

10 Years

By Kyle M.

Ten years ago, I faced one of the darkest moments of my life. It was 2008, and I had just entered college. I had hoped it would be better than the awfulness that was high school and middle school. Everyone said college would be different, would be better. It wasn't. It was the same. Everything that went wrong in sixth grade went wrong with "thirteenth" grade, and I still didn't know why. I had to drop class after class before dropping out completely before Thanksgiving that first (and only) semester.

More and more, I had to face the insistent possibility that I was never going to know why my life was so hard, and that it was never going to be good again. I wanted to be strong, to persevere and make it through the darkness, but no one can do that forever. Everyone breaks. I found myself in that mental place where people go to die. How much longer could I last? A month? A little more than that? There had to be a way out, something I hadn't tried, hadn't thought of. It was then that I set a goal. Survive for ten more years. If, after ten long years, things still hadn't gotten better, and I still couldn't find any way out, I would kill myself, content in the knowledge I had done my best.

Time passed. In early 2009, I was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. Starting in 2010, I volunteered at a nursing home for two years. In 2012, I joined JEVS Philadelphia Independence Network and moved out of my parents' house. In 2015, I gave a talk at the LaSalle University Autism conference. In October 2018, I got my first job. Then November came and went. Ten years had passed.

Now, the wounds of middle school, high school and college are still with me. I'm still scared almost all the time. It's like I'm still trying to catch up to everyone else. Shouldn't I be able to live on my own without my parent's help? Shouldn't I have a girlfriend by now? Shouldn't I have learned to drive? Shouldn't I have accomplished more by now?

But I'm alive. I survived. And I have so many of the hard won answers I was looking for. And my first job. And friends. And an apartment. And a way forward. Things are still improving. The cloud has passed. After fighting so hard and lasting so long, I've conquered the mountain. Now it's time for the hills.



PIN POINTS

a newsletter from
Philadelphia Independence Network

JEVS Human Services' Community-Based Program, Where Young Adults with Disabilities Live in Their Own Apartments, With Supports

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PIN Evolution

By Jill Gromen, Director of Operations



JEVS Philadelphia Independence Network is growing and there are many new developments. In August 2018, the program was officially replicated in Collingswood, NJ. The Independence Network of Collingswood now has 11 members, and another 14 applicants who plan to move to Collingswood to join the program. We have learned so much over the last year, made many new community employer connections, and new friendships are beginning. Between the two programs, we now have 39 official members!

Many PIN members have advanced in their careers, or experienced new employment opportunities. We are known for our active volunteerism and civic engagement. The members in both programs are positively impacting their respective communities through their contributions.

Over the last 6 months, both programs worked collaboratively to create a 3-year strategic plan. Members, families, operational staff, members of the JEVS Human Services executive team, and

a board member worked for more than 4 months to develop this plan. We have a blueprint for action, and a very bright future that will continue to improve how we support members to pursue their best lives.

We invite you to schedule a time to meet with our team; connect with members and their families; or plan a visit to learn more about us!



Donate to the Independence Network

Your dollars support the program, which seeks to empower young adults with disabilities to live independent and full lives, work and advance in their careers, and develop strong community connections. We appreciate any contribution, big or small, and every dollar helps!

Donations can be sent **securely through** www.jevshumanservices.org/donate or to JEVS Human Services, 1845 Walnut St., 7th floor, Philadelphia, PA 19103 and should specify the location of choice to apply the funds: Philadelphia Independence Network or Independence Network of Collingswood. All donations are fully tax-deductible for federal income tax purposes to the extent allowed by law.

EMPLOYMENT & VOLUNTEERISM

93%

of PIN members are currently employed or have established a career path.

77%

of PIN members practice active volunteerism and regularly participate in civic engagement.

contact us...

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Parent's Perspective

By Stephanie Morris



Kyle was born in 1990. He was a beautiful healthy baby, and we were overjoyed that he was ours. From as early as the first days of his life, Kyle presented us with new challenges. Our assumption that as “experienced parents” already, this little baby would seamlessly fit in our family. Practically immediately, Kyle proved us wrong on most counts. He cried in an inconsolable wail all the time. He was a terrible sleeper, and we struggled to soothe his distress. Our beautiful little monkey grew more inquisitive and could fearlessly climb anything, but struggled with milestones.

