

# matheny**matters**

Spring-Summer 2025



A Community of **Caregivers**



Paul Frascella with sister Karen Frascella, a versatile artist, writer, and dancer in Matheny's Arts Access Program



As I step into this new role as Chairman of the Board, I've been reflecting on what makes Matheny so extraordinary. Again and again, the answer is simple: caregivers.

At its heart, caregiving is about presence. It's about showing up, over and over again—with patience, with empathy, and with a belief in someone's dignity and potential.

For me, caregiving is deeply personal. My sister has lived in one of our group homes for most of her adult life. Watching her be supported by people who see her as a whole person—not just her needs, but her dreams, her humor, her abilities, has shaped how I think about care. It's not just medical or physical support. It's connection!

At Matheny, caregivers take many forms: doctors, nurses, therapists, direct support professionals, educators, families, and more. Our facilities staff, drivers, food services members, housekeeping team, volunteers, and advocates all play a vital role in creating a safe, supportive environment. Everyone who contributes to life at Matheny is, in their own way, a caregiver. They are the ones who make Matheny so special. I see the magic of that every time I visit our campus or one of our homes. The people who work at Matheny do more than provide care; they create belonging, joy, and love.

As we look to the future, the Board is committed to making sure Matheny

continues to grow in ways that support both the people we serve and the people who care for them. That means expanding access, investing in resources, and ensuring every caregiver—whether a staff member, a family member, or a volunteer—feels supported and valued. Our vision is a future where Matheny continues to be a place where everyone is cared for and cared about.

Thank you to every caregiver in our community. You are the reason Matheny matters.

Warmly,  
Paul Frascella  
*Chairman, Board of Trustees*

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## matheny matters

Spring–Summer 2025

The magazine of

### Matheny

Peapack, New Jersey

[www.matheny.org](http://www.matheny.org)

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**On the cover:** Emily, Oren, and Isla Klein with Rayne, a student and resident at Matheny

**Photo by** Keith B. Bratcher, Jr.





## Welcome Wednesdays

What's so special about the second Wednesday of each month? It's no secret—it's Welcome Wednesday, when Matheny invites the public to come on campus to learn about its history, its values, the staff who make it all happen, and the wide range of services it provides for students and residents. Whether someone is in need of special services, looking for a volunteer opportunity, or is a potential new community partner, Matheny welcomes you.

The program runs from 10 to 11:30 am, beginning with welcome remarks, followed by a full campus tour. Each month, a different Matheny program is spotlighted. Go to Matheny's website for sign-up information.

## Rutgers Students in Peapack

In 2025, Rutgers senior undergraduate biomedical engineering students are once again involved in a program with Matheny to enhance medical device development that may help individuals with medically complex developmental disabilities. These Rutgers students spend time with Matheny's students and residents to better understand their challenges, which subsequently informs the design of their senior projects. The program was the brainchild of Larry Thornton, a dedicated volunteer at Matheny for many years, until his death in 2019.



## Brave Bags in April

Do you know about the Matheny Brave Bags program? Participants in Adult Services design and assemble bags that police officers can provide to children during crisis situations. Filled with crayons, balls, small games, and toys, the bags bring comfort to kids going through difficult times. In April, participants brought bags to Morris Plains and Dover. Matheny residents love opportunities to be engaged in their communities.



## A Memorable Visit

Matheny welcomed Congressman Tom Kean, Jr. to the Peapack campus in April. Matheny residents, families, and staff appreciated the opportunity to share their stories and explain the vital services Matheny provides for children and adults with special needs. Kean is currently serving his second term in Congress as the Representative of the 7th congressional district and represented New Jersey's 21st legislative district in the NJ Senate from 2003 to 2022.





# Caregiving— The **Parent** Perspective

**W**hat is it like to be the parent—or sibling—of a developmentally disabled child with complex medical issues? It's very hard, and there is no one who is prepared for the daily physical and emotional toll it takes—that's a given.

Firsthand accounts can have value for families feeling overwhelmed and isolated

by their experiences; and professional help can often address parents' practical questions, such as: How do you bridge the isolation of being a constant caregiver? How do you continue to respond day after day to the demands of constant caregiving without any respite in sight? Where do you turn when you're exhausted and your night's sleep continues

to be broken? While other parents and professionals can provide helpful insights and answers, each family grapples with ongoing challenges, some unique to their situation.

Emily and Oren Klein, and their younger daughter Isla, age 12, are a New Jersey family who struggled to give their medically complex daughter Rayne, age 15, the opportunities and experiences they believe every child should have—excellent medical care and therapies, comfort, a sense of well-being, and as she's grown—more learning opportunities, and fun times. That's been challenging.

Emily grew up in Marlboro, loved dancing and writing, attended a performing arts program in high school, and is a Skidmore College alum, who majored in business. She was a ghostwriter for years and is now publishing her own writing. Oren grew up in Union, is a Rutgers College alum, and runs an auction firm that specializes in the sale of real estate and distressed businesses. Fifteen years ago, their first child was born with a rare genetic mutation after what looked like a perfectly healthy pregnancy, and that mutation changed their lives forever.

At birth, Rayne had eye anomalies, was feeding poorly, and her oxygen kept dipping. In her first six months, Rayne underwent intestinal surgery, two corneal transplants, had a feeding tube placed, and spent the majority of her life in various hospitals along the east coast. As a youngster, Rayne was often sick and struggled with gut issues. "Nothing was typical during those early years," Emily says. "Almost every illness landed her in the hospital."

Also, despite all of her therapies—five to seven days a week, sometimes twice a day—her developmental milestones were scattered. Emily explains, "Rayne would make progress, and then regress. She would have a few words, and then they would disappear. It was never linear." Rayne still can't sit up or stand. She's also nonverbal and blind.

Part of that chaotic feeling can be attributed to the fact that Rayne's diagnosis didn't exist when she was younger. Rayne was very much a medical mystery, which left the family feeling helpless. "No





doctor could identify what was going on or point us in the right direction. It was a lot of moving forward in the dark,” Emily says. Rayne finally got a diagnosis when she was five, and was included in the first medical paper on this condition. In addition to this genetic condition that has impacted her eyes and her movement/muscle control, Rayne also has mitochondrial issues, and requires support for her immune system.

When Rayne turned 3, their public school district acquired nursing care for her during the day and they were approved for some hours also in the afternoon. However, like so many families, they were not granted 24-hour care, which meant they did not get evening hours. For more than a decade, neither Emily nor Oren slept through the night.

By age 13, Rayne’s care needs had escalated. “She had so many medications. She required weekly infusions, and multiple glucose checks throughout the day. She was also getting heavier and I couldn’t lift her. Even changing her diapers was

difficult,” says her mother. “This wasn’t the life we wanted for her.” Oren adds, “We wanted her to have friends and activities.” That’s when the Klein family found Matheny.

