

# matheny**matters**

Spring • Summer 2026

## Longevity Starts Here





Nancy Hamstra  
President and CEO

## matheny**matters**

Spring • Summer 2026

The magazine of

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##### **On the cover:**

Matheny Hospital Unit Clerk Charlene Robinson with Matheny School student and resident Johnny

Photo by Keith B. Bratcher, Jr.

## Message from the CEO

**L**ongevity—meaning long life—is a word that has a very special meaning for us. This year Matheny celebrates its 80th anniversary. Founded in 1946 as a school for children whose special needs were not being met in the public schools, it has grown into a highly respected, effective, and beloved community that includes a specialized hospital, a nonprofit private school, seven group homes, an adult day center, and a fine arts center. And all of its parts—that so clearly work as a whole—have earned renown in the State and beyond.

The longevity of Matheny has relied on the long-term commitment of so many dedicated and highly skilled staff, who have given decades of their lives to support our students, patients, and residents. The excellent care provided by our staff, and deep caring about every individual, have undoubtedly contributed greatly to the longevity of Matheny's patients and residents.

Longevity also implies a good life. Matheny puts its emphasis on the long and positive life of those they care for. We ensure that those who rely on us can trust that we will do everything within our power to support their health, their well-being, their ability to learn and communicate, to have purpose, to be a part of the Matheny community and the larger world, and to enjoy many purposeful years.

We may have started small—with just four students attending our school in its first year—but we have grown over the years in so many significant and impactful ways. Our longevity has its history in the dedication and sense of purpose that launched Matheny, which have remained intact; and we look forward to many more years in which our special community provides a long and good life, and a secure and comfortable home, for so many special people.

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Transcending Boundaries: The Artist at Work

## Happy Together

In the last few months, the partnership between Matheny Arts Access and Kean University has continued to grow. Two programs have already earned kudos this year.

*Transcending Boundaries: The Artist at Work* features paintings, sculptures, and poetry by Matheny's Arts Access artists. The exhibition is on display in Kean's Liberty Hall Academic Center Gallery from February–May 1, and is built around the

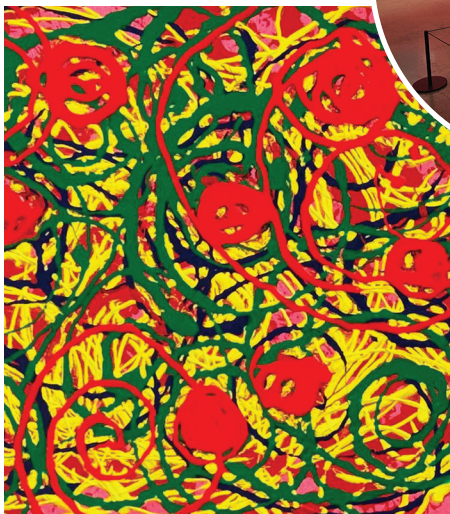
idea that “art functions as a universal language, one that extends beyond speech, culture, and physical ability,” and shares perspectives that might otherwise not be heard.



*Plays By People* returned in March 2026 with two performances.

Presented in collaboration with Premiere Stages at Kean, it features staged readings of dramatic works by Matheny Arts Access writers, performed by actors from Premiere Stages. This year's featured work includes *Deadly Vapors* by Christopher Saglimbene, and *Space Odyssey* by Amy Myers.

There will be more exciting Matheny-Kean collaborative work to anticipate in 2026, according to Heather Williams, Matheny Arts Access Director.



Photos courtesy of Galleries at Kean

## Calling All Cyclists

Matheny's partners at the Morris Area Freewheelers will host the 17th annual Revolutionary Ramble, a premier local charity event, on Saturday, June 13th, 2026. Matheny cyclists are invited to participate. Register as part of Team Matheny at [rambleride.org](http://rambleride.org), and proceeds of your ride will benefit Matheny's students and residents.



## New and Newsworthy

What's happening at Matheny? Stay in the loop by reading the *Friends and Family* e-newsletter. Just use the QR code below to sign up.



Charlene Robinson, who has worked at Matheny for almost 40 years, with Matheny resident Johnny, who attends the Matheny School





# A Vital Part of Matheny History

Matheny's almost 80 years of growth and service to a unique community of residents, patients, and students have largely been fueled by the many employees who have established deep relationships and decades-long careers here. Speaking with four of the ten staff members whose Matheny careers span more than 35 years, and whose commitments are still strong, it's evident that they initially had no intention of staying on the job here for decades, but the staff network and unique relationships with the clients have inspired them in ways they could never have imagined.

## CHARLENE ROBINSON

In September, Charlene Robinson will celebrate her 40th anniversary at Matheny. She started in 1986 as a personal care assistant in the hospital, first on Green Zone and then on Yellow Zone.

She was recruited from Youngstown, Ohio, where she grew up, to Peapack, NJ, where she began work at Matheny, and lived on campus in staff housing for about 20 years. She learned on-the-job, where, she says, there was always someone to show her how to care for the patients.

"I was comfortable right away," she remembers. "There was no problem. I like working with all kids."

For the past 10 years, she has served as a Unit Clerk, with more responsibilities for keeping clients' medical records, and other paperwork, up-to-date and accurate. She also helps out on the unit in a variety of other ways—purchasing and labeling patients' clothing, stocking shelves, helping out in the kitchen and with patients' feedings, "anything that has to be done," she describes. Each Thursday and Friday, she goes to the Hospital's Red Zone for four hours to help out.

While her current job keeps her at the computer for the majority of her workday, "I make time to be with patients," she says. "That's what I really enjoy."

She keeps in contact with families of patients, informing them about medical

trips and answering their questions. She also enjoys her role as a driver to medical appointments, although she did more of that in the past.

What is her favorite part of her jobs? "Interacting with the patients—all ages," she answers. "I talk with all of them, wave to all of them, kiss them on the forehead. When you're having a bad day, just seeing their smiles changes everything."

During the worst of COVID-19, Robinson came to work every day. The 31 patients on her zone, ages 7 to their 30s, especially enjoyed her sense of fun and her caring when outside visitors could not be there.

She takes personal pride in having learned great patience through her jobs at Matheny. "Just because our patients have some issues doesn't mean they aren't as productive and affectionate as anyone else," she says.

Does she have any dreams for the future? "Yes," she says. "We used to take patients out to eat sometimes and to local trips. We also had brunches every other weekend on campus. I loved doing it—the patients liked tasting many different foods. They loved the smells of the cooking—muffins, fresh pancakes, waffles with strawberries. The patients enjoyed it so much and I miss it, too."

"I wish we could find a way to cover the cost."

## ADULT DAY CENTER PAULA FADELL

Paula Fadell's emotional connection to her patients has sustained her day-in-and-day-out work schedule for more than 37 years, and she does not see retirement anywhere in the foreseeable future. As a direct support professional (DSP), she is assigned to and helps take care of 8 to 10 patients. She works 8 AM to 4 PM at the Hillsborough Adult Learning Center, where she "meets and greets clients when they arrive, helps them take off coats and gloves, travels with them to appointments, prepares lunches, helps clients eat, takes clients to the rest room, helps out in the classes and other activities, and more," she states. She was trained on-the-job when she started. During COVID-19's worst times, the Hillsborough's onsite outpatient program was closed, and she was transferred to work in one of Matheny's group homes.

Fadell says that she had a comfort level with Matheny's patients immediately when she started working here. "My mother is deaf—she can't hear or talk," so I had a lot of home experience," she explains. Her twin brother, Paul, has also worked at Matheny for more than 35 years.

She grew up in Sharon, PA, but after her "heart was broken," she followed

a friend to New Jersey and was quickly hired by Matheny. "I've been with the clients a long time," she says, "seeing many grow up." Her youngest client now is 22, the oldest 76, and there are several in their 60s, she says. "We're like family and it all works."

