



Re-Imagining Venture's Day Programs



LAST YEAR, VENTURE Chief Program Officer Marie Pardi lead a team whose goal was to reexamine and revitalize our day programs. After months of speaking with program stakeholders, running focus groups, and visiting schools and other Day Habilitation sites, Pardi and her team were ready to implement many of the innovative programming possibilities identified during this “Day Hab Project.”

At the same time, Pardi and Director of Day Habilitation Services Diana Dellolio had been exploring potential community sites for a new Venture day program opportunity. Parents of children graduating from secondary schools had clearly stated

that they wanted their children to land in a community-based Day Hab, with similarly aged peers, that mimicked a school structure while providing engaging adult activities.

Then Covid-19 hit, and the world ground to a halt. All of Venture's day programs were closed, and our residential programs were locked down. The agency's entire focus shifted to keeping our staff and the people in our care as safe and healthy as possible.

From mid-March through mid-July, Venture was focused on obtaining adequate PPE for staff and individuals, shifting staff around from day programs to residential, setting up teleconferencing and other tech solu-

tions... in essence, dozens of new immediate priorities that had everyone scrambling.

During this time, Venture began providing day services in-house to its group home residents. When New York State's infection numbers declined, and the order was given to reopen day programs, Venture, like many other agencies, opted to keep their own residents at home, and continue providing services there.

All eight Venture Day Hab locations reopened in July, at a reduced census and following strict Covid-19 safety measures. Shortly thereafter, we piloted a program for recent school graduates in a distinct and separate area of the Venture Center in Sparkill, NY.

This new program is attended by a small contingent of young adults, and focuses on individualized activities in a structured environment. The program strives to promote independence with an engaging routine of short activities and appropriate community engagements are prioritized. Prevocational skills are stressed, as well as physical fitness, technology, music, arts, and more.

Pardi hopes to move the program from Venture Center out into a community-based setting, as soon as circumstances allow. ●



Dear Venture Family...



I'm so pleased that we are able to present this edition of the *Venture Voice* to tell you about a number of good things happening at Camp Venture. While life has been very different—both professionally and personally—since March 2020, Venture's commitment to the individuals we serve and to our staff has remained steadfast throughout this time.

In the following pages, you will see stories about positive changes we have made to our day habilitation programs, our administration and infrastructure, and some emerging initiatives—

on both the race and social justice front, and through our social enterprise efforts at our “Just-A-Buck” dollar store. I could not be more proud of our Venture staff for their diligent effort and enduring family spirit, which has served the individuals in our care so well during these turbulent times. I'm also grateful for Camp Venture's Board of Directors, whose commitment to our cause and support of our management team and staff has been so essential during this time. To all of our readers, I thank you for taking the time to read about Venture's successes and to see Venture's resilience in action as we continue to navigate the uncertainties of the evolving and somewhat enduring global pandemic.

Matt Shelley, CEO

New Board Members Elected



Raf Portnoy

THE VENTURE FAMILY is excited to welcome two new members to its Board of Directors, Rafail (Raf) Portnoy and Dana Stilley.

Raf comes to Venture with vast experience and knowledge in technology and information systems, and will be a huge asset in Venture's efforts to modernize and streamline its systems.

Raf holds a bachelor's degree in Management Information Systems from Pace University, as well as a master's degree in Information Systems Engineering from the NYU Polytechnic School of Engineering, where he graduated with honors. He is currently Chief Technology Officer for the State of New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).

Raf says, "Joining the board of Camp Venture has allowed me to get involved with the local organization, which provides such important set of services in our community, and I feel privileged and grateful to be a part of the Camp Venture family."

Dana Stilley has spent much of her career as an educator, and has, as she says, "spent all of my adult life providing service to my community."

Dana holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Applied Mathematics and Economics from Brown University, an MBA in Finance and Management Science from Columbia Graduate School of Business and is scheduled to complete her PhD in Community College Leadership in 2021 from Old Dominion University in Virginia.

Presently, Dana is an Adjunct Professor at Dominican College in Orangeburg, teaching Introduction to College Math.