Two years ago, Rayne moved to Matheny, and became a resident-student there. Rayne’s family says her life on Matheny Hospital’s Yellow Zone has been more than they had hoped for. “All of the nurses, DSPs, and doctors have been stellar. Her core care team is exceptional; I’m grateful for every one of them every day,” Emily says. Oren added, “She used to be in the hospital at least four to five times a year. In the last couple of years, she’s been in the hospital only once. That’s a good measurement of success.”

The couple also likes the social aspect, with a recreation department that provides activities after school almost every day. Rayne was on a kayaking trip on the day of our *Matheny Matters* interview. “She enjoys kayaking,” says Isla. Rayne also loves everything music, movement, and walks outside--and she gets to do all

“Today, my daughter lives in the corner of the world big enough to hold all of her possibilities....She has a life filled with meaning and joy.”

—EMILY KLEIN

of these things at Matheny. “Matheny is the antidote to what I saw as the stigma of sending our child to live outside our home,” Oren says.

She also loves school. Isla adds, “She’s sad when there’s a week off for vacation!” And Rayne has made great progress. “The therapists and teachers are outstanding,” says Emily. The school was even able to keep Rayne’s one-to-one nurse (that she’s been with since age 3) with her. “She and Rayne have such a special bond; it was nice that Matheny kept that pair together,” Emily adds. The family agrees that every staff member at the school has gone above and beyond. Oren adds, “She’s making progress in her own way.”

The family was initially concerned about how often they would be able to visit their daughter. But they’ve since settled into a routine. “We’re there a lot,” says Oren. Rayne also goes home for some holidays, and the family sometimes takes her out on the weekends—to the mall or somewhere else she enjoys.

In the last two years, the Kleins have become members of the larger Matheny family. They attend the Town Hall meetings and have worked on internal projects with other families. “We are always open to putting our efforts towards whatever we can do,” says Oren, who has also been able to furnish Matheny with some needed supplies and furniture. Looking forward, the family can’t wait to see all the experiences Rayne will get to enjoy. And, Isla has already decided that she wants to work at Matheny when she gets older. **MM**

## Isla Inspires Her Classmates and Impacts Matheny

Isla, the 12-year-old sister of Rayne Klein, is a sixth-grade student at Gould Elementary School in North Caldwell. Early in 2025, she presented her “Dollars for Dreams” idea to her school’s principal and Student Council. “Isla came up with the idea all on her own,” says her mother, Emily. “We were really excited to see where this would go.”

Isla’s Valentine’s Day-themed fundraiser set homerooms competing against one another to see which one could raise the most money by Valentine’s Day. The funds would go to help support recreation activities for the residents. Isla wanted to support Matheny and managed to inspire the other students at her school—to the tune of more than \$4,000 in donations.

Isla will move on to middle school next fall, where she hopes to continue her fundraising on behalf of Matheny. “I hope to do it again next year,” she says, “and I plan to make it even bigger.”



(l-r) Aimee Hunnewell, Chief Development Officer at Matheny; Sean Bielefeldt, Vice President of Life Enrichment Therapies and Community Living at Matheny; and Isla Klein, sister of Matheny student and resident Rayne Klein



## Her Pocket of the World

# Our Journey to Matheny

By Emily Klein

How much longer can we keep Rayne at home with us?

For years, my husband and I dodged this question.

It's the question no parent—especially in the complex needs community—wants to answer.

So we shield ourselves with phrases like: I could never.

No one will care for her like we do.

How would she understand—that we're not giving her away?

I know these words.

Because I used to say them.

Before.

. . .

In December 2022, another nurse left us. A week later, the home health aide we'd hired to help overnight a few times a week took another job.

By then, my husband and I were more than a decade into the bone-deep exhaustion of sleep deprivation, the internal chaos of unrelenting medical traumas, and the persistent strain of divvying up Rayne's constant care between the two of us.

We were tired. Sick. And lost.

Not long after, I watched Rayne lying on her side on the black mat in our family room, pressing the flashing buttons on the musical toy she'd gotten for her thirteenth birthday months before. Her feeding pump hummed inside the mini backpack behind her. James Taylor played.

And I thought: This is Rayne's world.

Her entire existence had shrunk to the size of our family room.

. . .

We made the decision to move our daughter to a medical home because she deserved more.

She deserved friends.

She deserved to simply be Rayne, and not the persistent patient.

She deserved parents who weren't perpetually overwhelmed and exhausted.

She deserved to be part of a larger world.

And honestly—The world deserves her.

Because she's magic.

. . .

When we started searching for Rayne's medical home, I clung to a singular belief:

Somewhere, there's a pocket of the world made just for her.

I thought back to a conversation I'd had with a friend years before about a school and residence for individuals with complex needs.

"It's situated on top of a hill," he had told me.

"That sounds beautiful," I had said.

It must be beautiful there, I thought.

I reached out to Matheny.

Months passed.

We braced for the news that a bed had opened up.

We got the call.

We grieved.

Rayne moved.

We grieved some more.

. . .

It was terrifying to imagine someone else caring for my child. My child!

She should be with me.

I still think this sometimes, even now, as I pass by her bedroom on the first floor of our house.

Not because her care isn't wonderful—it is.

Not because she isn't thriving—she is.

Not because the round-the-clock medical support isn't keeping her well—it is.

But because—

This wasn't supposed to happen.

And yet—it did.

. . .

A few months after Rayne had settled into Matheny, we were dropping her off at the nurse's station after a short family outing. I swallowed the familiar lump in my throat as I kissed my daughter goodbye.

"Welcome back, Rayne," her nurse smiled wide as she brought over her afternoon medications.

"Hi Rayne!" another nurse called out from behind the desk.

"Did you hang out with your sister?" yet another asked, passing by.

Rayne smiled and giggled—her version of hello.

She's happy, I thought.

I started to walk away when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the little boy seated next to her reach out and touch Rayne's tray. The casualness of his gesture made me pause.

And then he called to her: "Ray Ray."

My heart melted to the bottoms of my feet.

. . .

Today, my daughter lives in the corner of the world big enough to hold all of her possibilities.

She has friends—children who want to be with her, near her. She goes to school each day and joins after-school activities. She has a life filled with meaning and joy. She has found the place where she's just Rayne, and where everyone makes sure that she knows: you belong.

After everything, my daughter has landed safely, contentedly, in her pocket of the world.

. . .

Thank you, Matheny, for being that pocket of the world—for Rayne, and for every individual who needs you.

*Rayne's journey to Matheny is just one moment of our story. I share more reflections on caregiving, belonging, and hope over on my Substack. If you'd like to stay connected, I'd love for you to join me at [EmKleinWrites](#).*





Nurse Pearl Chiang with Matheny residents Melvin Rhett and Daeon Troutman

symptoms—and learning how to communicate with each individual are key to keeping them healthy, says Chiang. “Most of the patients are nonverbal. But they all have learned how to communicate. Many use a communication tool.”

“But it’s still very important to know everything about each patient, so you know when something, even something small, has changed,” she says. “For instance, seizure activity is different from one patient to another, and all have different signs of an oncoming seizure. When you know the patients well, you recognize the signs.”