Among Fadell's many skills is her learned ability to notice even small changes in a client's condition. "It's a challenge to keep them well," she states. "Making sure their skin is intact," is extremely important, she explains, as well as being aware at all times of their psycho-social condition.

"I love them," she says. "When they're sad, I try to cheer them up. When it's someone's birthday, I bring balloons. The DSPs and clients play games—such as UNO and Go—and everyone has fun."

"They need me and I need them. We give each other support," she says. "I first thought I would be here maybe five years, then I thought 10 years. But they've grown on me. The clients make me happy. I'm grateful that I'm alive and can do this for these guys."

And to top it all, Paula met her husband Durrell—who has worked at Matheny for more than 40 years—on the job, and they have "been married for 36 years and have a wonderful son, Brandon," she concludes.



### PAULA FADELL (IN HER OWN WORDS)

#### *What I like about Matheny these days:*

I liked that patients could go back to Matheny from the group homes if their medical needs got too great. That shows loyalty to their patients.

During COVID, I got to work at a group home instead of being laid off. I liked working at the group home.

I love the Hillsborough Center because I love the students that attend and I love my coworkers. They are the best. I love the program and I see that the students love it, too. The students are happy that I work there. I try to be supportive and happy and that makes them feel like they can count on me.

I love Miles for Matheny. I always go and help out. I have only missed one since they started doing it. It's great and fun.

When my patients at Matheny got sick during COVID and had to be hospitalized, I would always go to the hospital to see them and take care of them.

I'm one of the older DSPs at Hillsborough and I think I contribute to the program. I participate in a lot of events. The instructors and the program director respect me and they know that I love it here. I thank God that I'm alive and that I can work. And if it wasn't for Matheny, I never would have met my wonderful husband. We've been together now for 36 years and we have a wonderful son, Brandon.



## MATHENY SCHOOL HOLLY STAUL

Holly Staul will celebrate her 40th year with Matheny on July 14. “I started when I was 20,” she says, “so I’ve spent two thirds of my life here.” She was recruited to Matheny from the town where she grew up in Western Pennsylvania, where she had been working in a nursing home kitchen.

“The person at Matheny who was in charge of PCAs (personal care assistants) was from my town,” she continues. “This was my chance to work with kids, which is what I had always wanted to do.”

She recounts why she first became interested in working with children, especially those who have communication issues. “I was inspired by Larry, a young boy in my church who had cognitive impairment,” she says. “Larry got sick and had to go to the hospital and he panicked. He died due to aspiration. I kept thinking, ‘If people could have understood Larry, he would still be here today.’”

Shortly after arriving at Matheny, Staul came to know Chuck Matheny, and his mother, Marguerite, who was The Matheny School’s co-founder. The newly arrived staff member was very homesick, but Marguerite “would encourage me. She was a great source of comfort.”

Originally hired as a personal care assistant (now called a direct support professional), she made a switch to work in The Matheny School in 1994, where she is a paraprofessional, currently working as a one-to-one student aide. She has also worked as a classroom paraprofessional, assisting all students who do not have a one-to-one aide.

What does her job entail? “I work with my student throughout the day—she has seizures and other medical issues—and help her to perform better in the classroom,” she says. The two have been together for seven years, and Staul will miss her when she graduates in June and moves on to Matheny’s Adult Services program. “I love working with her,” she says.

Staul’s workday begins at 9 AM when she meets with teachers, checks the day’s schedule, and reads her emails. At 10, she picks up her student from Matheny Hospital and brings her to the school,



where classes continue until the lunch break, and then resume after lunch through mid-afternoon.

How does the paraprofessional communicate with her assigned student? “She uses switches,” explains Staul, “to show her choices.” Her communication board has 32 picture-symbols that indicate common words. “She is very visual,” Staul continues, “and also loves music. She enjoys all her classes and being in school. I communicate with her hospital social worker if things arise, and also with her court appointed guardian periodically.”

The rewards of the job far exceed the minor challenges, Staul says. The only major challenge she recalls was when the school switched to remote learning during COVID-19’s worst periods. “All students had iPads and were up and running quickly, but it was hard,” she remembers.

This is her student’s “transition year,” when staff prepare all graduating students for their move to an adult program. “I won’t be assigned to her anymore, but I’ll be a volunteer for her, so I can continue

to see her,” Staul explains. “She is very attached to me, and I to her.”

What has been most memorable about her time at Matheny? “I’ve met the most amazing individuals,” she says. “I enjoy seeing how much they grow—even the little advances. I’m so proud that I helped them learn. They may be medically frail, but they are great to work with. What may seem like a small advance can actually be a big achievement.”

“When I see the residents from group homes wave and smile at Miles for Matheny, my heart overflows for them,” she continues.

“And the staff is so caring, and so dedicated to the residents. And everyone works to see the students and residents thriving. And doctors and nurses come here to learn,” she says proudly.

“When I work with the students and see them accomplish, and see them happy and fulfilled, I feel so privileged to work with them,” she says. “I would do it for another 40 years if I could.”

*continued on page 7*



mathenyhospital

## A New Chief Nursing Officer for Matheny Hospital

**C**hief Nursing Officer Pamela Turay may be new to her current position, but her journey at Matheny reflects years of growth, leadership, and deep commitment to patient care. Turay began her career at Matheny in 2016 as a per diem nurse, later becoming a full-time primary nurse on Yellow Zone. In 2019, she advanced to nurse manager of Red Zone, gaining firsthand experience in both clinical care and team leadership.

Her path into nursing was not linear. Initially accepted into a medical program abroad, a relocation to the United States led her to explore nursing as a starting point. That decision quickly evolved into a calling.

“Nursing pulled me in,” she says. Her first exposure to Matheny came during a pediatric rotation on Yellow Zone, an

experience she describes as both challenging and formative.

“It was my first time working with patients with developmental disabilities, many of whom were nonverbal, and it required a much higher level of attentiveness,” she says. “What stood out to me was how intentional the care was. Each patient had a unique way of communicating, and the staff made a real effort to understand them. That level of commitment stayed with me. It was also one of the few times during my clinical rotations when nurses took an active interest in teaching students. Their dedication and sense of fulfillment were things I knew I wanted to be part of.”

Her transition into leadership was encouraged, and Turay began to see leadership not as a step away from patient

care but as a way to amplify it. “I realized leadership is still service, it just operates at a different scale,” Turay explains. “When you support your staff effectively, you improve outcomes for every patient they care for. That scale of impact is what drew me to management.”

As Chief Nursing Officer, that scope has expanded even further.

When the position opened in 2025, Turay applied after giving this move a lot of thought. “I realized that I could have a greater impact beyond the nurse manager role,” she says. “At the executive level, you’re shaping systems, resources, and strategy, which allows you to influence care on a much broader scale.”

In her current role, Turay works closely across departments, from clinical teams to finance, IT, operations, and more. “Nursing sits at the center of everything we do,” she explains. “To deliver high-quality care, we have to be fully integrated across the organization. That collaboration is critical.”

Turay describes the role as dynamic and complex. “No two days are the same,” she says. “We’re managing clinical care, operational flow, staffing challenges, and system improvements simultaneously. It requires constant prioritization and adaptability.”

She also highlights the distinct nature of care at Matheny. “What makes our model unique is that we combine hospital-level clinical oversight with long-term, relationship-based care. Our patients are not just being treated episodically, we are managing complex conditions proactively every day. That continuity allows us to anticipate complications, intervene early, and truly sustain long-term health. You don’t typically see that in acute care settings.”

Turay leads Patient Care Services, which includes Nursing, Respiratory Therapy, and Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). Despite the operational and strategic demands of her position, her motivation remains grounded. “It’s the patients,” she says. “You see the impact of your work over time. You see progress, connection, and outcomes that are deeply meaningful.”

“I would like to see nursing at Matheny

continue to develop into a profession that is even more proactive, data-informed, and deeply collaborative. Our patients' longevity depends on vigilance, prevention, and coordination. The stronger and more supported our nursing teams are, the better outcomes we will continue to see."

