



Dear Friends,

Thanks
to all who
joined us for
the reopening
celebration of our

Center for Children & Youth (CCY). We were so heartened by the enthusiastic response to our renovation project, and the community support we continue to receive for the work we are doing with children and families. For those of you who weren't able to join us, please reach out any time for a tour of our "CCY"! We're very proud of it, and excited to share it with as many friends and supporters as possible.

Our Open House invitation posed the question, "Have you ever wondered what Hope and Healing looks like?" As with our prior Gift Books, this year's installment will answer that question through the stories of lives we've changed. Lives that are now flourishing because of the generosity and compassion of our supporters.

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The stories we've chosen to share with you this year focus on the work we're doing with children, families and adults through our therapeutic groups. Sometimes the most effective treatment occurs in a group setting.

Research has long shown the link between strong social support and mental health recovery outcomes, but why is it so significant? Part of it may be how social connections change the way we think and perceive the world. For example, children accompanied by a friend, when standing in front of a hill, see the hill as 10 – 20% less steep than kids who face the hill alone.

Whether it be teens who are grappling with social anxiety, adults on the Autism spectrum, families in crisis or LGBTQ+ young adults who need support, group therapy provides a safety net and helps those who struggle realize they're not alone.

As you read these stories, understand that West Bergen's ability to transform these lives has been made possible only through your support. And we need it now more than ever.

Our goal is to raise \$100,000 this holiday season. Community mental health services and support have never been more necessary, more essential to the wellbeing of our families, friends and neighbors.

Please consider helping West Bergen ensure that everyone who needs it can receive the hope and healing we all deserve. The gift of mental health and wellness.

With gratitude,

Michael J. Tozzoli. MSW. LCSW. CEO

The Gift of Connection

Janie, 25, struggled for years with crippling social anxiety.

At age 15, Janie's parents entered her into a Social Discovery group for teen girls, some of whom were on the Autism spectrum, all of whom struggled to connect with peers and make friends. Janie, although a bright girl, had always had a difficult time in school because of her inability to effectively communicate. Eventually she began refusing to attend school at all, which prompted her parents to call West Bergen.

Janie's group met on Tuesday evenings at the Center for Children & Youth. For her first two sessions, she refused to join the group, sitting silently in the waiting room until her parents came to pick her up. By week three, she agreed to sit in a chair outside the group room although she would not remove her blue coat and kept her hood tightly secured around her head. She never uttered a word.

Her patient and gifted group leader Michael understood that baby steps were necessary for Janie. So each week, he inched her chair closer to the open door until finally on week 5, he brought snacks and asked her if she wanted water and a small bag of pretzels. She answered yes. Her first words!

Janie continued to progress. and within 3 months became a full participant of the group. Michael's therapeutic approach for the teen girls was to help them practice conversation with others. Simple for us, but terrifying for those who are grappling with social anxiety. They learned how to initiate conversations with others. practice going to a party (including dealing with party RSVP's) and understanding dialogue nuances. As Janie blossomed, she also began individual therapy and soon returned to school where. with continued coaching, she was able to successfully navigate social interactions. She graduated from High School with honors, and attended a local college where she majored in graphic design.

Today, Janie is working for a small advertising agency in New Jersey, living on her own and has a group of friends she cherishes.

West Bergen Social Discovery Groups

Your donation supports:

A full spectrum of highly specialized programs for children and adolescents with a diagnosis of Level 1 Autism Disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) or severe social anxiety. Services include:

- Therapeutic Social Skills Groups
- Comprehensive Evaluations
- Individual and Family Treatment



The Gift of Healing

A bitter divorce left Janice's family in chaos and despair

Janice didn't see it coming. Her husband of 20 years, Tom, announced one day that he had fallen in love with someone else, and wanted a divorce. The couple's daughter Danielle (16) was devastated. Tom assured her that the divorce had nothing to do with her but Janice used Danielle as a sounding board for her anger and grief, effectively cutting her off from her Dad.

Taking care of her Mom's fragile psyche took its toll, and Danielle slowly drifted away from friends. She refused to see her Dad, actively taking sides as her Mother had encouraged.

Within a year, Janice began dating, and soon became involved with Walter who she declared was the "love of her life". Danielle felt betrayed again, this time by her Mom, and began rebelling in school. Her guidance counselor suggested Janice take Danielle to West Bergen, and so she began sessions with Elizabeth, a skilled family therapist.

Elizabeth realized that it was a family issue, not just a Danielle issue. Having spent the last year acting as her Mother's best friend and support system, Danielle now felt that she had been replaced. Acting out was her way of expressing her anger and sadness at the adults in her life, who couldn't be trusted.



