regularly tested and everything used to be negative and then one day I went to the urgent care and when I get that phone call, I'm like, "oh my goodness, why me, what do I do now?" I was scared. I was like okay how do I get rid of this COVID. Oh well, go to the hospital.

The COVID messes up your lungs. You can't breathe, I had to use oxygen for a while to go back home. Today they took me off of it. And I'm fine. Thank goodness. But I still gotta be careful. It's like a miracle I came back, a miracle. I came back for a reason. I came back to be with my family, my friends, and to keep creating my art. That's my coping therapy during this time to help me through this process, my artwork, my writings. So, in the dark tunnel, there was a light. This has been a life living lesson for real. This all told me that my

health is more important, safety is more important, to keep wearing a mask, six feet distance, until this COVID-19 goes away, vanishes. And I'm planning for my safety to get the vaccine. I can't wait because I don't want the COVID-19 in my body no more.

But this real-life story is real. And I wouldn't want nobody to go through this bad experience. It's very sad, very depressing, you have very dark thoughts, and the human mind gets shut down. You get depressed, you start crying out of nowhere because you wanna think that everything is gonna be alright but when you don't have family around, or friends, that's when you fall down. And you think you won't get back up again because I spent a lot of days when I was in the hospital in bed, pretty much isolated from the real world. It was all a freaking nightmare like *Nightmare on Elm Street*. And then all that medication I was taking, all that chest, bloodwork, CT scans to check my lungs, and the IV, oh my god. That was craziness. But it doesn't matter whether you have a disability or not, you can still catch it regardless. So don't fool yourself.

—excerpted from the original essay

Vaccination

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vaccine has been used for those 18 and older who are eligible, and the Pfizer for those inpatients 12 and older, and an effort has been made to coordinate Pfizer vaccines for all day students age 12 to 15. Matheny is currently using the Janssen COVID-19 vaccine for staff who desire vaccination.

"We are learning every day how really effective these vaccines are," he says. "This is a revolution in vaccination technology. The two mRNA vaccines are the culmination of amazing work in a short time without sacrificing any safety measures."

Barba explains that the virus has been mutating since the first infection in Wuhan—producing several variants of concern—but the current vaccines have continued to be effective. "The way to combat variants, and severe disease and death, is vaccination," he says. "The virus only mutates when it spreads."

He explains that persons with developmental disabilities have three times the risk of dying from COVID-19 infection than others, making vaccination even more important for them and those around them. "The only mission of a virus is to make more virus," he states. "We have to make the virus ineffective through vaccination." In addition to vaccines, he points out that there has been a "revolution in treatments, including monoclonal antibody cocktails."

According to Barba, most Matheny employees are "so completely dedicated to the patients" that they stepped up to be vaccinated as soon as the vaccine was available. Tinashe Maphosa, an 18-year employee of Matheny, is serving in his fifth year as a patient safety specialist—making sure that safety policies in accordance with The Joint Commission, The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), and the NJ Department of Health are in force. "I want to be an advocate for the patients," he says.

Maphosa is particularly dedicated to this role because he had a disabled sister who passed away at age 22.

He came to the U.S. in 1989 and, despite having an accounting degree, decided his heart was in the health care field. His first jobs at Matheny were as a patient transporter and then for seven years providing direct patient care as a personal care assistant. In late February 2020, with COVID-19 advancing into the State, he "went back to being hands-on, making sure the clients have everything they need and the staff have everything they need to provide care. We didn't know what would happen with COVID-19."

He got the vaccine early on and is a strong vaccine advocate—"I believe in science and



"I believe in science and the wisdom of researchers and doctors. I never doubted the vaccine." —TINASHE MAPHOSA

the wisdom of researchers and doctors," he explains. "I never doubted the vaccine. I believed in it right away."

He has encouraged co-workers, clients, and his own family to understand that the vaccines are "a big deal."

"Vaccines save lives," he tells them. "They are very effective. It's OK to be hesitant, but I encourage everyone to get the vaccine."