In her new leadership position, Turay has had to do a lot of learning in a short period of time. But that's not new to her. She loves to keep on learning. In the last 10 years, she has earned an Associate Degree in Nursing Science in 2016, a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) in 2021, and a Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Rutgers Business School in 2025.

**"I realized leadership is still service, it just operates at a different scale. When you support your staff effectively, you improve outcomes for every patient they care for."**

#### **PAMELA TURAY**

She recognizes the high level of responsibility that she has taken on in her new role at Matheny. "I have had great guidance and leadership support along the way, and I value that. At the same time, this role has broadened my perspective. I now see the organization through a systems lens, how decisions connect, how teams function, and how we can continuously improve."

For Turay, leadership is not static, it's evolving.

"This role challenges you to think differently, lead intentionally, and stay focused on what matters most," she says. "And for me, that will always be the patients." **MM**

## **Long-term Staff**

*continued from page 5*

### **TRACY SCHMITT**

Matheny long-timer Tracy Schmitt will celebrate 38 years here on May 16th. She's actually had two careers, so far, at Matheny—20 years as a personal care assistant (PCA), right out of college—and now 18 years as an instructor at the Hillsborough Adult Learning Center.

She grew up in Pennsylvania and worked for her mother at the Cambria County Association for the Blind and Handicapped before coming to Matheny, "so I knew people with cognitive and physical challenges before coming here," she says.

Schmitt earned a college degree, majoring in secondary education, English, and accounting. Although she enjoyed working as a PCA, she jumped at the chance to become an instructor, working at both of Matheny's adult learning centers at Hillsborough and on the Peapack campus.

"These are the coolest people on the planet," she says. "You can see them develop and progress, and learn to use technology." Her workdays are varied and interesting.

She comes in around 8 AM, and gets relevant updates from Hillsborough Center Coordinator Todd Deremer before the participants arrive. Then it's time to get ready for classes. Schmitt teaches a varied menu of subjects, including edible art, making greeting and special occasion cards, creating decorations, jewelry making, and UNO class. "The clients learn problem-solving when they play UNO," she explains, "and get better at communicating through body language, facial expression, and eye-gaze. They're playing a game, but also learning."

"We have parties and the parties are great," she continues. "It's a good place—everyone is part of a team and everyone learns how to help their peers. I get excited when people come out of their shells. They make choices, advocate for themselves and their peers. They get interested in things and encourage their friends."



Adult Learning Center instructor Tracy Schmitt (r) and longtime Matheny resident Cindy Shanks

"Many of the clients were quite young when I first met them," she remarks. "It's like you grew up with some of them. You grow with each other. To be a part of something like this is really fantastic. I watch them be patient with each other and show they care about each other. And care about us."

Schmitt gives a lot of credit to the direct support professionals, who she says work really hard. "You just have to live the experience," she says. "I've been lucky to work with such a great team and such giving clients. Everyone gives back to each other."

She continues: "When something happens to one of us, it happens to all of us. It's great being at Matheny and Hillsborough. When you come back after being away, whether you're a client or staff, we say 'Welcome home.'"



The positive impact of long-term staff dedicated to the care of Matheny's residents, patients, and staff is obviously immeasurable, but most certainly appreciated by everyone fortunate enough to meet up with them along the way. **MM**



## SOCIAL WORKERS

# A Small But **Mighty Team**

In the network of care that houses Matheny's unique population, social workers play a prominent role. This small group of four tackles both everyday, and also challenging, issues on behalf of—and with—the adult population calling Matheny home, and their families and guardians.

Living communally for a lifetime, while coping with complex problems that make wheelchairs, communication devices, and around-the-clock care necessities of their lives, means residents face many psychological and social issues. Those who are cared for at Matheny's Hospital in Peapack, as well as those living in Matheny's group homes and attending Matheny's Adult Learning Center in Hillsborough, hold the cadre of social workers dedicated to their welfare in high esteem.

It takes a special kind of social worker to make their career at Matheny. Communication lies at the heart of their profession, and communication is very challenging for many of the residents here. Zoe Fava, the team's most recent addition about six months ago, says that she was drawn to working in a residential hospital, where she would have the opportunity to build a rapport with clients over time. Matheny fit the bill. And while learning how each patient communicates "took getting used to," she says it's no longer an issue. "Now I'm pretty confident communicating with them."

She likes working with an interdisciplinary team, including physical, occupational, speech, recreation, and music

therapists, who "look at the patient as a whole, not just a diagnosis," she explains.

The best part of her job, she says, "is building trust with patients and co-workers. You can always ask for help. Everybody looks out for each other here."

What exactly does a Matheny social worker do? According to Shannon Curry, who supervises the team, the spectrum of responsibilities is a large part of what makes this job so interesting and fulfilling. Each of the social workers has an assigned group of hospital residents, except for Amy Kappmeier, who works with group home residents and community clients who attend classes at Matheny's Hillsborough Adult Learning Center each weekday.

A "typical" day for a Matheny social worker is both predictable, and often not. Meetings with co-workers in other departments are frequent, as well as regularly scheduled meetings, and sometimes drop-in visits with patients. It's the unique nature of each patient's situation that intrigues and challenges members of the team.

Danielle Lukas, who has worked at Matheny for almost five years, was employed as a social worker at two acute care hospitals prior to coming to Matheny. "I didn't really like working in acute care hospitals because I couldn't develop long-term relationships with the patients," she states. She values her relationships with Matheny's patients.

"Every day is different here, which might include unscheduled meetings with clients to check how things are going, weekly therapy with some, visits from agency workers, and a lot of communication with families and co-workers," Lukas explains. "We are contacted if a patient seems unusually sad or is upset about something."

"It's challenging—you never really know what to expect each day," she says.

"But it also can be as simple as answering questions that pop up for parents and guardians, or getting them connected to the right person."

Social workers team up on a daily basis with psychologists, nurses, nursing managers, therapists, and others on behalf of patients. "Communicating with patients, their interdisciplinary teams, and their guardians is an important part of the job," Lukas states.

"We communicate with families often, and because of that I have developed a rapport with many families and have gotten to know them really well," she says.

Understanding what the patient wants to say is always the highest priority. "Some use communication boards, some electronic communication devices, or they may have ways of indicating yes or no in response to a question," she states. Over time, social workers and patients establish ways to understand each other.

What does she like best about her job? "I really like building relationships with patients and their families. I also really like the teamwork approach here—working closely with other departments. I didn't have that on other jobs," she says. "Matheny gives very individualized care, and that care evolves as new things come up. The staff is always keeping up on new ways to help patients, looking for solutions to problems."

Matheny's Adult Learning Center at Hillsborough buzzes with activity Monday through Friday—adapted sports, an array of daily classes that change over time, advocacy programs, computer lab, arts and crafts sessions, music and theater presentations, birthday parties and casual socializing with friends and staff. On some days, particularly when the weather cooperates, Center participants may enjoy a barbeque or small groups may visit a local park.

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### *Clockwise from top left:*

Two members of the four-member Matheny social work team, Danielle Lucas (l) and Zoe Fava (r)

Shannon Curry with Matheny resident Zach L.

Amy Kappmeier with Matheny resident Cheryl C.

Zoe Fava (back row, l) and music therapist Elise Berube (r) with Matheny residents Mike C., Rasheedah M., and Andy L.



Proudly  
Introducing  
Some  
of Our  
**Longtime  
Residents**

Life today is healthier, happier, and often longer for those with developmental disabilities and serious associated medical conditions than it was 20 to 30 years ago, and even 10 years ago. Better overall health care, and training staff to be constantly vigilant and take immediate action for even minor health changes observed in patients, have produced positive outcomes. Building wheelchairs matched to the unique needs of those who need them to get around, and better prevention and treatment of pressure injuries to often fragile skin, also top the list at Matheny. Attention to mental health and regular social interaction for everyone are also now part of each day's menu.