In the past, Dana served as Vice-President of Student Services at Rockland Community College, where her responsibilities "opened my eyes to the various needs of those who are disabled, and increased my desire to ensure that everyone gets the services and supports that are necessary for an enjoyable life," she said. When the opportunity to join Venture's Board arose, she "couldn't resist."

The Board of Directors also recently announced the retirement of longtime member Barry Warner. As parents of Venture resident David, Barry and his late wife, Joyce, for whom the Warner House residence is named, were some of the earliest Venture supporters. Barry has Venture's deepest gratitude for his years of support and advocacy.



Barry Warner

COMMUNICATING WITH 550+ VENTURE EMPLOYEES spread amongst nearly 40 sites takes work in the best of times; this year's pandemic and lockdowns have made the task even more challenging. But it was more important than ever for our Executive Team to stay in touch with our programs and staff, to listen to their concerns, address their needs, and boost morale.

Regular updates from CEO Matthew Shelley on current affairs around the agency are sent to all staff along with their paychecks, so they're sure to see them. These updates are also posted on our website (www.venturerockland.org).

We've held a series of Zoom meetings, where Matt and other members of the Executive Team can meet with groups of staff: nurses, Day Hab and Residential programs, and DSPs. During DSP Month, once restrictions allowed, the Executive Team visited every residence and program to hand-deliver Certificates of Appreciation to staff, and to answer questions and concerns.

Finally, our HR Department created a Staff Resources page on our website dedicated to providing health and wellness resources. Posts range from how to setup telehealth appointments to meditation videos.



New Tech Systems on the Way



Director of IT Christopher Nelson

Since joining Venture in November 2019, Director of Information Technology **Christopher Nelson** has been working tirelessly to upgrade and remake the agency's technology infrastructure from top to bottom.

Chris, along with the team from Axiom, our managed IT service provider, have identified, researched and begun implementation on a number of long term projects, all while handling the

day to day repairs, support, and training an agency the size of Venture requires.

Two initiatives due for completion by year's end are the final installation of a new managed IP telephone system, and a move from desktop software to a cloud-based solution.

Another project Chris is particularly pleased with is setting up each of our sites with a "Zoom kiosk" — iPads programmed for easy use as communication devices. These kiosks provide for safe virtual visitations with families, telemedicine appointments, and agency meetings.

Upcoming long term projects include an integrated time and attendance system to streamline our current payroll process, and an EHR (electronic health record) program, which will allow Venture to keep up with upcoming changes to how we bill for services.

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Celebrating DSP Month

In mid-September, the nation observed *Direct Support Professional Recognition Week*. DSP Week is fine, but at Venture, we feel a single week is not nearly long enough to honor the tireless dedication and care provided by our incredible staff of direct support professionals. Thus, Venture spent September celebrating **DSP Month**.

While the celebration had to be more low key this year—no parties, sadly—we honored staff with Certificates of Appreciation, a raffle (including gift cards, TVs and a Fitbit as prizes), and our Executive Staff visited our sites to offer a heartfelt thanks to the people who make Venture work.

DSP of the Year was awarded to Venture Inn's **Gerard Mondesir**. Gerard was nominated by his Residence Director Danouchka Balin, and a number of his fellow DSPs.

Danouchka calls Gerard an "essential employee," willing to do whatever needs to be done. "He has a relationship with all the staff and consumers," she said, and is always there to "laugh, talk, encourage, support, and most of all love."

Gerard began working at Venture Inn in 2015, and says he loves everything about his job. When asked why he thought his co-workers nominated him, he humbly replied "because I work hard all the time."



Gerard Mondesir

Bringing the Arts Home

WHEN THE COVID-19 lockdown began in March, priority one was ensuring the immediate health and safety of the people living in Venture's 24 group homes. As time passed, and it became apparent that lockdown was a long-haul situation, preventing boredom, anxiety and stress among residents and staff became the bigger challenge.

With day programs closed, and limited opportunity for community excursions, Venture staff needed to be creative to find activities to engage and enrich the lives of our residents. Good thing we have Krista Bilodeau and her Creative Arts & Recreation Department.