Maphosa was vaccinated on February 9th, the day Governor Murphy visited Matheny's vaccination site. "I am thankful to be vaccinated, for the opportunity to be safe. I'm thankful for my family, clients, and colleagues to have the opportunity to be safe." His 17-year-old son was vaccinated in early May.

For those who question the vaccine on religious grounds, he says, "I believe God created scientists and scientists created the vaccines. I encourage everyone to get vaccinated. MM

Art Heals

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happy everyone was to be back creating art. There was amazing artwork generated in this time—poems and plays written, dances choreographed, each one a little piece of the artist."

Eileen points out the technological challenges on the clients' side—"the glitches that happen with tech and the fact that most clients are reliant on aides, nurses, and family to make this possible. But the majority were able to create in much the same way as they normally do," she says.

The theme of the 20th Full Circle event in November is aptly "Art from Afar," pointing to the fact that facilitators and artists worked at a distance from one another. "But the distance disappears when paint goes to canvas," she says.

For Isabell Villacis, the virtual Arts Access program was her spiritual lifesaver. Even from afar, she painted, choreographed dances, and worked on her writing. Her painting, entitled "I'm a Survivor of the COVID-19 Virus," speaks volumes. "It's so striking," says Eileen, who with her staff is currently planning the annual showcase event. "Whether in-person or virtual, Full Circle presents the artists' work in its most professional light."

Isabell is an artist and will continue creating artwork, whether from afar, or back at Matheny's Arts Center. She knows that Arts Access has changed her life, given her a voice to express her thoughts and feelings, and arms and legs to paint and dance; and she would like the world to know how hard the staff works to connect with clients, their dedication, their talent, how much they care. She says the staff, like her mother, Ana, have supported her in every way possible, and are always there for her. Isabell wants everyone to know how very grateful she is for all they do.

Isabell feels proud that her art will help tell the story to future generations of what it means to be a survivor of COVID-19 and how the "monster" virus impacted her life and fueled her art; and she is already planning for a future minus COVID-19 but filled with new ideas and the joy of creating art. MM



SCHOOL DAYS

Looking at the Big Picture

When in-person learning begins again, Matheny will share a big sigh of relief with parents and schools across the country. Remote learning for developmentally disabled children presents enormous challenges. Research has shown that for the students, as well as teachers, and families, the absence of the usual routine and classroom interaction can have detrimental impacts.

Bonnie Wilkenfeld, PhD, LCSW, the Matheny School social worker, knows firsthand about the struggles of families and children during the COVID-19 year. Her focus is the “mental health and well-being of Matheny students who live on campus, as well as those living at home.” The mental health of school-families and staff also come under her “umbrella.”

“Grief and loss are my niche,” explains the social worker, who has taught classes on this at Rutgers University. “COVID-19 has certainly opened the door to many different types of grief.”

While she generally loves “hands-on engagement,” the opportunities for in-person interactions with students and families have been very limited during the COVID-19 year. “Social distancing has made our work so difficult,” she states.

“The pandemic has had a very negative impact on mental health—worry and anxiety, loss and grief, mood changes, sleep changes and depression, the total disruption to routines have all been overwhelming for students and their families,” she says. “Suddenly children are at home with families, who, in addition to everything else, also may be impacted by job losses and financial setbacks.”

“Some of our students have trouble

really understanding what’s going on, but they are very sensitive to picking up vibes. They are feeling the worries and anxieties and frustrations of their families.”

Wilkenfeld explains that many Matheny students have communication impairments, and their difficulties with expressive language “become a barrier to their getting comfort and resolution. So, how do they express themselves? Most often through behavioral changes.”

A big part of the social worker’s job now is helping everyone cope, including teachers, paraprofessionals and therapists (speech, physical, occupational) who generally work with the students at the school. “They have been highly creative in coming up with strategies to help the students while they’re learning from home,” she says. All intervention for this year has been by phone, Zoom, and email. Wilkenfeld has taken on the role of “being the go-to person to connect people to each other internally and externally during COVID-19.”

One program that has caught on since its inception in the fall is the formation of social-emotional learning (SEL) groups, which bring together a number of students on Zoom twice a month to focus on one emotion. There is a group



“Our kids grieve, sense loss, feel change. It’s important to not deprive them of the chance to express themselves.”