Add to that an array of therapies provided consistently through the years—speech/language, physical, occupational, recreation, music—that teach individuals how to communicate through many different means, how to move more safely, and how to become more aware and independent. Recreation therapists help children and adults participate in a variety of enjoyable social and community pursuits, such as adapted sports, playing board games, and continuing to learn through their adult years. Special learning centers for those over age 21, and arts programs, such as Matheny's Arts Access, unlock nascent talents and give participants additional ways to express themselves and communicate with others. When life is healthier, and more active and purposeful, longevity is more attainable.

Matheny is a community that values, and has pioneered, many of these advances over its almost 80 years, and currently has residents whose expectation of longevity is very close to that of the majority of Americans. Given the severity

of some of their chronic medical conditions, and their greater vulnerability to respiratory infections such as COVID-19 and influenza, that's saying a lot.

Here, we introduce you to just a few of Matheny's hospital and group home residents who have benefitted from the vast improvements in attitude and health care. Like the general population, they have thoughts, talents, friends, and pursuits, and the desire to tell others about their lives and achievements.



*Longtime residents (top to bottom): Andy Lash, Melvin Rhett, Charles Fieramosca, Ellen Kane (l) and Nancy Soto*



Chet Cheesman

## Chet Cheesman

Age: 52

Came to Matheny: age 7

Favorite activities: painting, writing short stories, poetry

Chet Cheesman joined Matheny's Arts Access program when it launched in 1993, and his enthusiasm for creating visual art, and writing poetry, plays, and stories, has never waned. He was born with Lesch-Nyhan Disease (LND), a rare genetic disorder, affecting his neurological system, necessitating use of a wheelchair, and causing involuntary self-injurious behavior. He has limited verbal ability and most frequently communicates via a communication device or a communication board.

"I love to paint," he says. He also likes to sculpt with clay. Over the years, his creative works have been exhibited at the Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton, Rutgers New Jersey Medical School in Newark, the Atrium Gallery in Morristown, Full Circle events in Peapack, and an exhibit at Sotheby's in New York City.

Cheesman would like to raise awareness about his little-known condition, and has done some writing about his own experience of living with LND, as well as writing short stories about his friends and family. He has "business cards" with QR codes that link to a webpage (<https://matheny.org/Lnd-resources/>) about LND. These cards are a quick way to share information about LND with the greater community.

This long-time Matheny resident has stepped into the larger community beyond Matheny—taking part several times in Raritan Valley Community College's Summer Theatre Production workshop with several other Matheny residents and RVCC students. They work together over a six-week period, rehearsing and performing on stage, sometimes using original scripts written by Matheny participants.

## Tammy Heppner

Age: 56

Came to Matheny: age 21

Favorite activities: painting, writing poetry, essays, short stories

Tammy Heppner loves writing and painting; and since she joined Matheny's Arts Access when it began in 1993, creating art has been a central motif of her life.

As an Arts Access participant for 30 plus years, she has exhibited at the Morris Museum, Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, the Grounds for Sculpture, the Center for Contemporary Art in Bedminster, CSB Gallery in Morristown, and Sotheby's NYC. "Selling my paintings makes me happy," she says. "I feel inspired when I think about people loving them."

She also writes poetry, essays, and short stories about family, friends, nature, music, God, and her unique observations. She wrote and published a book of poetry and essays, entitled, *My Favorite Things*. Her writing was also featured in *Writes of Passage*, an anthology of work by Arts Access writers. She finds writing to be relaxing and comforting.

Several of Heppner's pieces were recited during readings at Mondo in Summit, the Bernardsville Library, and the Morris Museum in Morristown. Her published book was accepted as part of the second Montclair Literary Festival. Heppner says she is inspired by looking outside, by how she's feeling, and from her imagination.

She has expressed deep gratitude to the Matheny family. "Without you, Matheny would not be around. We wouldn't have group homes or flowers growing in the gardens. We wouldn't have so many staff who are so loving and caring." And she thanks Chuck Matheny (deceased in 2019), "for making me laugh. Laughter really is the best medicine."



Tammy Heppner

## Jessica Evans

Age: 43

Came to Matheny: 18 years ago

Favorite activities: visual art, writing, dance

Jessica Evans, who has cerebral palsy and has been in a wheelchair for most of her life, is a passionate artist. Over the years, her visual art has been shown at the Paper Mill Playhouse, Grounds for Sculpture, Visiting Nurse Association, Arts Unbound Gallery, Johnson & Johnson, and Sotheby's NYC. This Spring, her visual art was exhibited—along with that of other Arts Access artists—at Kean University's *Transcending Boundaries – The Artist at Work*.

Writing poetry and plays, storytelling, choreography, dance, and acting are also part of her repertoire. The author of a published book of poetry, *In My Heart Like a Key*, she also contributed to *Writes of Passage*, an anthology of work by Arts Access writers. "Writing makes me feel free and good and it's good for my soul," she says.

*Adventures Waiting to Happen*, a comedy she wrote, was one of the pieces chosen by The New Jersey Theatre Alliance Stages Festival, in partnership with Premiere Stages at Kean University, to be presented as a staged reading several years ago.

Her family—including an identical twin sister, Jamie, a younger brother, and nieces—are important in her life and to her work. She also loves, and is often inspired by, music.

Just last summer, her dance, *In My Daughter's Eyes*, was chosen for the 4th annual River Dance Festival, presented by Roxey Ballet Company in New Hope, PA, where she also performed onstage. "I want to dance to show people what I can do, so people don't see my disability or my wheelchair—so they can see me," she says.

## Cheryl Chapin

Age: 68

Came to Matheny: age 8

Favorite activities: writing, visual art, advocacy

Cheryl's involvement in the arts, particularly with Matheny's Arts Access program, has been her passion for decades, and continues.

Creating visual and digital art are high on her list of favorite activities, but writing poetry, short stories and works for the stage, many exhibiting her sharp sense of humor, may be at the top. Several of her original plays have been performed as part of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance's *Plays by People* program. Her most recent, entitled *Children's Imaginations*, was performed in Spring 2025.

Cheryl—along with several other Matheny residents—participated during several summers (most recently in 2025) in a six-week theater workshop at Raritan Valley Community College with some of the college's students. Each summer workshop culminated in a performance of original monologues and scenes, and group acting exercises. The students work closely with the Matheny participants, learning about their lives and about stage-acting.

Cheryl's activities at the Hillsborough Adult Learning Center include trying out new forms of expression. Most recently, she has been one of the primary writers for several self-advocacy podcasts aiming to make Matheny staff, both old and new, more aware of the concerns of Matheny's adult residents.

Cheryl also loves to read and is often seen with a book in-hand.



Jessica Evans



Cheryl Chapin



Joshua Handler

## Joshua Handler

Age: 60

Came to Matheny: in 1968.

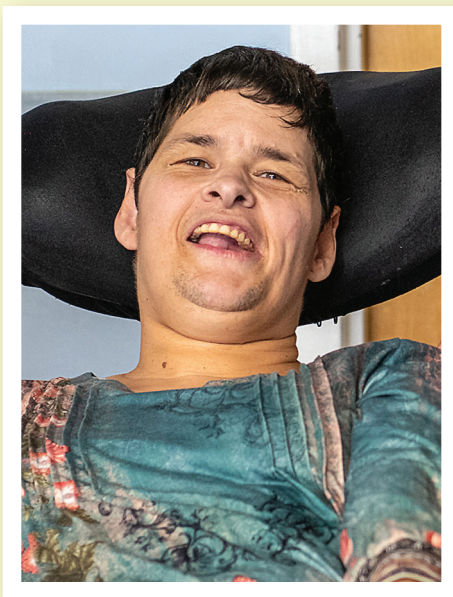
He is the longest Matheny resident.

