



# ECLC

*Celebrating 50 Years!*

Education, Careers & Lifelong Community for People with Special Needs

# 2020 BIENNIAL REPORT



Providing "Education, Careers & Lifelong Community" to nearly 900 children and adults with special needs.

# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends, Families and Benefactors:

We are pleased to provide you with this update on our organization and recognize supporters from 2018 and 2019. The year 2020 marked our 50th anniversary, and we had many plans to celebrate this major milestone. Unfortunately in this pandemic year, we had to halt our celebrations. However, your generosity has put us in a strong position to weather the financial storms we have experienced. We are truly grateful.

It has been remarkable to see how throughout this challenging year, our outstanding staff has worked hard to maintain the high level of services for our students and adult clients with developmental disabilities. Because of their efforts, we have not missed a beat in providing full educational advancement for our students and socialization and life skills training for our adult clients — in both on-site and remote settings.

Unlike most public schools, our doors opened to students in September for in-person instruction, five days a week. Our PRIDE Centers re-opened as soon as New Jersey allowed, after tackling challenging regulatory requirements. Our supported employment/support coordination agency, Community Personnel Services, continued to help clients experience a full and rewarding life.

The continuing and post-pandemic world is undoubtedly going to present new challenges. But the love our staff has for our students and adult clients, along with your ongoing support, leaves me confident that ECLC will continue to be a leader in serving their needs for many years to come.

Sincerely,



Peter Petrou  
Executive Director

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# EDUCATION

## Julia's Story - Chatham School

As a special education teacher, Kristen Hershey knew the support her daughter, Julia, needed to reach her full potential in school and to see her failing was heartbreaking.

She adopted Julia at age 5, after specifically requesting a child with Down syndrome. With her professional expertise, Kristen was an ideal parent for a child with disabilities.

At first, a public school setting seemed the right choice for Julia. Then, the family moved, and Julia had to start over in a new district. Almost immediately, problems arose, partly because of the challenges related to the transition, but there was more lurking beneath. Sadly, Julia began to regress.

*"She was having significant behavior issues, and they just were not able to help her,"* said Kristen. *"It got worse and worse."*

The school district agreed. They decided the best setting for Julia was an out-of-district placement in a private, special-needs school. Kristen was eager to explore ECLC's Chatham school. *"I knew the school because one of my former students transferred there and was doing really well,"* she said.

Transition is especially difficult for children with special needs, and the intake was a challenge. However, ECLC seamlessly stepped up to the task.

*"ECLC puts so much effort and work into nurturing the social-emotional part of learning. The teacher was able to manage her behaviors,"* said Kristen.

After enrolling at ECLC, the support and specialized approach continued as it does for all students. The benefit of ECLC is the ability to quickly adjust to students' needs and to draw on five decades of experience working with students who have disabilities. *"I gave them permission to keep her in the classroom to make sure that she felt safe,*



*protected and loved. They understood. They got it."* Whenever a problem cropped up, the teacher adjusted to accommodate her needs. Her Individualized Education Plan was updated to add a paraprofessional for one-on-one support. They recommended a communication device and that was put into place.

At ECLC, she steadily progressed. *"She used to struggle with basic letter identification, and now she loves to read books,"* said her mom. *"She does her homework now, and before it was hard to get her to just hold a pencil. She is learning how to communicate, instead of having meltdowns. She is finding ways to tell us what she wants."*

Kristen now has peace of mind about Julia's future. *"At ECLC, she is forming real relationships, real connections with others. It's such a wonderful community of people. It's everything that she needs to be successful."*

# EDUCATION

## Jada's Story - Ho-Ho-Kus School

Jada Albasi, 17, socializes with classmates in a lunchtime Girls' Group. She has won gold, silver and bronze medals running track events in Special Olympics. She is learning new job skills that might lead to working in a nursing home.

All of this is well beyond what her mom, Jodi Costa, thought possible when Jada was a small child. *"I had hopes for Jada, but I didn't want to put unrealistically high expectations on her and then have her heart broken,"* she said. *"It's putting added pressure on a child that she doesn't need."*



Jada was born legally blind, has scoliosis and cognitive impairments. At first her journey was difficult. After an early-intervention, preschool program, Jada enrolled in a special-needs school, and then briefly attended a public school, but neither program suited her special needs.

As the family searched for a new option, the ECLC school in Ho-Ho-Kus topped the list of programs to visit. Almost immediately, it just felt right. *"They gave us everything we needed. They made us feel like we were at home,"* said Jodi. *"They made the transition easy for us. It was like joining a family."*

In the following years, Jada has flourished at ECLC. She even ran and won a seat on the Student Council in 2019. Her teacher says, *"One of Jada's favorite phrases is 'There is nothing I can't do,' and she is absolutely right."*

*Her level of commitment to achieve success never ceases to amaze me."* Her mom credits ECLC for Jada's success. *"They are people that you know and trust with your child. No matter what you ask for, they solve your problem,"* said Jodi.