Chiang also communicates regularly with patients’ families. “I call the families often,” she says. “If a patient is sick or something special happens, I always call. The communication is two-way. If a family wants to talk with me, I’m available.” She also helps the patients keep in touch with their families.

“I love my patients so much,” she says. “I like spending a lot of time with them—relaxed time. We have so much fun together.”

When Chiang is not at Matheny, she paints—sometimes for hours at a time. She often gets suggestions for subject matter from her patients, who are enthusiastic about the vivid colors and joyfulness of her artwork.

Before COVID, “I had a lot of art shows—sometimes two per year,” she remarks. She plans to return to exhibiting her paintings soon.

Chiang came to this country with her husband in 1991. They have two children, Brian and Amy. In 2002, when Brian was 7, he was diagnosed with Type I diabetes. That was the impetus for her decision to become a nurse.

Nursing and painting are the themes that intertwine through Chiang’s life, bringing her happiness. She has also inspired some patients to become visual artists themselves. “I like to observe my patients while they create art,” she says. “I see a whole other side of who they are.” **MM**

## The Art of Caregiving

**P**earl Chiang has taken care of some of her patients for more than 17 of her 18 years as a nurse on Red Zone, an adult medical unit at Matheny Hospital. “Yes, for that long,” she says. “They are my patients, but we are also friends.”

Chiang first earned a bachelor’s degree in finance, then a Master’s degree in computer science, followed by her registered nurse (RN) certification 10 years later in 2006. It took a while, but she found a profession and a place to work that are a perfect fit.

“I had a clinical rotation here as a student nurse,” she says. “I saw that the patients are so vulnerable. And they need someone to take care of them.” She decided right then that she wanted to be “someone” on a Matheny nursing team.

Many Matheny Hospital nurses have worked here for at least 10 years, Chiang observes. “They are so dedicated to the job and to the patients. Nurses here support and help each other. We’re like family.”

This is highly specialized nursing, requiring significant training beyond nursing school, she states. Many patients require gastronomy tubes (for delivering nutrients and medication directly to the stomach); most have seizures—and there are many different kinds of seizures, Chiang says; and a lot of patients have colostomy bags and urostomy bags.

“And we have to be very careful about skin care,” she explains. “Skin breakdown—caused by patients not being able to move around a lot and change position—can be a big problem.”

Chiang says that despite these many threats to their wellbeing, “Most of my patients are healthy. They get their annual check-ups and are taken care of by specialists as needed.” Matheny Hospital has several physicians on staff, as well as a physician head of hospital, Vincent J. Barba, MD, who is Chief Medical Officer and Vice President of Patient Care & Safety.

Knowing patients well—how to spot and interpret their particular signs and





Yetunde Adebajo, LPN, and group home resident Jennifer Cox





# Making It All Happen at Matheny's Group Homes



**N**adine Thompson has worked as a Matheny direct support professional (DSP) for 30 years straight, first on Green Zone at Matheny Hospital on the Peapack campus until 2018, and then at the group home in Franklin. She hasn't ever held a job anywhere else. Nor does she plan to. Her friend—who recommended the job to her so many years back—also still works as a Matheny DSP, at the group home in Frelinghuysen. It's Thompson's strong connection to the residents in Franklin that makes every workday a day she truly looks forward to.

Her hands-on, 12-hour shifts are filled with activity—all to ensure that the residents here are “happy and well-cared for.” Her many daily tasks, and those of her fellow DSPs, translate into providing active and healthy lives for the six adults with serious developmental disabilities and chronic associated medical conditions, who would otherwise likely live out their lives in a residential hospital. She was well-prepared for her many responsibilities, completing a full month of training, provided by Matheny, before starting her job.

Her day at the Franklin group home starts at 7 AM, when she checks that residents are up, out of bed, and dressed for the day. She first asks them how their night was and how they're feeling. “That's important,” she says. “I want to know they're doing OK.”

Then she does diaper changes, makes sure residents' teeth are brushed, and dresses those who are not yet out of bed and dressed for the day (and if it's a

weekend morning, ensures they have a nourishing breakfast). Next, she packs a day bag—with a clean set of clothes, extra diapers, “a lunch they like,” and anything else that may be needed—for their time at Matheny's Adult Day program in Hillsborough. Residents set off in a private van at 9 AM Monday through Friday and return to their home at 3:30 PM.

While residents attend classes and take part in activities, such as cooking and exercise, computer lab, advocacy meetings, and adapted sports geared to their physical abilities, the DSPs clean the house, prepare dinner for the residents, do the laundry, and take care of anything else required for everyday life at the community residence. Thompson rides with the driver to pick up residents and accompany them on their return-ride, arriving back home at 3:30, having spent a busy, productive day.

Safely back inside the house, Thompson says residents usually spend the rest of the afternoon doing favorite activities of their own choosing, such as painting, music therapy, reading, responding to emails and playing video games. Dinner is served around 5 PM, and she helps feed those who need assistance. After dinner, as in every household, there are dishes and laundry to do, as well as preparing lunches for the following day, and bathing some of the residents so the overnight shift can get them ready for bed. If a resident needs to go to bed then, she puts them to bed.

Thompson works three 12-hour day shifts each week, along with two other





PHOTO: CARLOS NIEVES

**“The residents are all just like us—they have the same dreams, the same aspirations. They just can’t get from point A to point B by themselves.”**

**—NADINE THOMPSON**

DSPs. Night shifts and weekend shifts are similar, since residents require 24-hour-a-day care. She covers an additional shift if another DSP calls out because of illness or an emergency.

Many DSPs stay on the job for many years, she says, getting to know the residents very well. They can quickly identify if a resident is experiencing anything out of the ordinary, or running even a mild fever. If they assess the situation to be an emergency, they call 911 immediately, then notify the manager, and fill out a form with the pertinent information. A nurse comes to the residence Monday to Thursday, 7:30 AM to 4:30 PM, and addresses health concerns that are not urgent. “We notice everything, and if we’re concerned that it is anything out of the ordinary, then we report it to the nurse,” says Thompson. “Residents who are not verbal sometimes throw tantrums if something is not right. That’s how they tell us, and we make sure to find out what’s wrong.”

Thompson and the other DSPs are each assigned two to three residents, she explains, but their caregiving does not stop there. “We do anything that’s needed,”

Nadine Thompson, Direct Support Professional at Matheny’s Franklin Group Home, with Patrick Marchesani, a resident of the Franklin Group Home

she says, “not just for our own patients. It’s like someone invites you to their home, and you want to help out with whatever work needs to get done.”

Communicating with the residents’ families is also important to the DSP. “If something needs communicating right away, I talk with the manager, who will call the family,” she explains. “But I like to talk with the families when they come in to visit and tell them what’s been going on.”

What does Thompson like best about her job? “I love the clients,” she says. “I like being in the mix with them. One client is so challenging, but so funny. One of the women speaks about empowerment. Another says, “Nadine,” as soon as I walk in the door in the morning. I just love going to work.”