Josh's history with Matheny is long. His early personal history is interwoven with the early years of Matheny, as well as its growth over the decades. Born in New York, he came to live at Matheny as a very young child. He knew the founding family well and has good memories of Chuck, the son of Walter and Marguerite Matheny, who babysat for him.

Josh has witnessed, and benefitted from, the development of Matheny over the years. Despite being relegated to a wheelchair, he has always tried to be as independent as possible. This has included employment at Bristol Glenn Assisted Living (delivering mail and helping with crafts), Somerset County Board of Elections (assisting with the compilation of addresses and party affiliations), and volunteering at the Bridgewater Library.

Currently, he lives happily in one of Matheny's community residences, enjoys attending the Hillsborough Adult Learning Center, especially the computer lab and fitness programs, and has made many friends among Matheny's residents and staff. He was one of the earliest participants in Arts Access—joining the program in 1993. He loves painting and creating artwork digitally, and is also a choreographer and dancer. He choreographed a dance entitled, *Wild Horses*, as well as performing on stage at the second annual Riverdance Festival in New Hope, PA.

Among his current pursuits is creating self-advocacy podcasts—with a team from the Hillsborough Adult Learning Center—to tell Matheny's new, and long-time, staff about what's important and meaningful to Matheny's adult residents. He hopes to go on a fishing trip to a local park when the weather turns warmer.



Cindy Shanks

## Cindy Shanks

Age 49

Came to Matheny : 37 years ago

Favorite Activities: painting, writing, music and dance

Cindy Shanks was born, and raised until age 12, in Luray, Virginia, part of a large family that includes her mother, father, three brothers, and two sisters. She came to live, and finish her schooling, at Matheny because she needed the specialized, around-the-clock care available here. She has cerebral palsy, uses a wheelchair to get around and a communication board.

She joined Arts Access shortly after it was founded in 1993, and loves to paint, particularly on large canvases. Her art has been included in exhibits at the Grounds for Sculpture, the Arts in Healing Coalition, the Morris Museum, the Newark Museum, and the Paper Mill Playhouse.

“When people see my work, I want them to feel good,” she says.

One of her paintings is on permanent display at the Johnson & Johnson Headquarters in Ohio. In February 2019, she was among the five Arts Access artists whose paintings were shown at Sotheby's, NYC, for a three-day exhibit entitled, *The Art of Choice*, and she was featured with those same artists in the book *Flying Colors* by Tim Leffens. Over the years, this artist has expanded her horizons—writing short stories and poems, composing music, and choreographing and performing in dances. Her love for the arts continues undiminished. **MM**

## Social Workers

*continued from page 9*

The Center's staff members keep the hours lively. Matheny group home residents, as well as a few who live in local communities with family, come to the Center from 9 AM to 3 PM on weekdays. Social worker Amy Kappmeier has worked at Matheny for 20 plus years—on site at the Center except during the worst of the COVID-19 outbreaks, when Center activities, including interfacing with clients, were conducted over Zoom.

She provides both individual and group counseling; works with clients to develop and use coping strategies; helps them to build their own support networks, which can include staff, peers, family, and other friends; and encourages them to feel confident enough to advocate for themselves. She has “worked with at least 20 of the same Center-participants for the full 20 plus years. My role has always been the same,” she says.

“Some of them are now in their 60s and 70s, and are facing different challenges related to the aging process. Their mobility may have changed. The older residents face many of the same issues as the general population. They are learning to adapt.”

Other Hillsborough participants are in their 20s, have graduated from high school within the last few years, and are facing new challenges as they transition into adulthood and adult activities. Kappmeier says her meetings with the Center's clients are often on an individual basis—either initiated by her or at the client's request—and depend on the needs of the person.

“I meet with some on a weekly basis, or sometimes multiple times in a week, or sometimes only once a month,” she says. The clients right now number 45 to 50. Their issues include anxiety, feelings of depression, personal problems, anxious feelings about medical appointments, relationship concerns, grief, how to advocate for themselves about something, and sometimes, they just need someone to talk to, she says. She also meets with families, who sometimes reach out to her, or her to them.

Like all the Matheny staff, she has learned to understand the variety of ways that clients communicate—through body language, communication devices, sign language, gestures indicating yes and no, and speech.

The primary strength of Matheny—as she sees it—“is the way in which so many disciplines work together to supply whatever supports are needed. The medical team, therapy teams, group home staff, and the Hillsborough staff are all involved. The teams are so interactive,” she says.

**“The primary strength of Matheny is the way in which so many disciplines work together—the medical team, therapy teams, group home staff, and the Hillsborough staff are all involved.”**

### AMY KAPPMEIER

Helping clients advocate for themselves has been a primary theme for much of Kappmeier's career. Advocacy might include giving individuals the confidence to speak up about concerns and identifying the right person(s) to speak with; helping group home residents advocate together about a concern; how to approach a trip outside of the Center or their home; and how to reach a broader population with their concerns. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreaks, she used to travel with client-advocates to national and State advocacy conferences, enjoyable and productive ventures that she hopes they can do again soon.

At the Adult Learning Center, she has been helping the Hillsborough Self-Advocacy group to create three podcasts (so far), which they have produced for Matheny staff, focusing on respect, the various ways that Matheny clients

communicate, and courtesy. These podcasts are now a vital part of orientation sessions for new staff.

Her job satisfaction over the years has stemmed from watching the clients' confidence grow, their excitement at learning new things and engaging in new ventures, the impact they are having on those around them, and “seeing them smile,” she says.

“I really enjoy my job,” she concludes. “That's why I've stayed here so long.”

Shannon Curry sees the role of Matheny's social workers as “promoting the emotional well-being of every resident. There is no typical work day,” she says. “We spend time with individual residents, pop into a group, give one-on-one counseling, network with other departments—we put our heads together and do problem-solving. It takes time.”

There are a lot of everyday issues, she states, which center around “the reality of living in a facility, including conflict with peers, relationships, anxiety for things coming up such as a medical procedure, living with a diagnosis, and feelings surrounding holiday times.”

“Sometimes communication is challenging on both sides, but we find creative ways to make the relationship work,” she says. “It can take time, and sometimes the help of an occupational therapist or a speech therapist or another trusted individual. The Matheny team approach is really beneficial.”

Curry describes Matheny as “the most unique place I've ever heard of—so personal, so warm and caring. There is a deep sense of community and we develop working relationships that are very good. You get comprehensive care that you couldn't get elsewhere. It answers big niche needs in medical and mental healthcare.”

“For clinicians, there is a lot of flexibility and there are always new challenges and opportunities to grow as a professional and as an individual. It's a dynamic role—and we have the privilege to do a lot of things to promote everyone's well-being.”

“Lots of people have worked here for a very long time,” she concludes.

And that kind-of says it all. **MM**



Marsha Magazzu, Matheny Hospital wound care nurse, with Matheny hospital patient, Emma

# Wound Care is Front & Center at Matheny

**T**he majority of Matheny’s residents and students are up and about in wheelchairs that get them where they’re going and also allow them to take part in a variety of daily activities—but it is precisely this sitting in wheelchairs for long periods of time that makes them more susceptible to pressure injuries. Most have a primary diagnosis of cerebral palsy, spina bifida, or Lesch-Nyhan disease—with associated chronic medical conditions—that further increases the vulnerability of their skin to injury and infection.

Enter Matheny Hospital wound nurse Marsha Magazzu, whose specialty encompasses not only wound care, but special training in ostomies (surgical openings in the body, such as colostomy), incontinence, and bladder cancer and insufficiency. She took on this role almost 11 years ago, after multiple other careers that included working in the family’s bakery in Oklahoma, running her own advertising and typesetting company, doing accounting for her husband’s software company, and managing a physician’s office. “But I had never pursued what I really wanted to do,” she says.

In the early 2000s, her two younger sons (she has three) gave her a push, encouraging her to go after her professional dreams. So, she headed back to school, first to Raritan Valley Community College at night to take the science courses needed to become a registered nurse, while continuing to work during the days, and then to Rutgers for her Bachelor of Applied Science degree in nursing.

