



Champions

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Staying Connected when the World Turns Upside Down

Families who have children with disabilities face personal and financial challenges more often than families who have children without disabilities. In rural communities, people often lack internet access, experience higher rates of poverty, and are physically more isolated from each other and from agencies that can help.

For years, Starbridge has provided individual advocacy support in rural areas like Allegany and Cattaraugus Counties. In 2018, we offered several open forums for parents but attendance was often lower than expected.

Through research and conversations, we realized that we needed to offer opportunities to connect that would **meet the needs of the entire family**, not just parents or caregivers.

In 2019 Starbridge began hosting monthly “Family Fun” events in places like bowling alleys, skating rinks, mini golf courses, parks, and pumpkin patches. These social and recreational events allowed the whole family – grandparents, parents and siblings – to enjoy time together and begin to

build their own networks of connections. **In 2019, we reached 10 times the number of families that we reached in 2018.**

We also established a Family Advocacy Committee composed of county residents who have family members with disabilities living at home. The Committee’s purpose is to guide us in better understanding what families in that area need and helping us plan programming.

Like everyone else, once the pandemic arrived, we had to adapt our 2020 plans. Our in-person Family Fun events are on pause until we can safely offer them again. In the meantime, our advocates are supporting families in a few ways:

- Going virtual with events – In May & June, we will be offering drum circles, a dance party, a magic show, and virtual bingo.
- Emailing or calling families – With the shutdown of schools, families are often wondering what schools are responsible for providing and how to best support their children in continuing to learn. Many



schools are finding creative ways to deliver education, but it is still challenging for all involved.

- Connecting with care coordinators – Particularly while schools are closed, care coordinators play an even bigger role in helping families learn about options. Our staff are staying in touch so that care coordinators know we are there to assist.

These connections would not have happened without the creativity and willingness of our staff to take a fresh approach. Thank you to our advocacy team!

Starbridge’s Family Fun events are provided through a grant from OPWDD’S Western NY DDRO.

Message from the President/CEO

Dear friends,

Much has changed since the last time we wrote to you. First and foremost, our hearts go out to those of you impacted by this virus directly or indirectly. We wish all a full and speedy recovery.

Secondly, we are inspired by all the dedicated health care workers and essential employees at the front lines caring for people. We are particularly thankful for and proud of all the Starbridge staff in our residential and community living services and their commitment to supporting people with disabilities to stay safe and healthy.

Our priority is to secure Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to ensure the health and safety of our staff and individuals. This has been challenging with the shortages experienced around the country – especially considering this virus is not going away soon. We are truly grateful for the donations of cloth masks, cleaning and disinfecting supplies, and paper products.

With most of our staff working remotely, we have shifted all in-person workshops planned through the spring and summer to online events. You can visit our event calendar online to view upcoming webinars or look at our webinar recordings page to view recent topics.

Our staff continue to provide guidance, resources, and supports. If you are looking to connect with us, please phone or email the appropriate staff member or use our Contact Us form on our website at www.StarbridgeInc.org.

Our Among the Stars Gala has been postponed until Friday, October 30, 2020. All ticket purchases and contributions will be honored in October.

This is an unexpected, challenging time for us all. **We are grateful for your partnership, trust, and continued support.**



Your donation today, no matter the size, will go a long way in helping us maintain a safe working environment for our front-line staff and allow us to continue supporting people who have disabilities. You can make a gift through:

- The enclosed donation envelope
- Online at starbridgeinc.org/donate
- Your company's United Way campaign. Our donor designation code is 406.

We are all going through an extraordinarily stressful time but **we are in this together**. Thank you for being a valued member of the Starbridge family.

Kind regards,

Colin Garwood

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Thank YOU

The successes of Starbridge and the people we serve are made possible, in part, by the gifts we receive from **supporters like you**. We thank you for your support and hope you enjoy reading about the impact you have in the lives of many!

From Internship to Employment



Starbridge counselor Samantha with Anna

Anna is a determined young woman who was looking for a rewarding job helping people. She had experience working for the Rochester Childfirst Network and volunteering at Highland Hospital.

Anna's ACCES-VR counselor referred her to Starbridge for our Internship program. At the first meeting, Anna and her Starbridge counselor, Samantha Brown, created a list of five potential employers.

The Pittsford YMCA was one of those choices. With Samantha's assistance, Anna prepared for an interview and then met the staff to discuss possible internships. The YMCA offered Anna an internship as a front desk greeter.

During Anna's internship, Samantha met with her regularly, providing coaching if needed. When Anna wanted to add a day to her schedule and to move from an internship to a job – situations many interns find challenging – Samantha worked with her on how to proceed.

The YMCA was so pleased with Anna's work as an intern, she was offered a permanent position!

Anna says, "My mom didn't think I could get the job, but I sure proved her wrong. They love me!"

Nikisha Ridgeway, Chief Operating Officer

I have worked serving people with disabilities for 24 years, but my real start began as a young girl when my family moved next door to a young man who was a disabled veteran. My neighbor quickly became close friends with us. Richie was a quadriplegic and had enough hand movement to operate an electric wheelchair. He required total support and yet he successfully lived alone in his own home. In the 80s services weren't what they are today and there weren't options to push community supports into the home. Richie's family played that role in supporting him with living successfully in his home for many years.

I remember seeing Richie's friends come visit. One friend pulled up in his large van, got out and, to my amazement, he was also in a wheelchair. As an 11-year-old, I was in awe and I asked, "How did you drive that van?" Richie's friend showed me the inside of his adapted van that allowed him to independently drive and my world view of people living with disabilities changed. I realized **people can do anything with the right support, the right adaptive equipment and the right access.**

It was a normal day to sit on my neighbor's porch with all of our friends and families trying to determine how we could get an automatic door opener attached to his house like at grocery stores (again this was the 80s and the accessible door button hadn't been invented yet). Endless conversations regarding safety and accessibility occurred on Richie's front porch. At that time, we had no idea this would later be called a circle of support. We called it friends. It was a typical day in my neighborhood.

Years later, the first time I supported an individual with getting an automatic door opener on their apartment so they could live more independently, I was ecstatic and couldn't wait to tell Richie and his family that it could be done and I knew how to do it. Richie and his family were very excited



and grateful that I was helping others with disabilities and that they had their own personal guide to help them as well.

With every person I encounter, I consider how I might assist in helping to create space in ordinary spaces for all people to show up as their authentic selves. **I work towards expanding the WE to mean all of us, everyone – not some or a few, but ALL.** This is my WHY.

Nikisha Ridgeway, M.A., joined Starbridge as our Chief Operating Officer in December 2019. In her role, Nikisha is responsible for Starbridge's overall operations and service delivery.

Nikisha brings a wealth of knowledge and experience delivering high-quality services to people with disabilities across Western New York. She has a talent for embracing change, learning new service options, and successfully implementing new initiatives.

Welcome, Nikisha!



THANK YOU to everyone who donated masks, cleaning supplies, and other essential items so that we can keep our DSPs, Nurses, and residents SAFE & HEALTHY!



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