She says working with Matheny’s residents also prepared her to help out with her sister’s autistic son. “I know now that even if someone is nonverbal, it’s OK. You’ll get by. I can help by telling people how it is.”

Does she have any other advice? “Yes, apply for a job here,” she says emphatically. “The residents are all just like us—they have the same dreams, the same aspirations. They just can’t get from point A to point B by themselves.”

## **A Little Bit of Everything**

Dale Roberts, assistant manager for three group homes at two sites (Basking Ridge and Frelinghuysen), is a Matheny long-timer, like Nadine Thompson. He started as a volunteer in his teens, helping with events and trips for residents, then worked as a DSP at Frelinghuysen for four years before taking on his current job a year ago. “My Mom worked here too,” he says, “as a DSP and driver.”

His day consists of scheduling and managing staff in these houses; monitoring day-to-day operations; making sure clients are well taken care of; and ordering supplies. His years of experience as a DSP and going through nursing



school have prepared him well for his job, Roberts says.

What drew him to this work? “I grew up with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I’m comfortable helping and caring for people who are in need,” he explains.

What is his day like? “I do a little bit of everything,” he says, “meetings, training and supervising staff, helping with ADLs (activities of daily living), planning activities and trips. And even some shift coverage.” He interfaces with all 45 to 50 staff members (15 per house), filling in the gaps as necessary, “and making sure it’s a smooth operation and residents are happy, healthy, and taken care of.”

He often converses with residents and also with families, making sure communication goes two ways. “If there’s any issue, I can usually solve it with the resident,” Roberts says.

While his job is primarily management, he does “a lot of hands-on as well. Wherever there’s a need, I try to fill it. I cover for staff if they call out.”

What does he like best about his job? “Seeing a smile on a resident’s face, ensuring there’s a good environment for everyone. I love knowing that I make a difference.”

Do the routines become too-routine?

“No,” he says, “I like everything about my job, and then I come back the next day and love doing it all over again.”

Dale Roberts, Assistant Manager for three group homes in Basking Ridge and Frelinghuysen



## PAUL SANTO

### Group Home Resident, Writer, Visual Artist



**P**aul Santo, who was born with quadriplegic cerebral palsy (affecting all four limbs), lives in one of Matheny’s two Far Hills group homes.

He requires a wheelchair to get around, as well as significant assistance to go about his day. But the community residence he calls home provides him a medically safe environment and care that encompasses all activities of daily living. It is an antidote to a life of loneliness and isolation.

Santo is a songwriter, playwright, and visual artist, whose creations have been displayed in several exhibits featuring Matheny’s Arts Access artists. In 2023, his artwork was featured in Members Art Show & Collectors Week at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey in Summit. In Spring 2024, several of his paintings were included in an exhibit at Sotheby’s in New York entitled, “Art Without Boundaries,” along with the works of four other talented Matheny Arts Access artists. He has written and presented several staged readings of original short plays as part of Kean University’s Premiere Stages *Plays by People* annual Spring program. This year’s play is entitled, “Return to Baseball.” And he loves country music.

Santo enjoys an active life, leaving his home at 9 AM every weekday to participate in an array of learning, fitness, and social activities, and to meet up with friends, at Matheny’s Adult Learning Center in Hillsborough. He returns home to Far Hills at 3:30 PM each day.

He also has a caring family—three sisters, Susan, Christina, and Elisa, and their husbands and children—and a mother, whom he frequently visited with until her death in 2023. His father died when Paul was in his 20s.

Chris Nesbitt, Director of Matheny’s Residential Services, says: “Paul Santo leads a life filled with many activities and many people that he loves. The Far Hills group home is a great fit for him.”



## A Nurse on the Move

Chris Nesbitt was introduced to *Matheny Matters* readers in fall 2022, when his picture appeared on the cover of the magazine. He joined the Matheny community in 2020 as the nurse for the Basking Ridge group home. His prior experience included taking care of neurologically impaired patients at Kessler Institute in Saddlebrook, three years as nurse manager of a transitional group home, and working at the Somerset County Jail.

He attended Kean University, majoring in physical education, and later earned his nursing certification, inspired to enter the profession after “realizing how important the health care providers are—not only to the patient but to the patient’s entire family. A visit from a nurse, an aide, a doctor can have such a positive impact,” he says. His father died of a quickly progressing form of Alzheimer’s disease in his 50s, when Nesbitt was in his early 20s, impacting his choice of career.

In his new position as Director of Residential Services, he oversees all seven Matheny group homes and their managers. Is it a good fit for him? Yes, he says, “there’s something new every single day, I’m on the move a lot, I’m in the homes a lot. There’s constant change. I don’t sit still for long.”

“It’s hard,” he continues, “but I always embrace a challenge and this is a really big challenge. I like change and this is a big change. It’s exciting. I’m learning a ton.”

Nesbitt is charged with coordinating the work of all the group home managers, who oversee the work of all the DSPs and nurses in each home, who provide direct care to all of the residents in Matheny’s group homes.

While he misses the many daily interactions with residents, he still makes seeing and communicating with residents a part of his day. “I interact with the residents at the Hillsborough Day program and at the clinics on Matheny’s main campus. I get to see them at their best and out of the house, involved in the activities of their day.”

In his new leadership role, Nesbitt tackles the larger issues encountered in



“The residents are *numero uno* for me. The important thing is making sure that everyone has the highest quality of life we can give them.”

—CHRIS NESBITT

the overall functioning of the seven group homes. Right now, he is trying to streamline the work flow for staff and improve day-to-day operations. Staffing issues and time management need to be addressed with creative solutions. He says the workflow should be tweaked so nurses have more time to spend on patient care.

As an answer to these issues, he’s initiated a program he calls “Situational Response,” and it seems to be working well. He’s put together an “elite team of

workers, who have good computer skills and have hit the ground running,” he explains. The team is composed of five full- and part-time DSPs and LPNs, who can fill in any staffing gaps as needed. They are given a schedule for a month at a time, but can be rerouted, if necessary, he says. Having trained at all Matheny’s five Somerset County group homes, they are ready to step in at a moment’s notice. Since skilled, 24-hour-a-day coverage is such a priority when running a group home, this response goes a long way to fulfilling a crucial need.

Nesbitt is also working on admissions of new and transferred residents—finding appropriate candidates to fill vacancies that periodically come up in one of the group homes. He also looks for spots for residents requesting a move from one group home to another. Three years ago, Matheny opened a new group home in Far Hills, which quickly filled with individuals eager to move in.

Renovating the older group homes is also a high priority for him in his new role. “Three out of seven have had kitchen renovations and their floors redone. We’re upgrading the furniture in all of the homes as needed. The houses should be spruced up—to look more like homes and less like a facility,” he says.

“I want staff to have as much face-to-face time with the residents as possible—and less time on the computer. I want the residents to do more trips, more vacations.”

“The residents are *numero uno* for me,” he says.

“The important thing is making sure that everyone has the highest quality of life we can give them,” Nesbitt continues. “Awesome living space, good food. Everyone’s health and other appointments up-to-date. This is an aging population and we need to make some changes to reflect that.”