What brought her to Matheny? “I did clinicals (hands-on supervised training


rotations as part of a healthcare degree program) here, and I just fell in love with Matheny,” she remembers. Years before, she had done volunteer work at a Veterans Administration Hospital—her father and brother were veterans—“but I had never seen such a vulnerable population before working at Matheny,” she says.

She wanted to make life better for Matheny’s patients. Peter Longa, Doctor of Nursing and Director of PCA/CRA Services at Matheny, was her preceptor during her clinicals and encouraged her to apply for a job at Matheny Hospital. And the rest is history. She came on first as a per diem, and was hired within three months to be a primary care nurse on Green Zone, where she worked for a couple of years.

“There are so many avenues you can take in nursing,” Magazzu states. She had also done clinicals at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. “I knew that I wanted to specialize—I wanted to care for the patients who had issues. I love a challenge.”

Her interest in wound care was ignited during her time at Robert Wood Johnson, and in 2014, she switched to per diem at Matheny to further her wound education and training. In 2015, she returned to Matheny Hospital as the official “wound care nurse,” and completed an intensive certification in this specialty.

Magazzu loves learning and also loves teaching. The basics of skin care and wound prevention are part of the orientation program now for every newly hired nurse, therapist, direct support professional (DSP), dietitian, and pharmacist.



Medical and nursing staff, therapists, and direct support professionals are vigilant for even the smallest changes in a patient’s status.

She also teaches students from five community colleges that rotate students through Matheny.

High on her list of how to prevent wounds in patients is providing basic skin care, and staff vigilance at all times. She stresses watchfulness—that staff pay very close attention to even minute changes in a patient’s skin and also their overall well-being. Very small changes can be the beginning of a wound that becomes infected, fails to heal, and causes all sorts of problems for the patient. Catch it early and treat it immediately are her watchwords.

She also teaches staff to pay particular attention after a patient has surgery. “I do a preliminary presentation on the particular upcoming surgery—giving background and what staff need to know—for all healthcare providers on the unit,” she explains. Although most of her work involves patients at Matheny Hospital, she also provides consultations with Matheny’s group homes and with Matheny’s Adult Learning Center at Hillsborough, as needed.

“If training is needed when a patient is admitted with a diagnosis that we’re not familiar with, it gives me an opportunity to learn new things—and also an opportunity to teach this to the staff,” she says. “As nurses, our training should stay current and follow evidence-based practice.”

Preventing pressure injuries, and creating a remediation plan when pressure injuries occur, is the mantra of all hospital staff, with Magazzu leading the way. Pressure injuries are always a big deal and the team needs to investigate and find out where our processes failed, she says,

because if it can happen to one, it can happen to all.

With her aggressive action-plans in place, and everyone onboard, Matheny has reduced pressure injuries more than 96 percent since she started in this position. “Constant skin checks by our direct support professionals (DSPs), attention to patient positioning by our physical therapy and occupational therapy departments, along with the work of our seating/wheelchair clinic and workshop, speech therapist, dieticians, pharmacist, social workers and psychologists—all have essential roles in pressure injury prevention,” she explains. “Each of these departments plays a huge role in preventing pressure injuries, and in helping to heal them. If a patient is

underweight or overweight, is dehydrated, or does not have proper nutrition, it can impact wound healing.”

Wound care has significantly evolved over the years, Magazzu states. “There is a better understanding of how a pressure injury and subsequent tissue death happen, and there has been progress in understanding that debriding a wound (removing dead, or devitalized, tissue) is sometimes necessary. Even though the wound is often larger and deeper, it stimulates healing agents and encourages wound healing,” she explains.

When Magazzu was born, the youngest of six children, her grandmother moved from Baltimore to Oklahoma to help the family. “In Baltimore, my grandmother

had worked with a kind doctor who hired her to be a companion when he made house calls.” Once settled in Oklahoma, her grandmother shared the stories and her knowledge with Marsha, as she cared for the family and those in their small, rural community. This was the basis for Marsha’s dream to someday be a nurse and care for those in need.

“Wound care was different back then,” she remembers. “Wounds were thought to heal faster and better when they were not bandaged, but left uncovered to dry out in the air. We now know a warm, moist, wound healing environment and optimizing nutrition are what’s needed.”

She states that wounds should be monitored closely to ensure substantial healing within the first 14 days, while all the necessary components are provided by the body. She is also adamant about utilizing basic, simple products and techniques, such as keeping the area of the body clean, and providing basic skin care, as well as being open to considering new or nontraditional, methods when needed, and states: “We always have a patient-centered, holistic approach to care”.

Magazzu explains that for patients like those with spina bifida, who have never used or felt their limbs, it can be hard for them to understand that small blisters or a pressure injury can potentially turn into a deep wound or infection that is difficult to heal. “It’s hard when a wound you don’t feel has such an impact on your life, and we always have to consider the psycho-social aspect of the patient and achieve a balance.”

She tells the story of successfully utilizing a novel medical product that was derived from sterile, ground-up pig bladder in a patient’s wound that had failed to heal for an extended period of time. She worked with the wound-care physician at Morristown Medical Center, whom she had worked with before. “After 30 days, the wound closed, with healthy revitalized tissue,” she says. “This patient has a life, a family, activities. If there’s any way to get the patient out with friends and family, we have to do it for their physical health, and also for their mental health. We are always striving for patient-centered holistic care.”



Marsha Magazzu

So, what do the stats say about wound care at Matheny?

With 95 percent of patients and residents being wheelchair users, “We’ve had only two pressure injuries or wounds related to surfaces, wheelchairs, or medical equipment in the past year. These are ischemic injuries, where blood flow is diminished and tissue is dying or dead. When I started here, there were 54 pressure injuries in the previous year. The next year we reduced the number to 38, and have continued to decrease the number year after year.”

That certainly is a major “win,” but pressure injuries—and the fight to tame them—are always ongoing and often challenging.

## Leadership Counts

In a residential hospital, such as Matheny’s, with 100 residents ranging in age from 4 to the mid-60s, prevention of illness and injury tops the list of priorities. All medical and nursing staff, as well as therapists and personal care assistants (PCAs) are vigilant in their attention to even small changes in a patient’s status. Catching an illness or injury in its earliest stages can mean the difference between a quick recovery and a long, difficult fight back to health.

Vincent Barba, MD, Vice President-Patient Care and Safety, and Chief Medical Officer and Safety Officer, has been on-the-job at Matheny since 2015. In this capacity, he has overall leadership responsibility to keep Matheny’s patients alive and well.

“Longevity?” says Barba, when asked if patients are living longer within the past 10 years. “Of course, that’s what we’re about.” The VP came to Matheny 11 years ago expressly to head-up an effort to coordinate all of the services into a machine-like whole, which would run effectively, efficiently, and with high impact in terms of patient health, comfort, and years of life.

“My days involve ensuring that patients have an exceptionally high quality of patient safety and care—and that includes all clinical departments, in the hospital,



outpatient clinics, the school, and the seven Matheny group homes,” he says.

He was recruited from his prior positions at New Jersey Medical School and University Hospital to “improve the quality of care-delivery at Matheny.”

The challenge, of course, is that all hospital patients and group home residents have both developmental disabilities and medical complexities requiring around-the-clock care. “Their interdisciplinary long-term care delivery, including behavioral and social aspects, requires coordination every day,” he says. “And we care for both the patients and their families.”

In the 1970s, individuals with developmental disabilities generally lived into their 40s and 50s, he says. Now they can expect to live into their mid-60s and beyond. That’s a big impact on life-expectancy.

“Of course, that varies,” he continues. “Some of our patients have congenital heart issues, or gastrointestinal dysmotility, which can lead to bowel obstruction and sepsis. Our patients are more prone to aspiration pneumonia (when food and saliva go into the airway), which can lead to lung failure. Many have epilepsy and chronic seizures.”