— BONNIE WILKENFELD

for elementary students and another for those in high school. “The students pick a theme for the month, and we might read a story, watch a video, sing songs, and ask questions about that emotion. When the students see each other on Zoom, they cheer up. It’s so heartwarming,” she says. Teachers are encouraged to embed these SEL lessons in their curriculum throughout the month.

The social worker teams up with teachers, paraprofessionals and therapists to put together lessons that include a “social story.” “We discuss social stories that help students to understand and express their emotions—about why a teacher is leaving, about students who have left the program, and, of course, why students have not been able to go back, in-person, to school.

But the focus is not strictly on the children. Wilkenfeld provides a weekly self-care email for parents and staff. In the first email of the month, there is also information for families on how to work with the students and focus on the SEL

theme for that month. In May, the theme was “being silly.” As part of this, Wilkenfeld discussed the social and emotional benefits of laughter, and how laughter opens pathways to conversation about changes related to the pandemic.

“Our kids grieve, sense loss, feel change. It’s important to not deprive them of the chance to express themselves,” she says.

Parents’ needs and concerns are addressed as well. Wilkenfeld surveyed parents early in the year for topics of particular interest to them. Their concerns are more practical ones, such as financial planning and guardianship. In response to this, the social worker coordinated an interactive Zoom information session in concert with a financial planner/guardianship attorney this past January.

For staff, stress reduction is a priority, and monthly Zoom yoga sessions are part of the agenda. “Teachers need some time to focus on their own well-being,” she says. “We have a wonderful yoga guru, Noelle, who teaches in our school.” Wilkenfeld coordinates the Zoom sessions

that Noelle leads for staff.

Wilkenfeld is also involved in Matheny School Principal Sean Murphy’s weekly virtual Town Hall meetings for parents and guardians in which participants can ask questions and talk about whatever is on their minds. “This could be curriculum changes, a hybrid plan for summer learning, the fall reopening. Parents and guardians are partnering with us to ensure continuity of learning,” she says. “Parents and guardians have direct input. They meet with the head guy, and have their voices heard.” She reports during each Town Hall on social/emotional learning updates. Wilkenfeld says that Bill Kent, Matheny’s new CEO, attends these meetings and has been very visible in the school, which everyone appreciates.

“I also reach out regularly to parents and guardians and ask, ‘What are your concerns?’ People have been struggling. They don’t have their usual way of letting go of stress, of coping. I try to help them find other mechanisms for lessening stress. That’s getting better—now that we are

able to get out and be around others.”

Wilkenfeld points out that there are a few families who have mentioned the benefits of remote learning. “Some students are socially challenged. Some students like learning from home. Parents have also talked about the benefits for themselves—Zoom gave them the opportunity to see, and partner with, their children and the educational team at school,” she says.

According to research, “There are some benefits to remote learning. It’s prompted me to develop new strategies for reaching kids through Zoom. It’s helped me to develop my SEL curriculum,” she states.

Will everything go back to the way it was before? “Hopefully, but we may have to have some hybrid learning in the future depending on infection rates. It calls on everyone’s creativity and resilience. It makes it more of a team thing,” she says.

“COVID-19 has brought us together more as a community. We need to take care of everyone. We need to stay involved in the social and emotional well-being of students, parents, and staff.” **MM**

KRISTEN LABAZZO, NEW SCHOOL BOARD CHAIR

Engineering a Better Future



Kristen Labazzo, PhD, MBA, an assistant professor of practice in biomedical engineering at Rutgers University

Therapeutics, working with stem cells and biomaterials derived from human placenta. “It was great work,” she says. “I wore many hats there and enjoyed it.”

While she began her career there as a biomaterials scientist, Labazzo veered off into medical affairs after a few years. “I love science, but decided that I didn’t want to stay in a lab. I wanted to learn the business side of things.”

So, while continuing to work, she spent 18 months of Saturdays attending an executive MBA program at NJIT, where she “made great friends and earned my degree.” Afterwards, Labazzo found herself at another fork in the road—trying to decide where to take her career next. She wanted to utilize her business and science backgrounds, but never imagined that opportunity to exist in academia.

