

## Advocating for Disability Rights & Inclusion: It Takes a Community

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By **David Golder and Judy Halper**

(Sponsored Article)

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*Mike, who is on the autism spectrum and has extreme anxiety, relied on his parents to help him meet his daily living needs. Yet, his greatest wish was to be able to live more independently. Now he can. Learn about Jewish Disability Advocacy Month and help advance policy that empowers individuals with disabilities to achieve maximum independence.*

***Kehillah.*** Community. It's a core Jewish value, one that teaches we have a commitment to care for the health and welfare of each of our community members. It's that commitment that fuels our Jewish communal organizations, institutions, social services and thousands of volunteers, all across the continent, who often work together across agencies, to advocate for and better the lives of children and

adults with special needs and their families. Below are stories from three of families who have been helped by this work. Join us, The Jewish Federations of North America, the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies and more than 100 partners, virtually, for a month of programming that begins with a [special event at 7:00 PM ET on February 3](#) with renowned violinist Itzhak Perlman and some of our top DC advocates. For more information about Jewish Disability advocacy month visit [www.jewishtogether.org/jdam](http://www.jewishtogether.org/jdam)

## **Families like Mike's, in Boston.**

At age 36, Mike, who is on the autism spectrum and has extreme anxiety, relied on his parents to help him meet his daily living needs. Mike's greatest wish was to be able to live more independently, but neither he nor his parents had the knowledge or skills to help him along that pathway – until a caseworker from Jewish Family and Children's' Service of Greater Boston (JF&CS) reached out to them.

That was five years ago. Within that first year, JF&CS case management enabled Mike to move into a group living situation with some of his peers – Mike's first goal. Since then, due to perseverance, ongoing dedication and Mike's own determination, he's continued to learn the skills he needs to live a more independent life. With the help of a JF&CS case manager, who referred Mike to a vocational skills program, he completed an internship, another milestone that helped him reach his next goal – employment in a local retail store.

Today, through his case manager's advocacy, Mike has received the funding to learn computer skills and other proficiencies to help him fulfill his new ambition, to become a file clerk. What's more, he self-advocated for reasonable accommodations in his computer class, something he would never have had the confidence to do before.

Mike's mother was thrilled to report: "Mike is able to be more independent than we ever thought possible." She then added, "his father and I are so grateful for JF&CS case management. Now that we're at an age where we can't give him the same support we used to, knowing that JF&CS will continue to help him develop and get the services he needs – means more to us than I can possibly say."

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## **Rami in Columbus**

Rami first sought entry into JFS Columbus's MAX program because, as he put it: "I needed a job and knew that the job market would be tough, especially for a recent grad with a disability. I'd heard the MAX program was good at helping students and grads like me find jobs and gave them a social outlet as well."

Throughout Rami's eight-month job search, MAX was an essential resource. MAX Interpersonal Career Coaching serves adults, ages 20s–30s, with college degrees or in degree pursuit, who need assistance overcoming social cognitive barriers, connecting with peers, and exploring career opportunities to achieve self-sufficiency.

"There were specialists there whom I could talk to about my job search and help me practice my interview skills. I also attended events, especially the weekly meetups at coffee shops. Those meetings were invaluable. I could talk to others struggling with finding work, making the grade, or just living with the normal insanity of life. Knowing I wasn't alone kept my mood elevated. And

that's the big thing. My job hunt was a difficult time for me. I don't know where I might've been mentally without MAX."

Today, Rami works for the federal government as an EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) Specialist. "My job," he says, "involves making the federal workforce not just more diverse, but welcoming and accepting. I also write horror fiction on the side and even have a few books out. I have a great car, and I'm saving up for a home. And I know, in part, the MAX program helped me make it this far. And for that, I'll always be grateful."

**Rami. Mike.** Their stories are just two examples of the many thousands of Jewish lives impacted by disabilities that have been uplifted and forever changed by the power of *Kehillah* – the commitment of our Jewish community to care for the welfare of each of its members.

### **The month of February marks the annual Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month.**

In February, Jewish organizations and communities worldwide join in a unified effort to raise awareness and champion the civil rights of people with disabilities. As part of this effort, the Jewish Federations of North America along with **more than 180** partner organizations like the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies (NJHSA) will be hosting Jewish Disability Advocacy Month (JDAM), a month-long virtual educational and solidarity building experience with education, empowerment, and advocacy on Capitol Hill as the central themes. This event builds on the success of the **annual** Jewish Disability Advocacy Day that Jewish Federations launched in 2010 in partnership with the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

JDAM is the latest in Federations' long history of disability advocacy – in fact, Jewish Federations support the work of the aforementioned NJHSA member agencies. Our vital work and unwavering commitment will never stop. Because *Kehillah* – Community never stops. It is not confined to a single month or year. So, our community will continue to work together for Jewish disability awareness and inclusion – and never stop advocating for the laws and practices that will enable those with disabilities to lead their best lives.

\*Pseudonyms used in some cases to protect client confidentiality.

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