

New Horizons

Housing That Supports Independence



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On September 9th, Project Freedom Gave Their Official Thanks To Tim Doherty For His Years of Service as Executive Director



Our newest project, Freedom Village At Town Center South, was the perfect spot to hold our grand retirement party for Tim and Marion Doherty on September 9th.

In Tim's own words, "Back in 1997, I had stopped to talk with Norman about selling my accessible van, thinking that it would be better to sell to someone who really needed it, rather than just trading it in. Our conversation that day led to my giving a presentation to the Board of Trustees, who offered me the job. And as they say, the rest is history."

Yes, and what a history it has been with our 10th Project Freedom underway!

Needless to say, the people who live and the people who work at Project Freedom owe a debt of gratitude to Tim for his determination and hard work to not only keep the "lamp lit" at Freedom 1, but to grow the concept of independent living throughout New Jersey.

So, Happy trails to you and Marion, Tim. Happy trails till we meet again.

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19th Annual Golf Classic Sponsors

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On Oct 1st, Bristol Meyers Squibb employees volunteered to help with landscaping projects at Freedom 1 Robbinsville.

THANK YOU



From Norman's Desk

Thirty years ago this month Project Freedom dedicated our first apartment complex in Robbinsville. Little did we know that first ceremony would be the first of many more in the following years. Little did we know that 30 apartments would grow to nearly 700 apartments in five counties. Yet there was that inkling of the future because this complex is legally named Freedom I.

Neither did we know exactly how this housing would provide a base from which people with disabilities would blaze their own paths of independence. But they did because these apartments are not just bricks and mortar. They are catalysts for lives being changed through the opportunity of freedom and the engine of self-determination. These are places where people with disabilities can start down a path of independence and freedom to follow their dreams, follow their hearts and follow their ambitions.

Thirty years ago next month, 34 pioneers started moving into the first 30 apartments. Roughly a third came from nursing homes; another handful were diverted from being placed in nursing homes, and the rest were coming from living environments that were either not physically accessible or emotionally supportive. These were the first steps in blazing new paths.

Lives were changed as different paths were taken. Some changes were not as good as others since freedom also brings responsibility and consequences. Yet failure is the genesis of success if used as a motivator and a lesson to be remembered. Small success lead to bigger ones.

Years later, there are only a handful of these first pioneers left. But they have left wide trails for others to follow and created a legacy for Project Freedom. We will have more about "Freedom's Legacy" in the coming months.

Norman A. Smith, Associate Executive Director -
Follow Project Freedom on Twitter @TheFreedomGuys
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Freedom 1
Planted in Robbinsville 30 years ago...
now blossoming throughout New Jersey!

Hallmark Movie To Feature Actor With Autism

By Shaun Heasley / reprinted from Disability Scoop / September 23, 2021

Hallmark is putting autism front and center in its signature holiday movie lineup with a film starring an actor on the spectrum and an actress with well-known ties to the autism community.

Production is set to start on a film that Hallmark says is its first to feature a character with autism.

The movie currently titled "The Christmas Bond" stars Holly Robinson Peete and Nik Sanchez, an actor with autism.

"In the story, as a single mom (Peete) and her teenaged son with autism (Sanchez) come to a crossroad during Christmas, she must learn to let go so he can flourish and finds her own heart healing in unexpected ways," Hallmark said of the film.



Holly Robinson Peete appeared in "The Christmas Doctor" on Hallmark Movies & Mysteries last year. Now, she's filming a new Christmas film for the network alongside an actor with autism. (Hugh Tull/Crown Media United States, LLC)

Robinson Peete, who is also an executive producer of the movie, has a son on the spectrum and has long been active in the autism community. She said the "The Christmas Bond" has special meaning for her.

"I am making this movie for my son RJ, others with autism and their families," Robinson Peete said. "I am grateful to Hallmark for bringing this story to screen with authenticity, respect and hope."

"The Christmas Bond" will air later this year on Hallmark Movies & Mysteries as part of the network's "Miracles of Christmas" event.

Senator Wants To Increase SSI Benefits That Haven't Been Updated In Decades

By Sabrina Eaton, Reprinted from the Cleveland NS | September 24, 2021

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, wants to update the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program that provides financial assistance to nearly 8 million seniors and people who are blind and those who have disabilities.

Brown said 300,000 Ohioans are SSI beneficiaries. Their average monthly benefit is \$585, which comes out to about \$7,000 each year. The most they can get is \$794 a month, which works out to far less than the minimum wage. According to Brown, SSI is the sole income source for 60% of its beneficiaries.

"The program's eligibility rules literally haven't been updated in decades in many cases, not even for inflation," Brown said at a subcommittee hearing this week on the matter. "They force millions of disabled and older Americans to live well below the poverty line and punish them for any of their own efforts to build a little financial security ... It sends a pretty absurd message ... SSI's outdated rules make it impossible for beneficiaries to live with dignity."