Nesbitt gives a special thank you to Sean Bielefeldt, Vice President of Life Enrichment Therapies and Community Living, who has mentored him in his transition from group home nurse to administrator overseeing all of Matheny’s group homes.

“He’s helped me so much,” he says. **MM**



## The Gift of Friends

**A**mong Matheny's greatest supporters of its students' and residents' accomplishments is an organization affectionately called "The Friends."

Over its more than 40-year history, The Friends of Matheny has donated more than \$3.5 million, underwriting a better life for every Matheny School student, hospital and group home resident, and participant in Matheny's Arts Access and adult day programs. Most of that money has been generated through the steady, hard work of volunteers, who staff the Second Chance Thrift Shop in Gladstone.

The Friends work with Matheny staff to identify needs and wants not covered in Matheny's budget. Over the years, the organization has purchased new equipment, underwritten life-enriching trips, and supported special events and programs, as well as having fulfilled the yearly "wish lists" that staff submit on behalf of students and residents.

Most of their recent \$125,000 donation was awarded to Matheny's Rehabilitation Technology Department, but other programs like Arts Access, the Matheny School, and Life Enrichment Therapies have also benefited. On December 9, The Friends received thank you notes from Matheny School students, whose lives are impacted every single day by these gifts.



## Making Life Better at Matheny

Welcoming Daiichi Sankyo, Inc.'s Rose Ann Hastings, Associate Director, Corporate Communications, to Matheny's Basking Ridge Community Residence recently was a special opportunity to showcase the vital impact of philanthropic partnerships and to convey our collective appreciation. From supporting needed group home renovations, to making a generous holiday donation on behalf of employees, to bringing team spirit and sponsorship to *Miles for Matheny*, and more, Daiichi Sankyo, Inc.—with exceptional leadership from Rose Ann and her colleagues including Bill Maxwell who facilitated an introduction—is making such a positive difference for Matheny. Thank you, Daiichi Sankyo, Inc.!



*Above:* Cindy Shanks, resident (seated); standing l-r: Rose Ann Hastings, Associate Director, Corporate Communications, Daiichi Sankyo, Inc.; Chris Nesbitt, Director of Residential Services; Dale Roberts, Assistant Manager, Group Homes; Yetunde Adebajo, LPN

*Left:* The Friends of Matheny has purchased new equipment, underwritten life-enriching trips, supported special events and programs, and fulfilled the annual "wish lists" submitted by staff on behalf of students and residents.





# Caregivers Need Caregiving Too

**A** day in the life of a person with developmental disabilities can be a day of coming up against many frustrations. Communication and mobility challenges are the norm; feelings of isolation are not uncommon; living in a residential hospital or group home can present social challenges.

With limitations to verbal communication, frustrations can be hard to express and sometimes result in emotional outbursts. For Matheny's residents and students, coming to terms with the reality of their lives is an ongoing process of facing obstacles.

However, it's an ongoing source of growth as well, according to Dan Balboni, Psy.D., Matheny's Director of Psychological and Social Services. He heads up a team of social workers, behaviorists, and a part-time chaplain, all focused on the "mental health and behavioral needs of our people." The team is available to any resident or student who needs their care or just wants to chat. The same team addresses the mental health needs of Matheny's staff members, and serves as the primary point of contact for parents and guardians. It's a big job.

"We want to make sure that our residents and students can achieve all they can do," says Balboni, who has been working at Matheny for 15 years, first as a behaviorist for eight years and then as Director of Psychological Services, until taking on his current role in 2021. "We help our residents and students set goals that allow for their growth. We also make sure that the staff's expectations for a person are not set too high—or too low."

All Matheny residents, as well as day students, have developmental disabilities and serious medical issues, which limit their mobility and independence. But Balboni points out that everything is done at Matheny to support advancing their communication skills, their learning, and happiness, and to help them identify pursuits that enrich their lives. The psychologist and the team members meet with residents and students individually and also in groups.

Matheny's direct support professionals, paraprofessionals, and nurses work closely with Matheny students and adult residents on a daily basis, helping with their most basic needs and wants. These include all activities of daily living

(ADLs), such as eating, showering, getting out of bed and dressed in the morning, moving from place to place, and toileting. Over time, these caregivers come to know residents and students well, and form close ties with them. Many work at Matheny for 10 plus years, some stay for decades.

The psychologist points out that there are staff shortages in the caregiving field throughout the country, which also impact Matheny's caregivers. "They work so hard," Balboni points out, "and sometimes their workloads feel overwhelming to them." Some caregivers come to him and other members of the team for help in dealing with what are clearly signs and symptoms of "burnout."

The term "burnout" is frequently used to describe fatigue that doesn't seem to go away and feels worse over time. Hospital workers' feelings of burnout made headlines during COVID-19's peak years. There were too few workers and too much work, too many demands and stresses over a long time period, with no sign of letting up.

But burnout is recognized by mental health specialists as far more than chronic



tiredness, according to Balboni. Its symptoms can seriously impact an individual's work- and home-life, and be detrimental to everyday activities and happiness in many ways. He and the team work closely with Matheny's caregivers to identify burnout, and to teach them strategies for managing its symptoms and preventing its return.

So, how is burnout identified? The standard definition is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress, which often affects emotions, thoughts, and behavior, and can cause physical symptoms.

Balboni says staff describe their experience as "overwhelming exhaustion; not feeling as emotionally connected or as empathetic as they once did; feeling everything that was once doable is now more difficult; and not being able to find their (inner) resources anymore."

**"We want to make sure that our residents and students can achieve all they can do. We help our residents and students set goals that allow for their growth."**

**—DAN BALBONI**

Work supervisors and family often "advise the person to take a break; go away on a vacation; focus on yourself and your own needs for a while. However, I've never seen that actually work for anyone," says the psychologist. "And there's no research to support that it's effective."

What does he recommend? "The answer is complicated," he says, since different approaches work for different people. But first and foremost, affirmation of the person's feelings of burnout is, in itself, an important facet of turning things around.

"There is no test to confirm burnout; there is no precise definition and no defined treatment," says Balboni. "Burnout is undervalued. You can't measure it; it's purely subjective." So, his number one action is to validate the caregiver's experience, reassuring them that what they are experiencing is taken seriously at Matheny. "Experiences of burnout are too often dismissed. We never do that here."

Next, Balboni recommends trying to turn negative feelings into something that's positive and useful socially—such as painting, writing poetry, knitting. "Then I advise the person to take their creation and get it out there—find ways to make your state of being reach others. Connecting with others in this way is often healing."

Another strategy that

Balboni finds useful is to train individuals to shift their perspective and frame their experience differently. "You can choose to think about a situation from a different point in time," he says. "By imagining different scenarios, people often come up with fresh ideas and solutions."

He says, "Figure out where in time you exist. For instance, if you think now is awful and will be forever, then shift yourself mentally into the future to gain a different outlook."

