

Looking Back on Ten Years of Independence

By Lois Frischling



Since its founding in 2011 with four members, the Independence Network programs in Narberth and Collingswood have served more than 77 people to date.

In 2008, my son, David, graduated from the Vocational Independence Program at New York Institute of Technology, and joined the POINT program in White Plains, NY, as one of the founding members. David was thriving there, but wanted to come home to Philadelphia. He missed his brothers (he's one of triplets), he really missed his sports teams, and he even missed his parents. We could have found him an apartment, and possibly a job, but he would not have had a community or a way to make friends.

Our adult children with disabilities want and deserve the opportunity to have the rich and fulfilling lives their non-disabled siblings enjoy. They want independence, jobs, and friends. They deserve the dignity of taking risks and being challenged beyond our expectations. This is scary for parents, and difficult for someone living at home.

What we needed didn't exist. We contacted other interested families and all got to work. Based on POINT, we had a model with these crucial components:

1. The right agency to partner with.

Parents considered becoming a 501(c)(3) and running the program ourselves, but quickly discarded that idea. Staffing, billing, insurance, taxes, and assessment of applications require professional expertise and time at a level unattainable for amateurs and volunteers, no matter how well-educated and enthusiastic. JEVS Human Services has a 75 year history and a mission that PIN fits well. JEVS' commitment to building a region-wide vocational program for people with disabilities is vital to PIN.

2. PIN is a genuine collaboration among JEVS, parents, and members. David attended schools that claimed parental involvement was welcome, i.e. please bring cupcakes to the bake sale. At PIN, parents drove the founding of the program. We have helped shape the program, and continue to help market, enrich, and support it. The founding parents saw our initial involvement with PIN as an opportunity to help design a program for our own children, as well as the other

young adults who would eventually join. Continued parental involvement has led to continuous changes in the program. For example, dissatisfaction with the original model of vocational support has led to a complete restructuring, where it is now fully integrated into PIN. PIN is able to adapt to the changing needs of the members with unusual flexibility and sensitivity. And, the PIN staff is always willing to help support the parents as their children go through the challenges of becoming independent adults.

3. Program location is crucial to independence and building community.

Narberth is a safe, welcoming neighborhood with shopping, restaurants, a movie theatre, bank, park and easy access to all Philadelphia has to offer. There's no need to drive; everything is accessible by walking or public transportation. PIN members are part of the larger community; they volunteer and participate in many community activities.

4. PIN is a diverse community. Admission to the program is not based on having a specific disability diagnosis, but on having the ability to live independently and safely with support. PIN has members on the autism spectrum and others who are not, leading to members' increased understanding and ability to get along with a variety of people. Members bring different strengths to PIN along with different challenges. Their interests and needs help drive the selection of activities and enrichments.

PIN is a community, and members have friendships and active social lives. David has a job, friends, activities and the support he needs to be successful. And, PIN makes it possible for members' parents to lead more independent lives as well.

Socialization and Connection are Key to Program's Success

By Meghan McHugh



Meghan and members enjoying the 2019 Narberth Scavenger Hunt, a favorite annual event.

When I started working for JEVS Philadelphia Independence Network (PIN) 6 years ago, the program consisted of 16 members and 4 staff members. Fast forward to November of 2020 and we now have 30 members in the PIN program

in Narberth, 23 members in the New Jersey Independence Network program and 16 staff between both programs. To say this program has grown would be an understatement. I am lucky to have been here from, almost, the beginning.

When families come to us and are interested in the program, we often hear about how their young adult struggles socially and the difficult time they have had making connections. It is no surprise that almost all 53 members say what they love most about the program are the social events and the friends they have made.

Our social events have changed a lot over the years. We started with doing very small events, either at the Clubhouse or within the Narberth community. We have expanded our events greatly by visiting numerous museums and cultural events in the city, attending professional Philadelphia sporting events, Anime Conventions, taking day trips to NYC, Washington DC and various NJ beaches, and much more. The members of the program are now more involved in the social event calendar planning process which they truly enjoy!

Over time we have become a partner to the Narberth community and are their go-to

group when they need volunteers for community events. These volunteer opportunities have helped members to build connections outside of the program and within the community. Volunteering has also helped them to build on skills which can translate to paid employment.