Program Director Krista and her team created the Venture CARE At-Home (Creative Arts/Recreation Enrichment At-Home) Program, which provides a variety of arts and recreation activities on a bi-weekly basis that our folks can do in their homes during this difficult time.

Homes receive themed CARE packages that include arts and craft kits, sensory activities, games, prizes/giveaways, general art supplies, and party



Left: Thomas House scavenger hunt loot.
Right: Michael K. displays his finished art project.

Addressing Social Justice Issues

IT'S EASY FOR ANY ONE issue to get lost among the chaos that has been 2020, but the subject of race and social justice is one that simply cannot be ignored. The deaths of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and too many others have sparked nation-wide protests and outrage—rightfully so. And perhaps this unrest has kicked open a space into which our nation can begin to come to terms with its history of racism.

Over 50 years ago, Venture was founded by parents deeply committed to the Civil Rights movement, who then copied techniques used by that movement to champion the rights of their disabled children, ushering in a new era of compassion and care for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities.

Venture believes it has an obligation to its staff and its community to address issues of race and social justice. As CEO Matthew Shelley said in a letter to staff: "I believe we can use our inherent compassion, listening skills, and advocacy to understand how the issues around race and social justice permeate our organization and impact our staff and the individuals we serve."

To that end, Venture will undertake a series of important actions to address these issues. First, the agency will develop a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee comprised of direct support staff, management and Board members. From there, it will begin a series of 'listening sessions' with staff, where participants can bear witness to better understand how the issues of race and social justice have deeply impacted members of the Venture family.

Finally, the agency will look to redesign its education benefits to enable an increasing number of employees to obtain an associate, bachelor's, or even master's degrees to support forward movement along the organization's career path.

Venture's Executive Team is working with an outside facilitator to educate and inform themselves, "so that we can strive for forward movement on behalf of staff, individuals and other members of the Camp Venture family," said Shelley. ●

supplies for upcoming holidays.

In addition to the physical CARE Package, the team has started a YouTube channel where they upload videos of step-by-step tutorials for the craft kits, sing-along music videos, mindfulness and meditation videos, and more.

A series of lawn concerts have brought music and movement right to the yards of Venture residents. They've also offered a variety of virtual games, including FaceTime bingo and scavenger hunts via text messages.

Tanglewood House Residence Director Kathy Bennett says of the program, "The Arts and Recreation Department has really shown their support to the houses, and even though we can't meet in person, they have really thought outside the box and have come up with creative ideas to keep us occupied. Tanglewood's favorite activity is the scavenger hunt every other Friday."

Says Krista, "Re-inventing the Creative Arts program has been a great deal of work, but also a great deal of fun! None of it would be possible without my team of specialists—Katherine Martinez, Jeff Spindel, and Steven Sicher—cranking out these activities and keeping it interesting. It especially wouldn't be possible without the staff in the houses facilitating the CARE At-Home program." ●



Top: A lawn concert at Tanglewood House. Below: Halloween CARE At-Home packages ready for pickup.

Just-A-Buck Scores NYSID Contract

IN 2015, Venture opened a Just-A-Buck franchise in Garnerville, NY with the goal of providing employment training and meaningful jobs to people with disabilities. With its clean aisles, well-stocked shelves and friendly, engaged staff, the store has quickly become a North Rockland favorite under the leadership of Store Manager Calin Etienne.

Now, Just-A-Buck has partnered with NYSID (New York State Industries for the Disabled) to provide products that will be sold throughout the state. JAB has been named a "preferred source" through NYSID, and is providing thousands of rolls of paper towels to be supplied to facilities that purchase under state contracts.

This is an exciting opportunity for the store, not just to increase income, but to become engaged with the larger community of employment services offered to the people we serve.

Venture's Just-A-Buck store is located at 26 West Ramapo Plaza in Garnerville, NY, in the Shop-Rite shopping center. Follow on Facebook to see the amazing bargains available weekly: @GarnervilleJAB.



The Just-A-Buck team packing up the NYSID delivery.

The Dollar Store with a Unique Mission!



CAMP VENTURE'S
Just-A-Buck[®]
HOLIDAY HEADQUARTERS



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