

Y's Kids Child Care Program impacts Nathan Stewart's Life

In many ways Nathan Stewart is a very typical boy of eight years old. He loves cars and car washes, loves to swim and loves going to Dunkin Donuts. In his two years in the YMCA of Greater Westfield's Y's Kids Child Care Program he has befriended pretty much everyone on the Y's Kids child care staff with his upbeat and outgoing personality. When asked about Nathan, one of his counselors, Jason Blunt, shared, "Nathan has that wonderful quality of always finding the good in people and situations. He loves people and thrives off other people's positive attitudes." It is just these attributes that would make one think all is well with Nathan. But the reality is that Nathan has been dealt a very difficult hand in life. He was born with a break in the milar of his brain causing leakage of fluid into the gray area. Then at 16 days old, he sustained a head injury from nearly a three foot fall. He has been diagnosed with autism, learning disabilities and Lyme disease.

His early life was fraught with the loss of significant people; his parents, who were unable to care for him and his godfather and a close family friend who both died before Nathan was two years of age. His grandmother, Marty Baillarger, stepped in and became his permanent custodial parent. It's been the two of them now for most of his life and yet, the indelible footprints of his early losses continue to plaque him. Often in the wee hours of the night, Nathan will call for Grandma to reassure him that she is there and will not leave him.

Learning and retaining information is a huge challenge for Nathan. Repetition and plugging away at reading are absolute necessities to help keep him from regressing. Each day, Marty will review with him things he may have learned the day before. As she shared with me, his neurologist hopes that during these formative growing years he will learn as much as he possibly can and, hopefully, will be able to retain this knowledge moving forward into adulthood.

It is the daily routines of his life; attending school, going to the Y's afterschool child care program and dinner each night with Grandma that help Nathan negotiate the vicissitudes of every day life. The relationships he has developed in his circle of associations have been critical for they help him understand that others care about him and are there for him.

In particular, Nathan has found great solace and comfort in his relationships with his counselors and one-on-one aides at the Y. "I can't say enough about the Y counselors, especially Jason and Stacy and Katie" said Marty. "The one-on-one aides have been so important to Nathan's success in the program. He spends a great deal of time with Stacy and when she isn't there, he really misses her and feels off balance. She has become like family for him.

In general, though, I am very impressed with all the counselors. I know they receive monthly trainings on a variety of relevant child care topics from dealing with autism to conflict resolution. When issues develop with any of the kids, they have this foundation of knowledge and

experience that helps them effectively and compassionately handle the situations. They are willing to adapt and they are willing to listen”, shared Marty.

Coming off the summer Marty reflected on the Y’s Kids Summer program. “I just am amazed at the selection of summer field trips; the Boston Science museum, Boston Aquarium, baseball games and every Wednesday, Otis State Park where they get to swim in the lake and be in the woods all day. Swimming is also an important part of the program for Nathan. He loves to swim and thanks to the Y, he is now able to swim without floatation aides. This summer he was thrilled when he passed his swim test allowing him to swim in the deep end without the floatation devices. Knowing he can swim provides great peace of mind for me.”

It is quite evident that Nathan has found a place in our hearts at the Y and I surmise vice versa. Marty and Nathan came to the Y two years ago as a result of a suggestion from a Y board member to give the Y a try. Marty was unaware that the Y had a child care program, and when she learned that it did have one, she thought it would be expensive. As things turned out, she found the Y very affordable and most importantly, she found a safe and happy place for Nathan.

Kaitlyn Chambers, Assistant Youth Development Director, has seen Nathan struggle in difficult moments and flourish in happy moments over the course of the past two years. When asked about her work with Nathan she offered this: “Every year we get those special kids who give you a reason to come to work. Nathan Stewart gives all of us a reason. At the YMCA’s Southwick Town Hall site, the child care staff have been known to call him “their best friend”. Over the past two years we’ve seen Nathan grow so much. As with most families, both Nathan and his grandmother have become a part of our Y family.”

For more information about the Y’s Kids Child Care Program, please contact Michelle Anamisis, Youth Development Director at 568-8631 ext 306 or manamisis@westfieldymca.org.

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