"Or, are you fixated in the past, thinking things were far better back then? Now think of how you approached difficult situations in the past. Did it work? By stepping outside of your current timeframe, you can see problems from a fresh angle."

"When you choose to think about a situation from a different point in time—it could be a past experience or a future possibility—you can get yourself beyond the now," he says. "First, clearly define

the problem or situation. Then decide which timeframe you want to approach it from."

Imagine different possibilities in the future and make plans for changes based on this, he advises. Or think about successes you've had in the past, and how some of those same approaches can be useful now.

## **Some Common Symptoms of Burnout**

Extreme exhaustion

Increased irritability and frustration

Increased mental distance or detachment

Difficulties concentrating

Feeling alone in the world

Headaches, backaches, sore muscles

Sleep problems

Gastrointestinal symptoms

Balboni believes these strategies can get you unstuck and have big, positive impacts. "I also advise people to reach down inside themselves for their internal emotional resources," he says. "Those resources are still there." These strategies can also work for parents and other family members, who often experience burnout in their roles as long-term caregivers.

The psychologist reminds caregivers that when a nonverbal person has an emotional outburst, it's usually an expression of frustration when they can't communicate their feelings in other ways. He says there are methods that can be used to successfully manage the individual's meltdowns, and there are also reactions that tend to exacerbate the outbursts.

He assures caregivers that these are generally not meant as a criticism, or an expression of anger. While it may feel bad, caregivers should understand that these outbursts are a form of communication, not a judgement of their caregiving efforts, which are generally very much valued and appreciated. **MM**





**W**hen families come to the Matheny School, they're not just enrolling their child—they're beginning a journey of learning and support for themselves, too. Raising a child with medically complex developmental disabilities, especially one who can't easily express their needs, can feel overwhelming.

Many parents come searching for a place where their child will be understood—where they'll learn to communicate, grow toward independence, and be embraced by peers. They seek a safe, nurturing environment that can meet urgent medical needs and guide them through the challenges of today and the uncertainties of tomorrow. At Matheny, they find more than a school—they find a partner.

Educators Walter and Marguerite Matheny faced a similar challenge when they were unable to find a school that could meet the needs of their son, Chuck, born with cerebral palsy in 1941. In response, they founded the Matheny School in 1946 to serve children whose needs were not being met by traditional

schools. In 1951, they purchased 38 acres of land with several buildings in Peapack, New Jersey, where the Matheny campus grew over the years to include a school, residential hospital, outpatient services, and an arts center. In 1992, Matheny established off-campus group housing for adults 21 and older who did not need acute medical care, as well as day programs for those who had graduated high school but were not able to hold a job.

This small, homegrown enterprise evolved into a major force. The Matheny School has become a place where parents and guardians take steps toward a better understanding of their children's abilities,

while learning how to enhance those abilities as the child develops and grows.

An important first "lesson" for parents is learning they are not alone in caring for their children and supporting their children's future successes, and in their experiences of parenting. On their initial tour of the Matheny School, the first person that parents are likely to meet is Bonnie Wilkenfeld, PhD, LCSW, the school's social worker. Wilkenfeld has held her current position since 2019, having started her Matheny career in 2007 as a shared Matheny Hospital–Matheny School social worker. She knows what parents face when searching for a school where their children can thrive, be safe and happy, and make friends—a second home.

The Matheny School enrolls children from preschool at age 3 to high school graduation at age 21. In 2024, 10 students proudly received their high school diplomas during a formal ceremony. The accomplishments earned by these students can be difficult for parents to imagine when they arrive at the school for their first tour.

## Matheny School Is a Second

# HOME





“Why Matheny?” is the question in most parents’ minds when they begin the process of evaluating schools. “Will this school be a good fit for my child?” High on the list of wants and needs is medical oversight, according to Wilkenfeld. “These children are medically complicated or they would likely stay in their community school district,” she explains. “The school has well-qualified onsite nursing and a school physician; and the on-campus residential hospital also has pediatricians on staff.”

She says that of equal importance is the school’s expertise in “total communication” techniques, designing an “individualized approach for every child. A uniquely individuated program is developed for each student.” Speech/language specialists teach the use of sign language, facial expressions, picture icons, communication boards, state-of-the-art assistive augmentative communication technology, and combinations of these to enable students to express themselves.

Another major concern for parents is “having kids included, not isolated from their peers during specific social activities such as lunch time,” says Wilkenfeld. “And parents want transparency, since the kids often cannot express what’s gone on during their day. We send regular emails to parents and make sure they have ongoing communication with our team.” Assistant Principal Anne Bruno has also introduced a communication app that provides videos and photos in real-time—a boon to parent involvement by providing a better understanding of the child’s interactions during the school day.

What helps most parents choose Matheny after going on the school tour is “the vibe. They love the warmth of the staff, the caring and concern for the kids,” she says.

Wilkenfeld explains that many children start their relationship with Matheny as a community-based day student at the school, where they acclimatize gradually to Matheny’s environment and staff, feeling more and more comfortable, while continuing to return home to their families at the end of the school day. Then during the student’s middle or high school years, the kids age and grow,

becoming more difficult for families to care for at home, leading some parents to consider having their child be evaluated for residential placement at the Matheny Hospital.

Wilkenfeld describes her role at the Matheny School as working closely with students and staff to ensure their social-emotional well-being, and addressing the

individuals as well. For instance, the social worker may lead relaxation and stress reduction activities with a class that has recently had a new student join. Change can be very upsetting for the students. The social worker often works with other staff members to help students identify and express their emotions.

She also advocates for individual



School social worker  
Bonnie Wilkenfeld and  
Matheny School student  
Patrick Marchesani

same for parents and siblings, frequently by providing supportive emotional counseling and referrals to community resources. There’s no question that everyone here recognizes the inherent challenges of caring for the students enrolled at Matheny, and form a community of shared experiences.

Working with small groups to encourage social skills development and peer interactions makes up “the lion’s share” of her clinical work, Wilkenfeld says, although she does interventions with

students and families—assessing their needs for community support and helping them to access services. For instance, is the family struggling with financial issues? Wilkenfeld can connect them with the appropriate agencies for help in their community.

“When new families are starting here, we connect them with each other and with our parent ambassadors, who can speak about the school from the parents’ perspective, and provide new families

*continued on page 19*



# A LABOR OF LOVE

**A**ngela Housel's workday is anything but routine. She's the Matheny School's Certified School Nurse (CSN), and she's ready to jump into action at a moment's notice—a requirement of her job here. When a student has a seizure, for instance, or shows early signs of a fast-moving respiratory infection, she quickly responds to support the school's staff.

A nurse for 43 years, and a CSN since 2008, Housel left public-school-nursing when she began her capstone/thesis for her Master's degree in Nursing (MSN). "The public school system was limiting me," she remembers, and she needed new challenges. Drawn to nursing those with special needs, she saw a rising demand for trained, skilled nurses in this field; and she was eager to learn a whole new specialty. "It's challenging work, and sometimes patients become acutely ill quickly, needing an immediate and knowledgeable response," she states.

