

Telling Our Story

A Mother Shares How the Guttenberg Center for Special Services at the Kaplen JCC's Adult Day Program Helped Her Daughter Get into College.

Allison Bednarz, who has been challenged with multiple disabilities all her life, is now a confident and happy young woman, attending college with her peers. She is studying finance and budgeting and other valuable coursework that will prepare her for a job in the "real world" when she graduates, and lives in off-campus housing with a roommate, where she can shop in her own groceries, cook her own meals and have fun with her friends.

It is a dream come true and one that she and her family always assumed would be unattainable. From the time Allison was two, she had trouble speaking, and she went on to suffer more than 1,000 seizures before she turned ten. She was eventually diagnosed with PPD, as well as complex learning issues that stemmed from all the seizures she had as a child. It took ten years for her to advance from Kindergarten to a 3rd grade level, and by the time she was ready to graduate from the special needs program she was in at the age of 21, her parents were at a loss at where to turn or what to do.



"Independence is the greatest gift of all and that is what the JCC gave Allison."

Allison on Campus. BELOW: Coming back for a visit. (Left to right) Shelley Levy, Guttenberg Center Director, Allison, Lynn Bednarz, and Maria Engel, Guttenberg Center Staff.



And that is when they discovered the lifeline they needed. One of Allison's teachers told her about the Guttenberg Center for Special Services at the JCC, which offered an adult day habilitation program for young adults with similar challenges to Allison's.

Reluctant believers, Allison's parents, Lynn and Robert, came to the JCC for a consultation. Allison was accepted and for the next four years—September 2009 to July 2013—she was an active participant in the JCC's dynamic program. She learned all the life skills she'd need to eventually transition to the life she is now living, and benefited from being in the JCC's welcoming community environment, where she could swim, cook, Zumba-dance, and take part in the wider offerings that the JCC provides.

"I thought the JCC program would be a helpful stepping stone for Allison and was grateful for a place to send her," said her mother, "but in truth, I did not have high expectations. But the JCC's adult day program and its *On Our Own* summer camp changed her life. She was performing on a 5th grade level in no time, sailed through her studies to a high school level, and just took off like a rocket. I think the key to her success was the program's ability to help young people like my daughter feel confident and believe in themselves. They were given the chance to do jobs around the JCC, they delivered "Meals on Wheels," and made outings to the supermarket to shop and then prepare meals together when they returned. They learned valuable management skills and how to structure their time and I think this unique aspect of the program helped Allison transition from a dependent to an independent thinker. She learned to believe in herself at the JCC and gained the confidence to trust in herself so she could achieve more."

And Allison is achieving every day. Her experience at the JCC raised the bar for her and she is doing better than she or her parents ever imagined. Now a first year student at a college in Albany, Allison is matriculating in a two-year program that will give her real independence. It's competitive, and Allison was one of only two out-of-state students to get in, but she

has transitioned with flying colors. She excels in her classes, she is a member of the "Best Buddy" Club, where she interacts and has lunch with other students on campus, and she will soon be receiving special training for potential job opportunities that the school will look to secure for her when she graduates. And after graduation, she and her classmates will get jobs and live together in the local community where they can support themselves and live independently.

"Allison graduated high school four years ago and will turn 26 in January," says her mom. "It's been a long road, and I never thought she'd be doing what she's doing now. She's attending college! She goes to the mall with her friends and makes exciting trips to places like Lake George or Six Flags on the weekend. I remember days when I'd get a panicked call from her saying "Mom, I can't cook! What am I going to do?" And now she's cooking spaghetti dinners for friends. It's just amazing! Our greatest hope for her was to see her independent, and now we know for certain that she will be. In two years, she'll most likely be living and working in Albany and she'll cook us dinner when we visit. We are so grateful to have arrived at this place. Independence is the greatest gift of all and that is what the JCC gave Allison. We credit the wonderful staff and the amazing program for preparing Allison for the next chapter of her life."

"Our goal is to maximize the potential of every young adult who takes part in our program and to nurture and encourage them to live as independently as possible," says Shelley Levy, Director for the Guttenberg Center for Special Services. "Allison is now living that reality and we are so proud of how far she has come and all she is achieving. It was a pleasure to know and work with her and she will always be part of our JCC family."