“But, every person, every day gets very individualized care at Matheny,” he states, “by a team that works in a very interdisciplinary way.”

“I think what separates Matheny care is that full-time medical and nursing staff serve as the patient’s primary caregivers, and the therapists (physical, speech and language, occupational, etc.), DSPs (direct support professionals); registered dietitians; dentists; everyone works closely together,” he explains.

“The way we help patients eat, what we feed them, their positioning in wheelchairs and bed help prevent aspiration pneumonia and pressure injuries.”

“And the life enrichment therapies, the adult day programs, trips and recreational events, and the focus on community integration all help patients do so much better,” he continues. “The social aspects of having meals together, and the emphasis on encouraging families to come and visit, and taking the patient out and about for activities in the community, are very important. It impacts the quality of life and also longevity.”

“We know that when patients are placed in nursing homes they don’t do nearly as well,” Barba says.

How did the Matheny team accomplish this? “We began to develop high reliability care,” he says. “We put together a Skin Care Action Team of nurses, physicians, therapists, dietitians. We worked on strategies and developed strict protocols to follow—including patient-positioning, wheelchair construction, the use of different skin preparations. The whole team came together to prevent pressure injuries.”

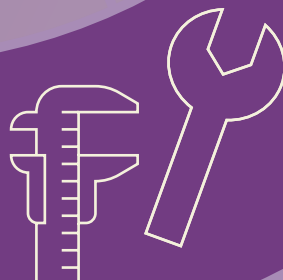
“The families know that when they aren’t here, they can rely on high quality medical and nursing care, and we communicate right information they need to know at the time, and we get information from them when it’s needed,” he says.

“We put patients first. They are always at the center of every equation. And the staff is committed to working together on behalf of each patient,” he states.

The ingredient that Barba may not have foreseen before coming here was his role of heading up and nurturing a staff who bring passion for the patients and their jobs to work every day. And that patient longevity and the staff’s longtime commitment to the welfare of these patients would grow together, hand-in-hand. **MM**

The Wheelchair Workshop team (left to right):  
Ed Muraski, Diane Converse, Patrick McCarthy,  
Christine Whitworth, Sue Baumann,  
Sharon Frant-Brooks, Tizazu Alamrew

# Creating a Unique-fit Wheelchair





In the day-in, day-out world of wheelchairs, a person's comfort, mobility, and ultimately health and well-being can be jeopardized by a chair that does not adequately address their needs. This is no overstatement, say professionals, who know that a right-fit wheelchair often makes a world of difference in a patient's life.

At Matheny, where every resident, patient, and student relies on a wheelchair for almost all of their activities, making that wheelchair as near to perfect a fit, and keeping it up to that standard, is a serious business. Matheny clients not only have an array of mobility issues, they also struggle with complex medical conditions that affect how they sit and move in the chair safely and comfortably; how they use their limbs and other body parts to access communication boards and other communication devices; how they reach switches that control iPads and other electronic equipment; and how they manage to eat and drink. The wheelchair can also be built to protect an individual from

unintentional, self-injurious behaviors (a symptom of Lesch-Nyhan disease).

The 8 members of Matheny's wheelchair workshop team have developed a variety of highly specialized manufacturing skills to answer these complex and unique needs. Their small "factory" is always humming with building and repairing activity, and also the conversations aimed at creatively solving the often-unique issues of its clientele. It is one of the few wheelchair workshops nationwide that takes standardized wheelchair parts, reconstructs some of these parts as needed, creates new parts to answer complex needs, and assembles all of these parts into a wheelchair fit for each patient.

## First Stop—The Matheny Wheelchair Clinic

The workshop team all agree that teamwork is at the core of how they succeed at their jobs. There are two certified ATPs that attend clinics as suppliers and work closely with the Wheelchair Clinic's occupational therapists, Maura Mirecki and Kim Siara, who are both certified as Assistive Technology Practitioners (ATPs) through the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA).

The Clinic stocks different types of wheelchairs and other equipment such as gait trainers, shower commodes, tub chairs, mechanical transfer and lifting devices, and adaptive positioning devices. The therapists make assessments, and then recommend certain products for the client to try out. Based on the client's experience, the therapists help the family and client choose equipment that will maximize the client's function and health.

When choosing, or designing a safe wheelchair, trunk support is the top

priority. The length of the client's trunk, the width of their chest and hips, and postural deviations are all important factors. The most common diagnoses of Matheny's patients are cerebral palsy and spina bifida; other diagnoses include Lesch-Nyhan Disease (LND), Angelman syndrome, and Rett syndrome. Most cause significant problems with muscle control, impact the client's ability to maintain upright posture, and often affect mental capacity and the ability to communicate.

The Clinic's therapists—with input from physicians, nurses, and other therapists as needed—identify the simplest way to meet each person's needs, then go to more customization when it's necessary. Clients often visit the Clinic two or three times when being evaluated and for product recommendations, and then another one to three times to be trained on the safe use of their wheelchair and other equipment when they're ready.

## Now to the Wheelchair Workshop

Christine Whitworth, a 14-year, Matheny wheelchair workshop-team-member, whose specialty is upholstery, has been sewing since the age of 6. With a Master's degree in visual arts, and on-the-job training in rehabilitation engineering, she discovered her passion for finding creative, and often unique, solutions to complex seating issues when she joined the wheelchair workshop. She was recruited by a Matheny nurse, "a good friend," who felt Christine could be a major contributor to the workshop team.

"I started out sewing bedding and coats for patients part-time," she says, but she was quickly brought on to be a full-time team member. "Ninety percent of my job is upholstery, primarily fabricating wheelchair seating, and the rest is making specialized bedding and clothing."

"My skill set suits this job so well," she says. "There is such a need—especially for the many emergency repairs and changes that need a quick turnaround." A major concern for wheelchair users is the formation of pressure ulcers related



to sitting, which can be very debilitating. Prevention—and immediate intervention when necessary—are the most effective strategies. Custom seating, which may require particular fabrics to cover cushions, and specially designed back cushions, can often help to protect a client's fragile skin.

Patrick McCarthy joined the team nine years ago after a more than 25-year career with Fed Ex and various other jobs. "I always enjoyed working with my hands," he says, explaining that it was his early mechanical background—along with his technical skills—that made him a good candidate for the workshop job. "There is a joy in getting back to my roots."

Subsequent on-the-job training taught him how to "fabricate mobility and communication devices for children and adults and create a lot of custom items for both manual and power wheelchairs. We adapt devices to the needs of individual clients," he says.

Upkeep and repair of wheelchair parts, which often get broken with constant use, are also important parts of the job. "This all comes together to benefit the client," he says. "Doing this is one of the best things I've ever done. You can actually see the ways it changes others' lives."

"Before working here, I never knew anything about the wheelchair world," Whitworth says. "What we can do for people makes me so proud—that something so simple makes such a huge impact. I'm honored to do this work."

McCarthy and Whitworth enjoy working with the rest of the workshop team, discussing the unique needs of each client.

There is trial and error, they say, and a lot of discussion and problem-solving.

"The client's needs are so specific," says Whitworth. "Small changes can prevent skin breakdown, which can become a serious problem for a wheelchair user. Or you can make it possible for the client to reach the jellybean switch on their chair." (This is a large button that can be used to turn electronic devices on and off.)

Members of the workshop team often go to the Wheelchair Clinic to see exactly what the client needs. They take pictures, discuss what they can do. "What we do in the workshop is put things in motion for the client," she says. "For instance, every day counts when there is a skin breakdown issue."

"We know our materials. We know what changes we can make," she explains. "We can go right into the clinic and tweak something, make it right."

"Clients can suffer from open wounds and sometimes the wounds take a long time to heal," continues Whitworth. "We have to figure out how to help prevent the wounds, or address emergency wheelchair situations. Our patients' behaviors can damage wheelchairs. We need to figure out what to do right away."