She had kept in touch with her Rutgers department—largely through hiring summer interns while she worked in industry. Rutgers was interested in starting a medical device center, and Labazzo seemed to be just the person to do it. She got the job. “I went into academia wearing an industry hat, which was the best of both worlds.”

Biomedical engineering is, simply put, “the application of engineering principles and design concepts to medicine and biology for healthcare purposes—both diagnostic and therapeutic”—and has resulted in the development of a spectrum of new healthcare products and devices.

In 2016, Labazzo began working with Matheny’s Information Technology coordinator, Alex Fraumann, and Larry Thornton, a retired businessman and dedicated Matheny volunteer (now deceased). Together they launched a pilot program at Matheny involving 13 rising seniors in the Rutgers biomedical engineering undergraduate program. The Rutgers students interacted with residents and students at Matheny with the goal of developing new medical devices to assist them.

“I thought this would be perfect for the senior design class whose students work on a year-long, team-based project. I hoped that by using their engineering minds, they could identify areas for improvement and create solutions that would help people at Matheny function better in their daily lives,” says Labazzo.

The pilot program was a great success. In year two, 20 students participated. In year three, 45 students signed on. “This

This year, for the first time, a student’s Matheny project was the basis for a Rutgers Master’s degree, an achievement not only for the student herself but for the entire collaboration.

program is now beginning its fifth year,” she says enthusiastically.

The students have a one-week “immersion” during the summer before their senior year, spending 30 hours on Matheny’s campus. “The purpose of the immersion is to better understand the voice of the ‘customers,’” explains Labazzo. Those customers could be the Matheny residents and students, most of whom use wheelchairs and have serious communication issues, or their caretakers, who could also benefit from solutions that would make their daily tasks easier. “It’s an exciting experience, but also overwhelming for some students,” she states.

The Rutgers students then spend the fall semester of this class coming up with ideas and bouncing the ideas off Matheny’s staff, like John Reck, Matheny’s director of assistive technology, and Kevin McCormick, director of rehabilitation technology, who make and repair wheel-

chairs and fit them for individualized use. The students might also interact with nurses, or physical, occupational, and speech therapists. “The students discuss their ideas with the staff members most critical to the project,” she explains.

“Matheny is where the Rutgers students can interact with end-users of critical medical innovations. And that’s what it’s all about—making things better with the goal of improving quality of life.” The device ideas will be the basis of the students’ senior design projects and could be developed in the Rutgers labs.

For instance, Labazzo explains, a team might look to make a change to a wheelchair that would benefit a patient with Lesch-Nyhan syndrome, who faces injury due to involuntary head-banging. “The end goal is to create a prototype of some sort,” she says. “A lot of new ideas have come out of the students’ work.” The program has already expanded to include other organizations that support disabled persons, and Labazzo hopes it will continue to grow and include other rehab facilities and even nursing homes.

This past year was a tough one, of course, since everything had to be done remotely due to COVID-19. But the course went on anyway. In total, 14 projects have been done collaboratively with Matheny since the program’s inception, although none have yet been tested. “Five years is not long for device development,” she says. “If we actually want to test the devices, we will have to get IRB [Institutional Review Board] approval, which isn’t impossible, but the devices really need to be developed with a high level of safety before we test them on people. The end-goal is that it should fulfill an unmet need and could be developed to do something novel.”

This year, for the first time, a student’s Matheny project was the basis for a Rutgers Master’s degree, an achievement not only for the student herself but for the entire collaboration. In May, Madara

Dias of Bridgewater successfully defended her Master’s thesis entitled “Development of a Dynamic Lateral Support for Wheelchair Users.” A lateral support is used for patients who require additional support in order to maintain balance and stability while seated in their wheelchairs.

Labazzo has won several teaching awards in the last few years. She’s very happy with her role now, which focuses on mentoring and teaching. And she has recently become the Biomedical Engineering Undergraduate Program Director. “This has been a really good year,” she says. “My department nominated me for the 2021 Provost’s Award for Excellence in Teaching Innovations, largely based on my efforts with the Matheny projects.”