The maximum federal monthly benefit amount in 2021 is \$794 for individuals (about 75% of the federal, individual poverty line) and \$1,191 for couples where both individuals are eligible for the program, Evangelista testified.

Brown told reporters his bill would update asset limits and income rules to compensate for inflation. He proposes raising the asset limit to \$10,000 for an individual and \$20,000 for a married couple, instead of the current \$2,000 asset limit for an individual and \$3,000 limit for a married couple. His bill would also allow people to earn up to \$400 per month from jobs without affecting benefits, and it would eliminate a benefit cut that happens now if two SSI beneficiaries marry.

"We want people to be able to get part-time jobs, if they can, and make a little money and save a little money," said Brown. "I hope sooner rather than later to raise the program to better than above the poverty line ... This was started to keep people out of poverty, but the amount of money isn't nearly enough to keep people out of poverty. So the first step is the asset levels."

Workers With Developmental Disabilities Owed \$304,000

By David J Neal, Reprinted from the Miami Herald/TNS | September 28, 2021.

MIAMI — Residents of Marianna's Sunland Center, which houses people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, received \$304,466 in back wages after a U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division investigation.

That money went to 163 Sunland Center residents, the Labor Department announced, or over \$1,800 per resident.

Sunland is one of the three centers run by the state of Florida-funded Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD). Its stated *raison d'être*, according to its website, "is to provide training and support to residents in every aspect of their lives in preparation for good citizenship in their chosen living environments."

Job training and employment is part of that. The Labor Department said the agency "holds certificates authorizing special minimum wage rates for workers with disabilities affecting the jobs they perform."

But, Wage and Hour Division District Director Wildalí De Jesús said, "To participate in the federal special minimum wage program, employers must provide the required counseling and referral opportunities to ensure workers with disabilities have every opportunity to reach their potential."

Some Sunland Center residents didn't receive that counseling or the referrals. So, Sunland had to pay them at least federal minimum wage for their hours worked. Also, the Labor Department said, payroll records "did not show amounts paid to employees," a Fair Labor Standards Act violation.

APD Communications Director Melanie Mowry Etters said in an email to the Miami Herald: "APD is committed to following the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the oversight occurred due to a former Sunland employee failing to deliver Subminimum Wage Training in a timely manner to Sunland residents. The Department of Labor found there were eight out of 44 months where the Sunland employee did not provide the required training.

"APD has implemented safeguards and additional supervision to ensure Subminimum Wage Training is delivered as required. Additional employees are now responsible to ensure the training is conducted. Also, an online training calendar has been developed to notify Sunland trainers of required training 30 days prior to the due date."

Changes Wrought By Pandemic Helped People With Disabilities. They're Not Ready To Give Them Up

By Billy Jean Louis, reprinted from the The Baltimore Sun/TNS | September 21, 2021

BALTIMORE — Traveling from Glen Burnie to Towson for her community language program has been a struggle for 63-year-old veteran Alison Elinoff. A stroke 15 years ago left the right side of her body paralyzed.

She skipped class several times — often for a doctor's appointment at the Veterans Administration hospital or because she was too tired. Her performance suffered.

"I really like virtual — virtual is great," Elinoff, who struggles to speak clearly because she has aphasia, a condition developed after a stroke. She likes being in class in person, but it takes 45 minutes to get there, which she said is a hassle.

The Snyder Center for Aphasia Life Enhancement (SCALE) went virtual at the start of the pandemic — but Elinoff will be forced to go back in person Sept. 30., part of a dispute over billing for virtual sessions versus in-person appointments between the VA and the League for People with Disabilities. Payments to the League for virtual sessions by the VA are reimbursed at a lower rate than in-person sessions.

Elinoff is not alone. Some people with disabilities say they're hesitant about going back in person and want to keep virtual services that began during the pandemic. But the practicality of whether that's possible remains uncertain, and other people with disabilities say they want to return to in-person activities.

Changes to telehealth, such as reimbursing at full price for virtual appointments, were possible when Maryland was under a state of emergency order. But Gov. Larry Hogan ended the state of emergency Aug. 15, meaning some COVID-19 telehealth options expired on that date, Maryland Department of Health spokesman David McCallister wrote in an email. Under the Preserve Telehealth Act of 2021, insurers, such as Medicaid, are required to provide coverage for telehealth services, regardless of the patients' location, he also wrote.

But David Greenberg, president and CEO of the League for People with Disabilities, said organizations offering medical day care for people with disabilities will be required to serve them in person if they want to get reimbursed starting Sept. 30.

Changes to which virtual services are offered also impact local schools. People with disabilities are among those whose households have the lowest incomes, and many students lacked the technology and access to participate in virtual learning, according to the Maryland Developmental Disability Council. For example, a lack of closed captioning or interpreters continues to be a problem, and screens are not always useful for those with visual impairment.

But despite the challenges, "virtual life is generally positive for people who have mobility issues because it alleviates the stress that can come with traveling," said Rachel London, executive director of the MDCC. London said the organization raised \$200,000 to provide technology for remote school access and other virtual services, but some spaces were still inaccessible.