"We have to understand the disorders affecting the clients," explains McCarthy. "We always need to be one step ahead. Lesch-Nyhan causes self-damaging behaviors. Other clients have seizures. Others can crack the frames of the wheelchair with the strength of their rocking."

"Sometimes, there are no medical solutions and the clients may not be able to

communicate well. We have to figure out how to protect and safeguard these individuals. We have to advocate for them,” says Whitworth.

“Technology has helped us do a better job,” McCarthy explains. “And we grow and learn every day through our experiences while working here.”

McCarthy and Whitworth agree that the need for custom parts for wheelchairs is big, and that what Matheny provides “is unique and amazing,” Whitworth says. “While we can’t reach everyone, we do come up with solutions and try to make it work for those who find their way here. Matheny takes care of outpatients, as well as those who live in the hospital and group homes.”

Lap trays, iPad holders, seating and back cushions, accommodations for aging patients whose skin becomes more fragile and whose bones break more

easily, adjustments for wheelchair-users after surgery or for those who have lost weight—the needs of wheelchair users are constant. This workshop always aims to manufacture a unique-fit wheelchair that answers all of the client’s needs.

## A Lot of Moving Parts

While the wheelchair workshop relies on the mechanical skills, creativity, and hands-on workmanship of each of its members, it is also a business and closely affiliated with Matheny’s hospital and outpatient services. Sue Baumann, who has been Director of Rehabilitation Engineering for four years, was a physical therapist with Matheny Hospital for seven years prior to joining the workshop team.

“My current job is a natural progression from working in the hospital,” she says. “I was always interested in seating; the shop was always amazing to me—making equipment that is unique for every individual.”

She is a RESNA-certified ATP, who has completed specialized training in seating and mobility devices, and also coordinates billing and insurance, among other things. “There are lots of moving parts to this workshop,” she explains. “I need to make sure everything runs smoothly. An order needs to progress smoothly from start to finish.”

She works alongside Clinic Coordinator Diane Converse, who manages verification and authorization of insurance coverage for rehabilitation equipment, including custom wheelchairs; coordinates patient scheduling for clinic visits with the delivery of patient equipment; and works with physicians to obtain patient prescriptions.

“When all of the wheelchair parts come in, and are together and ready to go, then they come to the shop to be assembled and additional parts fabricated,” Baumann explains. “The work is divided up and assigned appropriately. Emergency requests come in all the time. Repairs are made daily.”

With her physical therapy background, and knowing most of the patients from her years working in the hospital, Baumann can meet with therapists and offer suggestions. She can attend clinic visits “if someone needs another set of eyes. It keeps me involved,” she says.

While patients and families do not come to the workshop, the workshop team members do go to the Wheelchair Clinic, where they can brainstorm with the clinicians about how the patient-goal may be achieved. A supply of wheelchairs and back-up parts are kept in inventory in case a wheelchair frame breaks, for instance, Baumann explains.

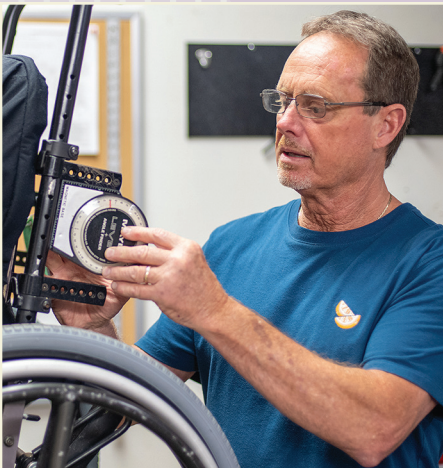
“Our goal is for the patient to have their chair as much as possible. We try to avoid the clients having to stay in bed. We try very hard to prevent pressure injuries.”

There are a number of patients getting older, Baumann points out, and their seating needs change as their bodies change with aging. We provide what they need throughout their lives, such as more head, neck, and back support, and different seat cushions because of skin changes. The workshop does preventative maintenance on wheelchairs annually—we do anything that ensures the clients are safe in their chairs, she says. Safety checks on the chairs are done regularly.

What’s new in this field? “Our team always goes to continuing education to see what’s new, especially for patient positioning and skin protection,” Baumann says. “It’s all about improving quality of life. Because we can repair wheelchairs onsite, patients are out of bed—not waiting for days for their wheelchair to be fixed.”

“If it doesn’t exist on the market, our workshop will design and fabricate it,” Baumann continues. “The team is incredibly creative in coming up with solutions for each person’s needs.”

By responding to emergency situations quickly with knowledge of the patients’ unique conditions, as well as having the skills to create new products when needed, this team is generally able to keep patients moving safely and comfortably almost 100 percent of the time. **MM**



Wheelchair workshop team members Patrick McCarthy and Christine Whitworth

# The Wow of Life Enrichment Therapies

**In simple terms, it's about making life richer.**

Rich with learning; rich with connections and community; rich with purpose; rich with structured physical activity; rich with new experiences.

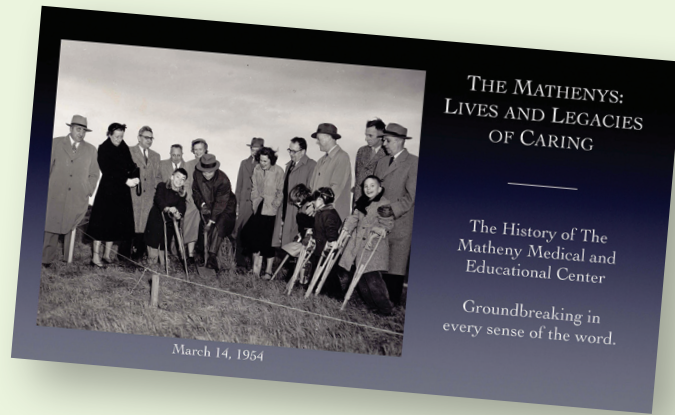
Yoga, art, music, cooking. Trips to see the Yankees, to the zoo, to the oceanside boardwalks, out to eat. Self-advocacy activities, BBQs, skiing, swimming, kayaking, fishing, camping-out.

Therapeutic? Without a doubt. Patients and therapists set goals and work on achieving them. Then they recalibrate, setting new, more ambitious goals to reach for. Making strides.

Fun? Oh yes, the participants say. See our smiles? Feel our energy? We don't sit on the sidelines. Together we move forward.



# 80 YEARS matheny



## Let's All Celebrate

The March 30th kick-off event in Matheny's celebration of its 80th anniversary was a hats-off to its dynamic founders, Marguerite and Walter Matheny. Somerset County historian, W. Barry Thomson, who has a passionate interest in local history, presented an on-campus, captivating program, *The Mathenys: Lives and Legacies of Caring*, to a rapt audience.

Thomson grew up in Peapack-Gladstone, home to the Matheny campus, graduated from Drew University, studied architecture and urban planning at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, and is co-author of *New Jersey Country Houses: The Somerset Hills*.

Following a corporate career in New York, Thomson has re-searched, written, and lectured on architectural and local history; served as director, trustee, and officer of several not-for-profits and foundations; and was executive producer of two documentaries, one promoting the employment of those with developmental disabilities, narrated by James Earl Jones.

Stay tuned for more in the next *Matheny Matters*.



*Top right:* W. Barry Thomson, Somerset County historian, presents "The Mathenys: Lives and Legacies of Caring"

*Bottom right:* (l-r) Matheny CEO Nancy Hamstra; Betsy Michel of the Jocky Hollow Foundation; Colleen Blaxil, Matheny parent and Friends of Matheny board member; Debbi DeLorenzo, former president of the Friends of Matheny

*Top left:* Edana Desatnick, member, Board of Trustees and parent of Matheny resident; Lloyd Desatnick, parent of Matheny resident; Bill Kraus, Board of Trustees member

*Bottom left:* Members of the Friends of Matheny turned out in full force.



80th anniversary ♦ 1946–2026

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