At his 18-month well-baby check, I shared my concerns with the pediatrician and used the word autistic for the first time. I was scared, but the pediatrician told me everything was fine, and Kyle would “grow out of it.” Kyle continued to remain a beautiful, energetic little boy, but he didn’t speak. The new pediatrician sent Kyle for speech therapy and with treatment Kyle found his voice. We were finally able to know this fascinating little boy in a new way. Throughout his childhood we all struggled to help Kyle grow and develop. From as early as preschool his teachers noticed that he was an exceptional and unique little person. School was a challenge from day one and along the way Kyle did not get to experience success or friendship especially after about 3rd grade. To say it was heartbreaking is a gross understatement. After a disastrous year in

9th grade we were fortunate to get Kyle into a private school for kids with learning differences. He experienced success and made friends for the first time in his life. At every step of the way Pat and I attempted to uncover what were Kyle’s specific challenges. Educators, principals, school psychologists, private therapists and the physicians discounted our concerns for autism. I heard so many times, “he’ll grow out of it.” The word “spectrum” did not exist nor the autism awareness that is prevalent today. As a parent I didn’t succeed to find the answers for Kyle. However, he still grew and developed into a brilliant, clever, wickedly funny young man filled with empathy for the world and a thirst for learning. Our family of five was always a team and no matter what life challenges came along, we tried to keep moving forward.

In June 2008 we moved back to the Philadelphia area to be closer to family, and in August Kyle took a huge leap by starting college. None of us knew if things would be different but we hoped. That fall our hope faded from concern to fear for Kyle’s emotional and psychological health. It was evident by Thanksgiving that Kyle needed to come home. I was afraid every day that I left him home alone. Thankfully we got him into Johns Hopkins hospital for the month of January 2009. The experts once again gave us their esteemed opinions. They discussed depression, anxiety, OCD and a list of other possibilities, including schizophrenia. I struggled every day to keep going. I sat in the office of yet another doctor and explained to him that as early as 18 months I felt Kyle displayed signs of autism. Finally, I got someone’s attention. Maybe ‘Mom’ was on to something. This was a major turning point when we left the uncharted course and finally had a path the Johns Hopkins doctors named Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified or PDD NOS (aka Autism).

With the PDD diagnosis, we now had a better understanding of our son and how together we could make his life and our family better. The diagnosis gave us better

tools to help Kyle and start learning what worked better for all of us in how we related to one another. It was at this time that Kyle started volunteering at a local nursing home and discovering his value. This was a new trajectory with two key milestones ahead that would ultimately lead Kyle to PIN.

The first was finding a support group for young adults on the spectrum and their families called Socializing on the Spectrum. Each family in this group shared a similar experience with their son or daughter on the spectrum: few or no friends and feelings of failure and isolation. It was so miraculous really, because, the families in this group for once were no longer alone. The young adults found friends, many for the first time in their lives, and started having a social life. In the group Kyle started coming out of his shell. At one group meeting, Jerry, Lois and Marnisha came to tell us about JEVS’ new PIN program. We were thrilled to hear about it, but could not fathom Kyle could be ready for such a program any time soon. We had a leap of faith and shortly thereafter, Kyle signed on and got a place with his brother in Narberth to start his PIN adventure.

Kyle’s connection to all of the amazing new people including the staff and his peers helped him see his worth. He had found his community. Throughout Kyle’s time in the PIN program, all of the staff have been extraordinary with their kindness, caring, diligence and professionalism. We could not be happier.

In the past 10 years our sweet, funny, empathetic son has made friends and experienced successes of his own making. PIN helped provide the framework for Kyle to grow as an independent man. He has independent living basics like grocery shopping, laundry and cooking. Beyond those life skills we all have to negotiate, he has continued to pursue his writing, spend time with friends, present at a LaSalle autism conference, and show profound strength and resilience in how he faces the world and his challenges. The PIN village is his tribe and no matter where life takes him, he will always be a part of this amazing group of people.

This is Us.

In their own words, members share just a little bit about their diverse interests, personalities, talents and accomplishments.

NARBERTH



Getting my Child Development Associate Certification is something I always wanted to do. I studied and worked really hard for it! I feel great that this is going to help me find more jobs in the future.

- Chrissy A.



I have fought hard for everything in my life. Now things are on track, and I feel so successful.

- Aaron E.



Since getting my driver’s license I feel excited; it’s a really big accomplishment for me. I am looking forward to driving. I will have the opportunity to do so much more!

- Ryan S.

COLLINGSWOOD



I’m proud to sell my artwork at events like Second Saturday. I’ve gotten to meet people from town who come to my table.

- Chris G.



I’m proud that I’ve come this far and really established myself in my new community. Before I moved to Collingswood, I did not think I would make all these connections so quickly and now I always have someone to talk to and something meaningful to do.

- Shawna D.



I love my job at Penn Jersey Signs. I put vinyl markings on and put the stands on the signs. This is the first paid job I’ve ever had and it feels good to pay for things like my own groceries and household needs.

- Zachary S.