West Bergen Divorce Program

The impact of divorce can have emotional and psychological consequences for children. Our family therapists are trained to understand the complex dynamics that divorcing families face. Your donation supports:

- Family, Group and Individual Counseling
- Re-unification Counseling

After individual sessions with both Janice and Danielle, Elizabeth helped Janice see that the betrayal Danielle felt towards her mother was exactly what Janice had felt towards Tom. She had unknowingly burdened her daughter with her pain and anger, and left her without a relationship with her father. And then abandoned her once Walter came into the picture.

Elizabeth brought all family members together (including Tom) and helped them learn how to communicate and share their feelings with each other. With her coaching Janice is now giving Danielle permission to have a relationship with her father. Janice and Tom understand that their differences must be put aside for the sake of Danielle. And they are learning how to

build a new family.

The Gift of Friendship

Robert and James, both in their 30's, are challenged with Level 1 Autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a relatively recent diagnosis, and West Bergen has been a leader in this area for years. Early intervention is critical in helping mitigate lifelong socialization issues, but when Robert and James were growing up, little was known about this condition. Effective treatment solutions were nonexistent. Kids who struggled to make peer connections were simply labeled "odd". Robert and John were two of these kids. As a result, both reached adulthood before they learned they were on the spectrum and could benefit from a Social Skills group.

Attempting to intervene in adulthood can be challenging, and it was for Robert and James. They had both grown up without any friends. Both men still lived with their parents, who worried constantly about their futures. When the families individually became aware of West Bergen's Social Discovery groups for adults, they encouraged their sons to enroll. Both reluctantly agreed to give the group a try. That was how Robert and John met for the first time. Neither

had ever experienced any kind of group therapy, and both were fearful of being laughed at, an experience they knew all too well. They soon realized though, that for the first time in their lives, they were with others who had shared experiences. Slowly they began to relax and started to feel like they finally "fit in".

Alan, their experienced group leader, worked with the group on their social limitations and reassured them that these skills could be learned through practice, just like any other skill. In the process of learning how to socialize, Robert and James realized that they had more in common than just their diagnosis. They had many collective interests and hobbies, and little by little, they built a real friendship outside of the group.

After two years of group, they decided to plan a trip together. Something they'd never done. They saved money and planned methodically. Last year, the two of them went on a cruise to the Carribbean. It was a transformative experience for both, as they realized how wonderful life can be when you have a friend to share it with.

West Bergen Adult Social Discovery Program

Your donation supports:

A full spectrum of highly specialized programs for adults with Level 1 Autism Disorders. Services include:

- Therapeutic Social Skills Groups
- Comprehensive Evaluations
- Individual and Family Treatment

The Gift of Acceptance

Phoebe (age 22) is a happy, welladjusted college student

She wasn't always that way.

At age 15, P disclosed to his parents that he was transgender. He identified as a she, and although fearful of their reaction, he knew that his parents loved him enough to support him, and he wanted their help finding a therapist. P's parents, while surprised, were not unfamiliar with the LGBTQ+ landscape as P has a younger brother who is gay, not uncommon in families. P's dad reached out to a neighbor who he knew was a therapist and asked for advice. As he said to his neighbor, "I just don't want to mess this up".

The neighbor recommended a LBGTQ+ group at West Bergen, and so P began

West Bergen LGBTQ+ Specialized Services

Your donation supports:

A seasoned group of mental health professionals with extensive knowledge and experience providing mental health services and guidance to LBGTQ+ teens and young adults. Services include:

- LGBTQ+ Support Groups
- Couples/Relationship Counseling
- Clinical Support to families dealing with a transitioning member
- Individual Therapy
- Family Therapy



his journey. The group leader Michelle quickly laid the ground rules at the first session, making it clear to all participants that group is a safe place where all members can progress at their own pace. Some members had not yet come out, and others were well on their way in their gender expression and social transition, but each person's story and timetable was to be honored and supported. Part of the weekly program was vibrant discussions centered on exploring "who we really are as well as how it affects ourselves, our families and everyone in our lives". Members also talked about their expectations and Michelle helped them with coping skills, and shared other resources and support.

Slowly P began his gender transition, and at age 17 became Phoebe. She applied to a local college so she could continue with the group, and hoped to achieve her dream of becoming a therapist. Well liked, outgoing and feeling safe and accepted, she made many friends and became involved in the LGBTQ+ student group at school.

Today, Phoebe is set to graduate in May with a degree in Psychology. She plans to pursue her Masters, and is exploring the physical gender transformation process, all with the support of her parents. And she finally feels aligned with who she identifies with.



With profound gratitude, West Bergen Mental Healthcare, Inc. thanks a group of generous supporters who have come together to collectively pledge to match every dollar we receive up to \$50,000.

Please consider giving as much as you are able so your dollars can be doubled! Your gift ensures that our mission of hope and healing continues, and will support a full spectrum of therapeutic treatments for children, adolescents, adults and families suffering from trauma, depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.

https://secure.qgiv.com/for/2023holidaygiftbook/

How to Give

Use the QR code, the convenient envelope attached or contact Barbara Hand at **201-444-3550** or **bhand@westbergen.org**.