With the PRIDE Adult Day Program and supported-employment jobs available through ICommunity Personnel Services, Jada can stay within the ECLC family for years to come and that brings comfort to her mom. *"I see ECLC continuing to grow and evolve with the times, and Jada can be part of it,"* said Jodi. *"She could stay there for the rest of her life."*

# CAREERS

## Brian's Story - Community Personnel Services

When COVID-19 hit in March 2020 and turned life upside down, many people lost their jobs or were furloughed, including Brian Grant, a client of ECLC's affiliate Community Personnel Services.

Brian has worked part-time as a busboy and greeter at the Applebee's in Kearny for the past four years. However, with indoor dining closed, his job was shut down, too.

It would be nearly three months until Brian returned to work and reunited with what he calls his *"second family."*

He was called back on June 22 and couldn't wait to put on his uniform again. *"I was excited to come back,"* said Brian. *"I was bored at home and missing work. I was really happy to come back."*

At the same time, he admits to being apprehensive about how the restaurant would operate differently because of COVID. Brian is fond of routine and is comforted by a feeling of security that comes from knowing what to expect.

He had to adjust to wearing a mask and explaining to guests that they also needed to put on a mask, before they could be seated in the new outdoor dining area, created in the adjacent parking lot. A few guests bristled at being told to wear a mask, but they were willing to comply with an explanation from Brian. *"When I told them why, then they understood,"* said Brian. *"Better safe than sorry!"*

The transition went smoothly, explains Brian, with help from his manager and co-workers. Manager Francisco Albarran downplays any help Brian may have received. *"I haven't seen a change in Brian since COVID,"* said Albarran. *"He manages himself. He's reliable and does everything that you want. He communicates with the guests really well. We are lucky to have him. He's a model employee."*



Brian's road to a successful job at Applebee's began at ECLC's SKIL (Seeking Knowledge for Independent Living) Program. In his final year at ECLC's school in Ho-Ho-Kus, he "job sampled" at Valley Home Care and learned basic restaurant skills. After graduating in 2010, he worked elsewhere before finding this position. *"ECLC helped me get this job because I knew how to do the work already,"* said Brian. *"And, it's close to my home, where I live."*

ECLC is also where Brian met his longtime girlfriend Amanda, a classmate. She lives out of state, and the two have not seen each other since Christmas 2019. Plans to visit over the summer were derailed by the pandemic. But they text and call each other, every day.

Brian is also in touch, although not every day, with his job coach Nancy Ferns, who provides him with support as needed. When Tropical Storm Isaias churned through New Jersey in August, Brian reached out to Nancy about taking days off and was assured this latest upheaval would be temporary and brief. *"Whatever he needs,"* said Nancy. *"I am here for him. We are all in this together."*

# LIFELONG COMMUNITY

## Vaughn's Story - PRIDE Program

Phyllis Smith vividly remembers the evening many years ago that led her son Vaughn to ECLC.

At the time, Vaughn was 6 years old and attending the local public school. Phyllis went to a PTA meeting of parents with children in the special-education program to learn about options. She didn't know anyone and was sitting alone, listening, when a mom stood up and spoke passionately about the importance of advocating for your child. She said, *"No one knows your child more than you do. Don't ever let anyone tell you about your child."*



As the meeting was breaking up, the woman came over and introduced herself, and they exchanged phone numbers. It turned out her daughter was enrolled at ECLC's Chatham school and was thriving. *"I wasn't happy with Vaughn's situation and set up a meeting with the Child Study Team to discuss transferring him elsewhere. They agreed to let us visit ECLC."*

Phyllis remembers the warmth and understanding she immediately felt from the ECLC staff, and it moved her to tears. *"I knew it was the right place for Vaughn."* And it was; at ECLC, Vaughn soared.

Fast forward to 2016, when Vaughn was graduating, and it was time to find an adult program. They worked with Community Personnel Services to look at options. *"We visited a few other programs, and I didn't see anything that would work for him."*

The PRIDE Program was the perfect fit. *"Vaughn is like the mayor. He is very social and likes to*

*talk with everyone. Going to PRIDE made it easier because he knew people there and already had his friends."*

Vaughn also sees friends and former classmates at the Diane Gagliardi Enrichment Program held in the evening at the Chatham school. *"He's like the Toys R Us kid. He doesn't want to grow up! He just loves going back to his old school for the dances, movie nights and bingo."*

His favorite part of PRIDE is traveling into the community for activities and volunteering, which had to stop because of COVID-19. *"Vaughn is really looking forward to when this is all over, and he can go back to being the 'mayor.' "*



Celebrating 50 Years!

Education, Careers & Lifelong Community for People with Special Needs

ECLC FOUNDATION  
100 Passaic Avenue, Chatham, NJ 07928

## 50th Anniversary Milestones

1970 - ECLC founded as the Early Childhood Learning Center

1976 - Educational program expands up to age 14

1983 - Pre-vocational SKIL program begins

1987 - Name changes to ECLC of New Jersey

1988 - Morris County school moves to Chatham

1990 - Bergen school moves to Ho-Ho-Kus

1994 - ECLC Foundation established

1995 - Community Personnel Services founded

2002 - Alumni activities start

2008 - PRIDE Program launches

2013-14 - New PRIDE Centers open in Florham Park & Paramus

2019 - Renee and Bruce Litinger and Family PRIDE Endowment reaches \$2 million goal

2020 - ECLC celebrates 50th anniversary!