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## A NEW VISION FOR CREATING A LIFE: CYNTHIA AND HYACINTH

"My life is like a tree. Everything is connected. If one branch breaks, another one will start to grow."

Cynthia Willis, a mother and grandmother, has faced challenges in her life, but her faith keeps her optimistic that help is out there. And last year, in the midst of the pandemic, Cynthia and her 19-year-old daughter Hyacinth connected with Starbridge.

"Somebody came up with a great idea to meet at the Seneca Park pavilion. Whoever came up with that brilliant idea, it was awesome!"

Maritza Cubi, Family Support Service Program Coordinator, is the "somebody" who runs Starbridge's Creating A Life After High School program. Normally held as an in-person, six-session series, presenters guide young adults and their families in developing a vision for their lives after school. Information about the

many supports available for adults is also provided.

The restrictions of life during COVID-19 made it impossible to host Creating A Life in the usual way. So, Maritza got creative.

Creating A Life was transformed to a one-day event hosted in the open-air pavilion at Seneca Park, which allowed for safe distancing, masking, and plenty of fresh air. The content was adapted to be delivered in less time, but still provided the information that families and young adults find so valuable.

Cynthia says, "I loved the staff that presented because they themselves went through what I'm going through and that just blew my mind. I've got somebody to connect to, to make that foundation for Hyacinth. I know I'm not always going to be here so I'm going to have to make a platform for her to achieve."

Maritza has led the program for a few years and sees how meaningful the experience is for families: "They have an opportunity to connect with others in a meaningful way while learning about opportunities to live, learn, earn and be part of our communities."

Cynthia has nothing but praise for the team she and Hyacinth have, which includes Hyacinth's sisters, LaShawnda and Hillary. And Cynthia is determined to share what she has learned with others in her life:

"Wow! I can help somebody with the information that I received with my child. Are you gonna say my child is not normal because she's got these issues? I can't even put my head around that. No, she just needs more time to grab this information. I will give out information as long as I receive it. I will not keep it just for my benefit. I'm gonna spread it."



## MEET BRANDEN

Branden Weaver is 28 years old and has worked with Starbridge's Employment team over the years. Branden has worked in both fast food and retail operations, and hopes someday to be a retail manager.

He sees his disability as the biggest barrier to getting and keeping a job. "It's hard to find a job and maintain it for someone like me. I try my best."

Employment Counselor Stacey Daly, LMSW, works with Branden on routine employment matters, such as communication with his manager and how to process feedback. When Branden has scheduling conflicts, such as when his family needs transportation,

Stacey can be a resource in helping Branden plan ahead and communicate with supervisors.

When asked what he has learned over time, Branden says, "To be patient, mainly. To have confidence in myself, which is hard to come by nowadays, but I'm trying."

Stacey praises Branden on "his persistence and his openness to looking for other jobs."

To other people in his shoes, Branden offers this advice: "Don't let anyone tell you you can't do it. Keep going. Believe in yourself. Have a heart for the work."

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# THANK YOU FOR 25 YEARS OF SERVICE:

## PAM MERKLE

Pam Merkle, IT Manager for Starbridge, is retiring after more than 25 years of service. Pam and her husband, Bruce, now live in Florida, and are the parents of two sons: David (age 35) and Paul, who died in 1994, just shy of 5 years old.

### HOW DID YOU FIRST HEAR ABOUT STARBRIDGE (OR ITS LEGACY AGENCIES)?

I attended a workshop from The Advocacy Center back when Paul was in preschool. I learned tried-and-true techniques for advocating. I still use those techniques now in advocating for my mom and keeping track of things on her behalf.

### WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO JOIN STARBRIDGE?

It was the connection that I felt to people who worked there, many of whom were parents of kids with disabilities. The experience of having a child with a disability can be somewhat isolating. By getting connected to The Advocacy Center, it helped me to feel like I wasn't alone and that the vision that we had for Paul wasn't crazy. When he was first diagnosed, I remember thinking that I couldn't change the fact that he had a disability, but I could help people around him to better understand him.

### WHAT IS YOUR "WHY" FOR THE WORK YOU DO?

I had been a math major in college and began my career at Eastman Kodak. After we had Paul and he passed away, I felt that my job at The Advocacy Center sort of chose me. It was especially nice over the years to get back to what I felt I was good at in terms using technology to support people to do their work, but also do it in a way that was nearer and dearer to my heart.

### WHAT HAVE YOU GAINED OR LEARNED FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

I gained a respect for and appreciation for all that people with disabilities could contribute. One of the most enriching experiences I participated in as a staff member was supporting the efforts of the Partners in Policymaking program. As a parent of a young child with a disability, I didn't know what the future was going to hold for Paul. Through Partners in Policymaking, I got to see adults with disabilities engaging in the kinds of things I would have hoped Paul could do when he was an adult. I got to witness the later years for a person with disabilities. And the unique personalities and the things that these men and women would contribute to, how they were working on things in their own life, but also contributing to systemic advocacy. This is why we're



Pam with her husband, Bruce

doing what we're doing, so that as people finish school and get out into their adult lives, when institutional supports are not there anymore, there are opportunities for them, that we're making society more inclusive for people with disabilities.

### IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY TO SOMEONE WHO IS CONSIDERING CONTRIBUTING TO STARBRIDGE IN SOME WAY?

I would say that the mission of Starbridge, working with people to help them achieve what's important to them, is a powerful process. If you can contribute by either volunteering time or by volunteering resources, that makes a difference in people's lives. Who doesn't want the ability to make decisions on their own behalf about where they work, where they live, how they spend their time? That's more challenging for people with disabilities to have that level of independence.

By contributing to Starbridge, you're helping someone else do things that some of us take for granted and helping people achieve more than they might without support.

### IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

It's been an honor to work with such a dedicated group of people over many years, at The Advocacy Center, with LDA, and now at Starbridge. It's a remarkable group of people with a shared commitment to an important effort. It's been a pleasure and I've valued that opportunity to be able to contribute what I think are some of my best skills and talents to make a difference.



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<sup>1</sup>

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## SAVE THE DATE

### ANNUAL AMONG THE STARS GALA

*A Virtual Special Event*

Friday, October 15, 2021  
6:00-7:00PM

# Among the Stars



*For the Hope and the Hour*



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