Oak Hill Newsletter

A Newsletter for Friends of Oak Hill

Oak Hill School Saved My Son…

David Ishmael, parent of an Oak Hill School student, shares his journey of raising twins with autism as a single dad. How he persevered during the darkest times. And how Oak Hill School helped restore his faith in the special education system.

When David Jr. and twin brother Austin were diagnosed with autism, ADHD, and Asperger’s syndrome they were just three years old. At the time, the family lived in New Hampshire and immediately pursued the necessary services to help their children thrive. As they grew, the twins displayed significant differences within their diagnoses. Austin was verbal and able to attend a typical school. He made friends easily and didn’t exhibit outbursts while communicating. David Jr., who was eventually diagnosed as moderately to severely non-verbal, had more of a difficult time in school.

While in New Hampshire, David Jr. attended a school for children with autism. The school was great and offered the services and competent staff that David Jr. required. However, that year the Ishmael family was faced with several hardships. David Sr. and his twin sons lost their wife and mother. Soon after this tragedy, the Ishmael family relocated to Connecticut. David Sr. was now a single father, running his own business, and trying to stay on top of the critical developments of his sons' diagnoses. He had so many questions. How do I begin to find the right services for my sons in a new town and state? Will people take me seriously, because I am not their mother? How will I continue to run a successful business and raise two boys who need me?

David Sr. refused to let these challenges get in his way. ‘Yesterday’s setbacks are today’s setups for tomorrow’s comebacks’, explained David Sr. “I knew I had no choice but to keep going for my kids. I am first and foremost a dad, my kids need me. I will always make them my number one priority.”

For more than eleven years the Ishmael family challenges continued. David Sr. had an incredibly difficult time finding a school for David Jr. upon moving to Connecticut. He was confronted with endless obstacles within the special education system. His son was taunted by classmates, bus drivers, and even teachers. David Jr. feared going to school and would act out violently when he had to get on the bus. ‘School was supposed to be a place where he felt safe and comfortable,’ pleaded David Sr. “But instead it was a battle each day to get him on the bus. He would run away, and I would have to chase him down. I would drive him myself and then turn around to come home because of his outbursts. I was missing work and watching my son regress. The school (he was in at the time) practically begged me to have him placed into another school, so they didn’t have to deal with him. As hard as I tried to maintain my optimism, it felt as though everything and everyone around us was fleeting.”

And then, on the eve of David Jr. & Austin’s 17th birthday, after years of uphill battles and heavy-hearted pleas with various school districts, the Ishmael family finally found what they had been looking for. And what David Sr. refers to as a “wonderful miracle.”

A man by the name of Mark Hedrick, Education Administrator of Oak Hill School, had returned David Sr.’s phone call. Mark scheduled an appointment to come out to David’s home, introduce himself to the family, and conduct an assessment.

“Mark was personable, professional and very friendly,” cheered David Sr. “When he met my son, he was not afraid of a behavior Mark gave me hope!” During his first visit to Oak Hill School, David Jr. sat down at a table with other students and you could tell he felt at home. It was a positive reaction that David Sr. had never witnessed from his son. Almost as if he was vocalizing, “Dad, this is where I belong.” As the school visit came to an end, Mark confirmed that David Jr. had been formally accepted to join Oak Hill School. “I cried tears of joy that night,” quivered David Sr., “I haven’t seen my son this happy since he was six years old.”

“Upon enrollment at Oak Hill School, David Jr. has been part of the family at Oak Hill,” said Mark Hedrick. “He’s actively engaged in his education program and community and has an excellent relationship with his teachers and peers. He has shown substantial growth academically and socially.”

These days, David Jr. gets himself dressed, stands by the door eagerly waiting for the school bus to arrive, and willingly gets on the bus [this alone is a momentous accomplishment] David Jr. has established routine for himself and community and has an excellent relationship with his teachers and peers. He has shown substantial growth academically and socially.

During the weekends however, you can find David Jr. doing what most 17-year-old boys like to do; eating Popeyes Chicken (his desired cuisine), Listening to music (James Brown & Billy Idol are his go-to artists), and watching movies (Shrek, his personal cinematic favorite).

“Oak Hill has been a blessing to my child and my family,” said David Sr. “They are the reason I believe, if you want to see a rainbow, you’ve got to taste a little rain. Thank you, Oak Hill, we are eternally grateful.”
Why Become a Monthly Donor to Oak Hill?

Bringing long-lasting change to empowering individuals with disabilities throughout Connecticut doesn’t happen overnight. It takes hard work and dedication every day of the year.

By making an affordable automatic tax-deductible gift each month, you can help Oak Hill improve lives and empower children and adults with disabilities. Not only will your donation make a tremendous impact, it will make on-going support of Oak Hill’s mission very easy.

Become a Monthly Donor...

It’s easy! You decide on an affordable amount that meets your budget and your desire to help children and adults across Connecticut. Your gift can be routinely billed to your credit card or debited to your checking account on or about the 15th day of the month.

Of course, you can always modify your monthly amount, discontinue your support, or adjust your preferred method of payment at any time by calling our Development Department at 860-769-3854.

Additionally, because the costs for managing this program are much lower, so much more can be dedicated to our necessary programs that are helping children and adults overcome barriers and conquer obstacles that stand in their way.

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(Continued from page 2)

Oak Hill Camp Summer 2020

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Eastseals of Oak Hill Camp Hemlocks is an accessible, residential summer camp in the scenic woods of central Connecticut for youth and adults with physical, sensory, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. Camp Hemlocks offers a traditional camping experience for campers as young as eight and there is no age limit, allowing campers to attend into adulthood. Activities include swimming in our indoor heated pool, boating and fishing on our 22-acre pond, arts and crafts, nature, archery, health and fitness, and climbing our challenge tower. Camp Hemlocks programming is individually adapted to the needs of each camper to provide them the most enjoyable and successful camp experience possible.

The benefits of summer camp extend beyond the exhilarating activities, campfires, and friendship bracelets. Camp is a place to develop confidence and where social skills flourish. Camp promotes independence. Most importantly, camp is fun! Campers often say that they feel as if they are a part of a family while they are with us. They feel accepted and wanted with people who understand them. Camp Hemlocks is a place where each camper can socialize with old friends and make new ones.

At Camp Hemlocks we support the use of assistive technology, adaptive equipment, and creativity to support the needs of each individual camper. We offer the appropriate assistance needed for all campers around mobility, participation in the program, and activities of daily living. New activities and customized support encourage campers to try new things and creates an exciting challenge, even for the most seasoned camper!

If you are interested in a tour and meeting with a member of the camp team to learn more about whether Camp Hemlocks is a good fit for you, please call or email Jillian.McCarthy@oakhillct.org and the Camp Director to schedule an appointment!

Contact Us:

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Thank You for helping us empower individuals with disabilities.

(Continued on page 3)