We are not alone in having to adapt to significant changes since the pandemic began. By the end of March 2020, we completely shifted all our social events to virtual opportunities. The members in both programs have been able to maintain social connections and friendships throughout the pandemic.

Socialization and connection are so important for all of us and continues to be a huge benefit of the program. Through our social events we have been able to build connections and a rapport with the members which has opened trust and willingness to help them in other areas of their lives such as independent living skills building and employment.

Over the last 6 years, like the members in the program, I too have made lifelong friends through the PIN program. Here's to the years ahead!

Thank You Clara for Your Commitment Through the Years

The JEVS Independence Network is a true collaboration among members, their families, and JEVS Human Services. Over the last 10 years these cooperative efforts have enabled our program communities to thrive and expand.

Since its inception, one important constant of the program has been Clara Thompson. As Senior Vice President of Community Living and Home Supports, Clara has championed the Independence Network programs from day one. Clara's vision and innovative leadership are still a driving force within

the programs and an ever-present source of support for the Independence Network team, members and their families.

Clara was part of the genesis of the program when she, along with founding members David Miller and Adam Fuerman (and their parents) collectively took a leap of faith and pioneered this new PA program model.

Like the Independence Network, Clara's entire career reflects a genuine commitment to supporting individuals with disabilities to ensure they have equal access to a rich, full,

meaningful community life. Her steady support makes a difference every day, and for that, we are all grateful. **Thank you, Clara!**



INDEPENDENCE NETWORK TIMELINE

December 17, 2009

Founding families met with JEVS for the 1st time to explore a potential partnership.



March 10, 2010

JEVS provided the official go-ahead to begin the Philadelphia Independence Network program in Narberth.



October 21, 2010

Founding families hosted an initial outreach event to try and build a critical mass of prospective members to get the program off the ground.



November 2011

4 young men officially started PIN with 1 staff.



September 20, 2011

JEVS holds recruitment open house for families and providers.

March 2012

PIN establishes first clubhouse.



June 24, 2012

PIN holds its first community picnic.

September 2014

PIN moves into a larger clubhouse.



February 2016

PIN officially embeds employment support into the program structure with a dedicated Career Navigator position and cross training all staff in supported employment best practices.

November 2016

PIN holds a community 5-year celebration.



October 2016

PIN Associate Membership begins – the program's first attempt to develop a step down membership for members needing less support but not ready to leave the program.

June 2017

NJ families come to JEVS and request replication of the program in NJ

August 2018

Independence Network of Collingswood officially starts with 2 founding members.



September 2018

PIN and IN began to hold social events together.



March 2020

PIN adds virtual programming and support to include both programs and adapt to the conditions of the pandemic.



In Their Own Words: Members Reflect on the Program



"Since joining PIN, I am more independent, active within the local community and have made so many more friends."

– Ryan



"I was one of the founding members of PIN 10 years ago. There were only 3 other members back then and now there are 30. I love living on my own in Narberth. I work full-time, love my job and my co-workers."

– Adam



"It is a lot of fun here in Narberth! The PIN staff are really helpful and easy to talk with."

– David



"This program has changed me. My life has changed completely because now I can do more things on my own. I have more independence."

– Shawna



"The first event I went on with PIN, was my first trip into the city. I learned right then that I would be able to trust the staff and always have been able to since."

– Chrissy A.



"I think it's a great program. You learn a lot about living on your own, cooking, and being sociable. As soon as I joined the program I made more friends."

– Gabe



"Since joining PIN, I have been able to have a full-time job and live independently. Staff is always there if I need assistance, which helps me out with my independence. I really feel happy with my life now!"

– Josh



"For anyone who is interested in this program, I say jump right in – don't even hesitate! This is a perfect opportunity. You will get all the help you need – from housing arrangements and groceries to employment."

– Andrew



"When I came to PIN, my life completely changed by me being more independent and working a full-time job. I didn't think I would be able to move away from my parents, but I was able to overcome my fear and do it."

– Chrissy B.



"I would recommend this program. I know it can be a little scary moving out of your parents' house for the first time but you never know until you try it. It's a good experience."

– Josh D.



"The program has changed my life since joining. I found a job and am earning some money so I have enough to pay my bills like groceries and clothing."

– Zachary



"My life has changed in many ways since joining PIN. I am now living in my own apartment, doing many new things, and I work and volunteer in the community. I have also made many new friends."

– Laura