She has a husband and two daughters, ages 14 and 19, four cats, and a bird “that goes with me almost everywhere.” The family has fostered almost 30 cats over the past few years. She loves animals. She’s also passionate about Matheny. “When I first went there, I fell in love with Matheny,” she remembers. “I loved walking down the halls and I loved watching Alex high-fiving students.”

That’s why she took on the “job” of volunteer School Board Chair—on top her other activities and duties. “I never would have foreseen working with developmentally disabled people,” she says, “but I love the opportunity to make their lives better. It also means we can bring something new to the college classroom—all because of Matheny.”

“I feel very valued at Matheny. I have good listening and leadership skills, and I have an amazing School Board that brings so much talent to the table. My talent is bringing people together and listening to everyone,” Labazzo continues.

“Being introduced to Matheny was one of the best things to happen to me,” she states. “Being asked to serve on the School Board has solidified that relationship. Whatever I can do to help the people of Matheny is what I want to do.” **MM**

At first glance it appears to be an obvious mismatch. At second glance, too. Why would a busy Rutgers biomedical engineering faculty member at the height of her career, and with a packed portfolio of achievements, want to head up The Matheny School Board? And why would Matheny’s leadership view her as someone who could dedicate the necessary time and energy to lead The Board of this school for developmentally disabled students?

Anyone who has served in a “volunteer job” like this one knows the demands can be astronomical. But for Kristen Labazzo, PhD, MBA, it’s one more in a long list of challenges she’s happily taken on in her career, and a responsibility she feels particularly positive about shouldering.

Enthusiasm and positivity are “core traits” of Labazzo’s personality. A Jersey girl, she earned degrees from three NJ universities: a bachelor’s degree in chemistry, with a minor in biology, from

Caldwell University, an executive MBA from New Jersey Institute of Technology, and a PhD in biomedical engineering from Rutgers University. But her path meandered a bit along the way.

“I entered a Rutgers PhD program in chemistry, looking for a lab focusing on medicinal chemistry,” she explains. But she didn’t find a perfect match. “For the first time in my life, I felt a little lost.”

She happened to see a flyer for a talk on biomedical engineering posted in the hallway of a campus building. “I had no idea what biomedical engineering was, but when I walked away from that lecture, I knew what I wanted to do. It changed my life,” she remembers. “I always follow my heart and my passions.”

She switched into biomedical and tissue engineering in her second year, and subsequently decided that she did not want to stay in an academic lab after earning her degree, but preferred a job in industry. She started her career at Celgene Cellular

Here Come the Graduates

June 10, 2021, was a momentous day for three students graduating from The Matheny School, and their families and friends. Like graduations across the country, Matheny's marked the happy culmination of many years of study and hard work. But these graduates faced additional challenges: all have medically complex developmental disabilities; and they missed out on their final year of in-person classes and activities when the pandemic shut down NJ's schools in March 2020.

Scott Gordon, Valedictorian for the Class of 2020, joined 2021 Valedictorian Najeevere Rogers, and 2021 Salutatorian As-Salaam Matthews for this year's ceremony, since last year's graduation ceremony could not be held. Graduation Day 2021 brought an audience of well-



(top) The 2020 and 2021 Matheny School graduates: Scott Gordon, Valedictorian, Class of 2020 (r); 2021 Valedictorian Najeevere Rogers (middle); and 2021 Salutatorian As-Salaam Matthews (l) (middle) Scott Gordon receives his diploma from Matheny CEO Bill Kent; in the background speech language pathologist Christine Meyerck (l) and School Board Chair Kristen Labazzo (bottom) New graduate As-Salaam Matthews is hugged by his dad.

wishers to Matheny's campus to celebrate the graduates as they received their diplomas from their home-districts during a very traditional graduation ceremony. The keynote speaker was Kathy Ford, a State Coordinator and Founder of Ms.