She pointed to how the Maryland General Assembly embraced virtual meetings, which gave people with disabilities the ability to testify and attend public meetings from home instead of needing to find accessible transportation. The change led to an increase in meeting attendance among individuals that the MDCC works with and their families, she said.

As schools resume in person, parents have conflicting thoughts about what may be best for their kids. For those who suffer from anxiety, virtual classes allowed them to comfortably communicate and participate in class. Rene Averitt-Sanzone, executive director of the Parents Place of Maryland, a special education nonprofit, said several schools also increased services, such as speech therapy and sign-language classes, to better accommodate students.

Younger students who spent little time in school before the pandemic have never had the opportunity to learn crucial social-emotional lessons. For students who received specialized help with one-on-one educators or assistive technology, more time out of the classroom meant even more learning lost.

Tech Firm Helps Youth With Developmental Disabilities Find STEM Career Paths

by Darcel Rockett reprinted from the Chicago Tribune/TNS | September 16, 2021

CHICAGO — Anirudh Paidipally, 19, likes to code.

The Schaumburg resident is on the autism spectrum and likes HTML so much he spent his summer working on code with Chicago-based career networking platform and software company, YolBe (Your Life Only Better) via its website and app. Paidipally's father, Bhaskar, said his son is always on the computer at home, so when one of his teachers from Higgins Education Center recommended him for the program, he thought it would be a good fit for Anirudh.

Paidipally was one of seven interns who worked on YolBe's platform as part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's TECH-Prep program — a program where youth of color with intellectual and developmental disabilities are introduced to STEM careers with real-life experiences working in the STEM field.

Young learners, ages 16 to 24, participate in eight-week online soft skills training (where modules on communication, networking, teamwork and professionalism are taught and practiced with peers and coaches who are Ph.D. candidates with the university). Then they participate in a four-week paid internship with YolBe.

David Douglas, YolBe CEO, said the Equal Access internships were designed specifically for those with disabilities. "Equal Access is a disability focused marketplace on our platform for those organizations serving that population, and employers that want to hire individuals with some form of disability. We're expanding that," he said.

This summer marked the second year YolBe — likened as a youth-focused LinkedIn with an Instagram look — offered online internships to increase accessibility and flexibility. "As we started working with Chicago students, we noticed access to opportunity is severely limited," Douglas said about STEM jobs. "It's not that they're not available; the opportunities are just not known. And in certain areas it's very difficult to access. "We've been trying to build software that caters to organizations, employers that work with those populations," he said. "Through that work, we were connected with University of Wisconsin-Madison. Their intention: How do we influence young adults, in particular those with disabilities and minorities, to pursue careers in STEM?"

The YolBe team, comprised of about a dozen employees, is focused on driving more STEM opportunities to those in marginalized communities. From jobs to training, YolBe is working to bridge the information and skills gap by providing hands-on, project-based, real-life work experience. Internship coordinator Sydney Gear said the youths this summer worked on the basics of coding and programming through various projects, including technical and usability testing as administrators on the YolBe site. Douglas is hoping the program recruits more students next summer, scaling up to double digit participants from across the country. "They do presentations at the end of every week," Douglas said. "The way that our developers, our marketing people say: This is what we built, here's the value that we provided. Sydney had them run projects that are valuable to us, go out and talk to people that are using our software, get their feedback, deliver that back to our engineering team so they can realize what's working, what's not. Do testing on the software to find out where it's breaking, those types of things, build out our social media."

Xander Vizcarra, 16, of Albany Park, helped with the networking aspect of things, looking to bring in more users for the different groups on the YolBe platform and finding, posting job opportunities. Vizcarra's mother, Betty, said her son was born with a missing chromosome that hinders his learning capabilities. "For him to learn, he has to repeat the same thing over and over and over," she said. "He said my mind is like a blackboard — you write on it, and then every morning it's erased and he has to start from scratch. But if you write the same thing over, in the same way, eventually no matter how many times you erase, it stays in there. And that's how he learns. For him it's repetitive. You have to say the same thing over and over and he has to practice it over and over, but he'll eventually get it."

Xander Vizcarra liked doing the internship virtually since he's comfortable staying at home. A self-taught artist, he hopes to use his new coding skills to help with his pencil drawings. Vizcarra plans to do another internship next year and keep the momentum going. According to Douglas, the success of the participants will be tracked by the university over the next several years.

"The success of the program is the extent to which a large proportion of individuals follow a career in STEM to become a software engineer, a designer, a tester, quality assurance type of person," Douglas said. YolBe staff is looking forward to doing the internship program in person next summer. Samantha Skjodt, YolBe's vice president of product and marketing, said YolBe is inviting more nonprofits, states (they hope to expand to Pennsylvania and Georgia very soon) and more public schools in Chicago to be a part of YolBe's networks. "That's our vision, really making sure people get the right connections, whether it's a job or job center or workforce agency," she said. "They're connected with all those career specialists now on the platform; it's like a social capital network for people with disabilities in Chicago."