Housel came to the Matheny School in 2022 to be the nursing team supervisor after what she calls "boot camp" in another school for students with special needs, where she had been "immersed in specialized intensive nursing knowledge. It was a valuable professional growth experience," she says.

What attracted her to Matheny was the residential hospital-school relationship, where pediatricians with this specific expertise are available 24–7, and can be called upon throughout the school day if needed. She also liked the continuity of care at Matheny. After school hours, those living in Matheny's residential hospital are followed and cared for by nurses and those same physicians.

"I was looking for that clinical piece," she states. "The hospital and the school are a perfect balance for the children

and for the nurses here. The access to physicians is very positive. There is a higher level of care with the physicians involved." Most of Matheny School students reside at the hospital, with 10 living at home in surrounding communities and commuting to school.

Housel shares her responsibilities with Vanica Eldridge, who earned her RN licensure in 1998, and subsequently joined



the staff of Matheny Hospital, where she had completed her final clinical nursing rotation. She has held several nursing jobs with Matheny since then. Eldridge earned her BSN in 2022. "The work is rewarding," she says. "Every day is different and the children are wonderful to work with. It's great being able to utilize and build upon my nursing skillset within both the school and the hospital."

In 2016 she and husband Ken adopted Matheny Hospital resident, India, who has cerebral palsy and is a graduate of the Matheny School. India was 4 years

old and living at Matheny Hospital when Eldridge first met her. They had a longstanding relationship prior to the adoption.

She is "completely dependent for all care," says her adoptive mother. "She can't stand or eat by herself, goes everywhere in her wheelchair, has a feeding tube, although she can also eat by mouth, and communicates using a device. But she is basically a healthy, strong person." (See *Matheny Matters* article, "Adopting India: The Making of a Family," Summer/Fall 2019)

India and her parents communicate a lot. Over the years she has become an integral part of her immediate and extended family, and enjoys traveling, eating out at restaurants, being outdoors, and participating in community activities with her parents.

**"We focus on what students can do and support them. But mostly we make sure all our students are included and loved."**

**—ANGELA HOUSEL**

"She is verbal," says Eldridge, "and her speech has blossomed since we adopted her. She is very determined to tell you what she wants. She also uses Proloquo [a symbol-based communication app] and an iPad."

Housel and Eldridge are a nursing team passionate about their professions. Both have strong first-hand experience with caregiving in their own families—Eldridge providing hands-on care for her adopted daughter and Housel committed to social and mental health caregiving for her younger sister, "who was a talented





School nurse Vanica Eldridge and adopted daughter India, a graduate of the Matheny School

and spirited artist.” She cannot work or live independently now because of serious mental health issues following a significant breakdown when she was 17, and has lived for the past five years in a supervised group home. Housel maintains strong family ties, visiting her often and taking her out to enjoy her favorite activities.

“What I’ve learned is that you can’t solve everything—similar to working with the children here. Acceptance is a big thing with what you can and cannot do. Then you care for each child, meeting each one of them where they are, caring for them with dignity and doing your best to support and improve their quality of life. At the Matheny School, we give each child purpose, keep them safe, and choose to love them.”

Both nurses have an evident commitment to Matheny School students. They head up a team of 10 Matheny School nurses, each assigned to a child who is

so medically fragile that they require a one-to-one nurse throughout the school day. Housel is in charge of scheduling these nurses on a daily basis, which can be tricky, often needing to step in herself to take the place of a nurse who is in need of back-up support with her assigned case, or requires bathroom coverage, and during lunch breaks. Two students have private nurses from agencies. The others are monitored by 22 Matheny paraprofessionals, most assigned on a one-to-one basis.

Vanica generally remains in the office, taking care of medications, assessments, and emergency calls with nurse Lexie McKevitt, and also steps in to cover wherever she is needed. “We cover for each other when one has to use the bathroom, for instance, or takes a lunch break,” says Housel. “Students who require one-to-one nursing are covered by a nurse all day, every minute of every day—they cannot be covered by a teacher or another care worker.”

Housel goes on to explain that Matheny nurses “are unique and specialized. They provide services other than nursing, such as instructional support and therapy support, and help with art projects and outside activities. They are connected and engaged with the children, and become part of the child’s educational experience. The approach is more holistic.”

“It’s an extension of our commitment to the child,” she continues. “It all supports their academic success.”

Nurses do an “overview” of each child every day, according to Housel. “They note changes indicating altered health. Each morning, Vanica and I go to the hospital zones where the residential students live, and we receive reports from hospital nurses, detailing relevant information for the school’s nursing and paraprofessional staff. There are also student-dental and medical appointments to keep up with, and IEP meetings with school districts (Individualized Education Plans designed for each child requiring specialized services) to attend—sometimes two or three each week,” she says.

This is even more labor intensive for parents with non-residential students, she explains, who have many medical appointments with specialists, such as neurologists and pulmonologists, many times during school hours. “There are so many details to keeping kids in school—successful and happy, as mobile as possible, and seeing that their communication skills are supported and improve.”

When children are sick, Housel follows up with the families, not only to check on their health, but to explore what is required for them to return to school. “Communication with families is very important,” she says. “We all do everything we can to give our students a better quality of life.”

“We develop beautiful therapeutic relationships. We see the progress they make. We watch them grow. We focus on what they can do and support them,” she says. “But mostly we make sure all our students are included and loved.” **MM**





Paraprofessional Michelle Mardis with Matheny School student Jacob

## A Day in the Classroom at the Matheny School

**Y**ou might call Michelle Mardis a Matheny School newbie. While many employees have worked there for more than a decade, she began less than a year ago, in August 2024. After first attending County College of Morris (CCM), where she received a Distinguished Student Leader Award in 2018, she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Stockton University in 2020 and worked in the mental health field for four years, some of which was in a classroom setting. In 2024, Michelle began looking around for a new opportunity. Knowing she enjoys working in a classroom and is interested in behavioral health, a friend referred Mardis to an opening for a paraprofessional position at the Matheny School.

Mardis says the job is a great fit. Each school day she is assigned to one student, although it's not always the same student. The majority of her time at Matheny has been spent working with a pre-school child, though she also has worked with middle and high-schoolers, primarily in the classroom. She helps the students with academics, activities of daily living such as eating, toileting, and moving around, and twice each week is on lunch duty. She also often communicates with families of non-residential students when they come to the school to pick up their children.

She particularly likes "the one-on-one rapport" with individual students, but she sometimes works as a "classroom para," assisting the classroom teacher, another role she enjoys. Working as part of a

team in the classroom, with occupational, speech and physical therapists, teachers, nurses, and other paraprofessionals, Mardis says she learns something new every single day.

She often stays by her assigned student's side when they have therapy sessions, she says, because it helps her better "understand the student and how they're doing." She is also in "constant communication" with the direct support professionals (DSPs), who take care of the students who reside in the hospital.

Mardis describes her role as "helping to keep students safe, happy, and secure." She explains that when students feel frustrated and have difficulty communicating, they may express themselves in ways that include yelling, physical agitation,



or even self-injurious behaviors. Her focus is on understanding these moments and supporting students with care and compassion.