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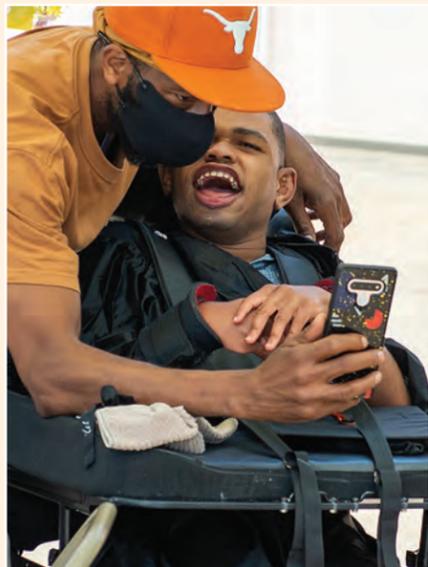
Wheelchair New Jersey, Inc., a registered nonprofit organization. After graduating from Stockton University in 2007, she became a 911 dispatcher with the Atlantic City Police Department. Her disability, Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva, is very rare with only 900 known cases worldwide.

This year's graduates are part of a long and stellar school-history. The Matheny School was founded as the Burnt Mills School for Paralysis Correction in 1946 by two dedicated educators, Walter and

Marguerite Matheny, when they couldn't find a top-quality therapeutic and educational program for their son, Charles (Chuck), who had cerebral palsy. In 1949, as student numbers grew, the school moved to Far Hills, and in 1954, it moved again to its current site in Peapack. Over the years, The Matheny School has earned a reputation for its excellent educational and therapeutic activities, and for the dedication and compassion of its staff.

In the upper grades, students move from classroom to classroom for their classes, completing academic requirements and choosing electives. Developing practical skills is also emphasized, including activities of daily living (ADLs). Students first develop skills inside purpose-designed transition rooms, and then practice skills out in the community. Some reach Mastery Level, where job coaches support their progress to independence. Technology spurs students' abilities and confidence; and communication devices encourage nonverbal students to build vocabulary and express their thoughts and needs.

This year's graduates, like those before them, will transition to a new stage of life. Most will go on to the Adult Services program at Matheny or the Adult Learning Center at Hillsborough, where they will take classes, participate in adaptive sports, and engage in creative arts and social activities. **MM**



The Friends of Matheny

Despite the many challenges of the COVID-19 year, The Friends of Matheny has once again donated \$100,000 to Matheny, bringing its total contributions to well over \$3 million since the group's inception in 1983. "The Friends" has become best known for its well-stocked and busy Second Chance Thrift Shop—run by more than 140 volunteers—selling a wide variety of donated items, including housewares, jewelry, furniture, books, and clothing.

"The Friends" has impacted the lives of many at Matheny with its numerous gifts, including trips to Disney World and Morgan's Playland; tickets to major league sports events and live theater performances; purchases of iPads, SMART Boards, wheelchair accessible vans, and adaptive sports equipment; and creating a comfortable, accessible lounge for visiting families. Almost all wishes on this year's list will be "granted," demonstrating the tirelessness of this group even during pandemic times.

To learn more: friendsofmatheny.org

Funding the Arts During COVID-19



The New Jersey State Council on the Arts distributed \$5 million in federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds to arts organizations that experienced significant losses during the COVID-19 year.

Matheny was among 94 NJ nonprofit arts organizations to receive funds, which were a real "lifesaver" for the arts groups. Matheny's Arts Access received two awards, one for \$16,000 and another for \$62,694, and was also recognized with the Cultural Access Network 2021 Innovator Award.

And in May, the National Endowment for the Arts recommended a prestigious \$10,000 grant to the arts program at Matheny for "Arts Projects—Presenting & Multidisciplinary Works." More than \$88 million will be distributed by the agency in all 50 states and jurisdictions. This is the fifth consecutive year that Matheny has been awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

MATHENY THANKS all of its many volunteers and extended community for your continued support throughout the pandemic. Your ongoing concern, generosity, kindness, and care mean more than we can possibly express.



A MATHENY MOMENT IN HISTORY

Do You Know About Arts Access?

Arts Access is a pioneering, multi-disciplinary arts program that was established on Matheny's Peapack campus in November 1993. It was the first of its kind, allowing disabled adults to create art on their own terms, and has since then served as a blueprint for other programs.

It was the brainchild of former Matheny Medical Director Dr. Gabor Barabas and his wife Suzanne, and was started as a pilot program with a \$35,000 grant from the Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation. This unique art development and communication program was given a home with the building of the Robert Schonhorn Arts Center in 2000, where it continues to thrive as a hub for artists with developmental disabilities.

A MATHENY MOMENT IN HISTORY

Do You Know Jean Wadsworth?

Jean Wadsworth, a resident of Basking Ridge, was invited to join The Friends of Matheny in the early 1980s by the thrift shop's founder, Ginny Estabrook. The shop had about 15 volunteers at the time. In 2008, Wadsworth was awarded a "Spirit of Somerset" award on behalf of The Friends of Matheny, where she had already volunteered for 29 years. She is a past president of The Friends and has served on its Board of Directors for many years.

Now fast-forward to 2021. Jean is still active with the group and still going strong—36 years after joining. Matheny gives its heartfelt thanks to this dedicated volunteer, who—together with her colleagues—has made such an enormous difference to everyone at Matheny.

Jean Wadsworth, center, at The Friends of Matheny Breakfast of Champions at Miles for Matheny 2021. Also pictured: Friends members from left, Linda Horton, Gail Cunningham, Debi DeLorenzo and Liz Geraghty.



Bill Kent

continued from page 1

However, an exciting opportunity came his way. Following a presentation that he made at an Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) conference, Kent was offered a position at Johns Hopkins. “So, I picked up and moved to Baltimore as clinic manager for four outpatient clinics residing in Johns Hopkins Hospital,” he states. “I had never managed a person in my life and suddenly I had 80 people reporting to me.” Even now, he’s surprised that he was selected for this opportunity.

It was there he met his wife, Karen, who was at Johns Hopkins for a two-year administrative fellowship. “My mentor-boss was the preceptor of Karen’s program,” he says. At the wedding reception, their first dance was to Bonnie Raitt’s *Let’s Give Them Something to Talk About*. “No slow dance for us,” he says. “We did a swing dance.”

That first dance set in motion the tempo of their shared lives—busy, energized, and somewhat untraditional. Both of their careers took off; and three years into their marriage, their daughter Lauren was born, and two and a half years later, their son Ian. They moved to a slightly bigger house; Karen started teaching; and over a period of 13 years in Baltimore, Kent moved up the ladder three times from manager to director and ultimately president of a Hopkins primary care subsidiary.

The family relocated to Cincinnati in 2001, where Kent started a job at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, which “was becoming renowned at the time. My job was to help build out the infrastructure for rapid growth of the hospital,” he says. “The timing was perfect. The hospital had just been awarded one of five national grants by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to demonstrate how to dramatically transform hospitals to be safer.”

Shortly before the move, their son, Ian, 2 ½ years old, was diagnosed with autism. “The hospital has an amazing developmental pediatrics program. That sold us on the move,” Kent says. “Ian

immediately started all the therapies; and Lauren got settled into school.” Karen began teaching full-time in the Master’s program at Xavier University, and then started working on a PhD in gerontology, focusing on the healthcare experiences of aging people with autism and intellectual disabilities.

“I have an understanding of what it takes to be a special needs parent. I know what it takes to help a special needs child achieve their fullest life potential.”

—BILL KENT



The Kent family (l-r): Ian, Karen, Lauren, and Bill

Meanwhile, 14 years went by. Lauren continued dancing, and discovered she could also sing; Ian progressed well; and Kent enjoyed his work. However, when he heard about a position at Lehigh Valley Health Network as president of the 800-bed flagship hospital, he—in tandem with his wife—decided to go for it. Before leaving Ohio, Ian finished high school; Karen finished her PhD; and Lauren left for Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, to study musical theater and dance. Bill, Karen and Ian Kent relocated to Pennsylvania, and Lauren later moved to New York City.