However, “one of the things our students learn early on is how they can express their frustration in other ways,” she says. “Most of the students have communication boards, and quickly learn the core words, such as “Go” and “Stop.”

“Once the students understand how to use their personal communication systems, most of the frustration and behaviors go away,” she comments. “They can tell you if they’re hungry, tired, or feeling sick—as well as answer questions with a “yes” or “no.”

“By high school, many Matheny students have iPads and have learned how to use electronic communication systems,” she says. There are also some students in the school who are verbal and some who are ambulatory, she comments.

Mardis says the preschooler with whom she works just started his communication training in August, and “is already able to use eye gaze to communicate, picking out one or two pictures at a time on a board.”

Staying with the theme of communication, Mardis says that Matheny School paraprofessionals fill out communication logs every day with information such as what the child ate, how the child’s day went, which therapies the child had, and additional comments and concerns. These logs are available to be read by parents and guardians. In addition, Mardis talks face-to-face with the parent(s) every school day, if possible, and tells them details of interest about the student’s day.

“This place is amazing,” she says. “I always look forward to coming to work. Everyone is kind. And you have lots of different experiences every day.”

“And best of all, the kids get to know you. And you know you’re having an impact on the kids’ lives.” **MM**

## Matheny School is a Second Home

*continued from page 15*

with peer support and information on how they navigated the various community resource networks,” she explains.

Matheny hosts many events throughout the school year—Miles for Matheny, the Halloween parade, December holiday celebrations, the senior prom and senior trip around the Statue of Liberty, to name just a few. “We encourage our school parents to participate in these events,” the social worker says, “as well as arranging speakers for them on such topics as guardianship and curriculum development. We also connect parents with workshops, seminars, and newsletters that might interest them.”

Teachers also get in touch with the social worker for advice, information, and referrals. She’s been called into classrooms to provide bereavement counseling, such as when a student had seizures after his brother died. “I encourage students to express their emotions,” she says. She has various programs set to go for issues that seem to repeat, such as when a teacher is leaving or if a student is in the hospital with an illness.

She is currently working with Matheny School Principal Sean Murphy to create a survey that will ask parents to provide anonymous feedback about their school experiences. “We want them to be completely honest,” she says, “to provide us with constructive answers so we can improve.”

During a student’s last two years in Matheny’s high school, helping them make the transition to their adult life post-graduation has become a crucial part of the school’s curriculum. Wilkenfeld partners with the transition team, which consists of the teacher and therapists Christine Gonella, Christine Mayercik, and Christine Horvath to help students—and their families—prepare for this major life change with specialized programming.

The program model used is called PCAST, which stands for Person-Centered Approach to Secondary Transition. The transition team has received training from



Matheny School student Molly surrounded by four members of the school’s nursing team: (l-r) Vanica Eldridge, Lexie McKeivitt, Angela Housel, Deborah Foster

the Bogg’s Center for Developmental Disabilities and stays current with recent developments in this initiative. It culminates in a party celebrating the students and all that they have accomplished during their Matheny School years.

As part of the PCAST process, during the final two years of high school, the transition team works closely with each student and their families to help them create a person-centered brochure that describes what they want and what they need (ultimately quality of life experiences) from their point of view to bring forward into their adulthood journey post-graduation. It serves as an introduction to their caregivers and others who will closely interact with them in the next phase of their lives.

The school has an open-door policy and Wilkenfeld coordinates parent/guardian visits, which are encouraged. Visitors can watch a classroom in session, observe a therapy session, or be part of a birthday or other event celebration.

Wilkenfeld has been with Matheny more than 18 years, and she is still inspired and amazed by everything that goes on and everyone who makes it happen. Matheny, she says, “has had a big impact on my life.” Her biggest wish is that she continues to have a positive impact on the lives of students, their families, and other staff at the Matheny School. **MM**



## Its Reach Is **Near and Far**

Arts Access is having another banner year—with participants exhibiting their paintings and other visual art, and presenting their writing, choreography, and dance performances throughout New Jersey and beyond. Here is a quick take of just a few of their many activities and collaborations in recent months:



### Arts Access at Pfizer NYC Headquarters

Arts Access presented a pop up exhibit and artist talk at the Pfizer NYC Headquarters in Hudson Yards on April 29th, 2025. Four Arts Access artists were present to showcase their work and discuss their involvement in the program: Josh Handler, Tammy Heppner, Nancy Soto, and Isabell Villacis.

### Starlight Starbright

The works of 15 Arts Access artists were displayed at the Starlight Gallery of the Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown. After an opening reception on April 16, the exhibit was viewed by many who attended performances at the Center through May 18th.

### Plays by People 2025

On March 30th, original short plays written by Arts Access writers and dramatists Cheryl Chapin, Paul Santo, Chet Cheesman, Amy Myers, and Jessica Evans were performed by professional actors from Premiere Stages at Kean University. The successful partnership between Matheny Arts Access and Kean's Premiere Stages has been ongoing for a decade.

### FOR YOUR FALL CALENDAR

It's never too early to mark your calendar for a big celebration of the Arts Access artists at:

**Full Circle 2025:**  
***The Making of An Artist***  
on November 8

### A First for Arts Access

The participation of Arts Access artists in Art Fair 14C in Jersey City was the program's first-ever appearance at a professional art fair. This was the sixth 14C Art Fair, running from May 8 to 11. According to its website: "Art Fair 14C is open to exhibitors of all kinds—from brick-and-mortar galleries, to arts organizations, artist collectives, and individual artists." It aims to: "increase opportunities for artists; expand public access to fine art; strengthen careers in the arts; and activate underrecognized arts communities."

### Roxbury High School Students at Matheny

As a follow-up to the Arts Access presentation at Roxbury High School last fall, students came to the Matheny campus recently to get an in depth look into the Arts Access program and its unique facilitation process.

### An Online Art Show

From April 15 to June 15, works by Arts Access visual artists Cheryl Chapin and Ben Cuisson will be part of a virtual exhibit, *The Color of Rebellion*, presented by Inside Small, which, according to its website, "offers art opportunities for smaller artwork." Seventy-five artists are participating in the art show, which focuses on rebellion.



## On Another Note

Longtime Matheny nurse and artist, Pearl Chiang (read story page 5), displays some of her much admired artwork.



"HOLIDAY" ARTIST: PEARL CHIANG  
There is always always something to be  
thankful for,  
Especially on a holiday snow night.....  
Thanks all my great friends for supporting me  
all the time!







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# Full Circle 2025:

## The Making of an Artist

EXHIBIT OPENING | STAGE PERFORMANCE | RECEPTION

### SAVE THE DATE

Join us in the Robert Schonhorn Arts Center

**Saturday, November 8, 2025**

Celebrating the artists of Matheny Arts Access

[artsaccessprogram.org](http://artsaccessprogram.org)



Made possible by funds from the  
New Jersey State Council on the Arts, a partner  
agency of the National Endowment for the Arts.