During his 5 ½ years at Lehigh Valley, Kent helped build a new emergency department and build-out a children’s hospital. When the pandemic struck, he hunkered down to do “some of the hardest work I’ve ever done—leading the hospital through devastating times, talking with families when we couldn’t let them in to see loved ones who were dying. It was heartbreaking. It was also heartbreaking what frontline caregivers and their families went through,” he says.

In late winter of 2020, he heard about the opportunity at Matheny and “immediately felt a calling. I have an understanding of what it takes to be a special needs parent,” he thought. “I know what it takes to help a special needs child achieve their fullest life potential.”

So, Kent decided to throw his hat in the ring. “All interviews were virtual,” he says, but “Matheny did something quite profound. They brought me on site and toured me around. I met much of the leadership and many frontline workers.”

“When I came onsite, I knew the position at Matheny would be a wonderful next step. I could use all of the things I had learned along the way. I felt this would be a wonderful culmination—the pinnacle—of my career,” he says.

Kent started his new job on March 29, overlapping one week with Dr. Kendell Sprott, who “personally introduced me to many people. It was a remarkably generous thing to do,” he says.

For employees who wonder what they can expect from the new CEO, know that he has two core mantras: 1) from his days as an Eagle Scout, he believes “You should always leave the campsite better than you found it; and 2) You should build a strong team, so when you move on, you’ll leave no gaping holes. The organization can move forward seamlessly and successfully.”

He looks forward to building a five-year strategic plan with Matheny’s leadership and then putting the plan in motion. “The five-year plan needs to be a living, breathing organism,” Kent states. “Everyone in the organization should feel they’ve been involved and be able to see where they can make an impact in implementing the plan.” **MM**

Miles for Matheny Strides Forward

COVID-19 did not cancel out last year’s 23rd Miles for Matheny. Nor did it stop this year’s 24th Miles. While the line-up of activities was somewhat different from the traditional, the Matheny community still “came together” to celebrate the incredible work done at Matheny, and the patients, staff, families, and friends who make it all happen.

Miles 2021 was a combination of virtual and in-person events. The 10-mile, 25-mile, 35-mile, 50-mile, and Hills of Attrition cycling events took off from, and ended in, Liberty Park in Peapack on Saturday, June 5th. The 5k, Kids Fun Run, and Wheelchair/Fitness Walk were virtual. Participants could walk or run any time between June 5th and 20th to raise funds. The Lu Huggins Wheelchair Walk for patients and staff took place on Matheny’s campus and at its five group homes on the afternoon of June 5th. This year’s event raised approximately \$127,000 (net) for Matheny.

The 2021 top individual and team fundraisers are: Rolling With Scott; Bryan Desatnick; Team Andy Flash Nash; Michael Taurozzi; Danny’s Crew; Justin Lash; Diana D. Correia; Clive Morgan; Team Shane; Christopher Asbell Jr; J & J Technology Services; Jill Porter; and Team Scaglione.

This year’s sponsors include: the Small family (Event Sponsor); Peapack-Gladstone Bank (Rest Stops Sponsor); Pfizer (Cycling Sponsor); Porzio Bromberg & Newman (Kids Fun Run Sponsor); Total Lubricants, Unitex, Steve Halper—Imperial Dade, Maffey’s Security Group, Delta Dental of NJ, New York Jets, the Lash family (Community Sponsors); the Gordon family (Green Zone Wheelchair Walk); the Golub family (Yellow Zone Wheelchair Walk); the Caniano family (Red Zone Wheelchair Walk); the Petrucci Family Foundation (Basking Ridge Wheelchair Walk); the Nortillo family (Franklin Wheelchair Walk); Partlow Insurance Agency (Lakeside Wheelchair Walk); the Kent family (Frelinghuysen Wheelchair Walk); Bedminster Flyers Cycling Club, Medical Express Healthcare Products, Private Client Group, AM, Fairclough Propane, Village Office Supply, and The Friends of Matheny (Valued Sponsors).

A big thank you to the individuals, families, teams, and corporations who participated to make this “Miles” a major success.





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Detail: *I'm a Survivor of the Covid-19 Virus.* by Isabell Villacis



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