

It's Time for a Paradigm Shift. Now.

Friendship Circle Launches Job Skills Program for Special Needs Young Adults

By Rochel Groner

Let me introduce you to a friend of mine. We'll call him Mike to protect his privacy. Mike is twenty three years old, six feet tall, and has brown hair. He loves watching busy streets, listening to music, and playing video games; lots of video games. He doesn't talk much, but when he does it's about cars. He won't stop until he's shared all he knows about pretty much every make and model since Henry Ford's Model T from 1908. All the shifting feet, watch glancing, and looks of boredom are lost on Mike. Yes, Mike is obsessed with automobiles. He reads books about them and he's watched just about every movie and documentary there is about cars. Mike doesn't drive, but when he's picked up to go somewhere first thing he does is assess the car and tell you how much it's worth and what you should do to increase its value.

Needless to say, Mike is a car guru; a socially awkward car guru. Mike has Asperger's Syndrome. The same syndrome that has made national headlines and come under recent scrutiny in the wake of the Sandy Hook tragedy.

When Mike was a child, his parents were told to lower their expectations or he would be a disappointment. His teachers were frustrated by his behavior and his continued obsession with odd de-



Rochel Groner with some her Friendship Circle kids.

tails of seemingly useless information.

High school for Mike was simply a disaster. His peers poked fun at him day in and day out. He became the icon of just about any nasty joke that could be conceived. He often escaped from school to the closest busy street and would sit for hours observing the cars that drove by. That's how I met Mike, leaning against a utility pole, scanning the traffic. After watching him for several minutes from the window of a coffee shop, I walked over to make sure he was ok and introduced myself. After he finished converting me into an expert on the automobile industry, I asked him, "Did you see any Chevy Silverados drive by? They're my favorite car." His immediate answer, "Yeah, 34 not counting the 9 GMC models that drove by."

Today, Mike lives at home with his parents. Mike has been written off by a society unwilling to notice his talents but quick to pinpoint his syndrome as the cause for a horrific tragedy without research or proof.

If Mike was a car salesman he would be the most honest and straightforward in the business. If Mike was a car journalist his assessments would be unbiased, frank, and very thorough. If Mike was an engineering technician, his descriptions of the vehicle production process would be so clear that the accompanying drawings would seem redundant.

Yet, Mike still lives at home and has no job.

In truth, Mike is a myth. I made him up for this article. Well not really, because I know about 25 Mikes and I'm sure you know a Mike too. You might even be related to one. The 25 Mikes that I know are unique. They have different personalities, are talented in different areas, and have entirely different interests. But something common in all of them is their unwavering honesty and non-judgmental nature. They show commitment, are hard workers, and pay close attention to detail, when the subject appeals to them. Through my work with an or-

ganization called The Friendship Circle I have met so many wonderful Mikes. Until now, we have focused on providing social opportunities to children and teens with special needs by connecting them with local teens who share similar interests and together they have formed many genuine friendships. But to help change the Mikes' situation, we are now launching an employment training and job skills center for young adults with special needs. We are starting with a thrift boutique and coffee shop to enable these underserved members of our community, like Mike, to focus on

developing their interests and talents, while acquiring essential job skills and training in an inclusive environment which celebrates their individuality.

We want to give them jobs, a salary, and a future. Not out of pity, but because we believe they are the most qualified human beings on the planet. Stay tuned, because we're going to prove it to you. ☆

Rochel Groner is the director of the Friendship Circle of Charlotte. For more information about the Friendship Circle visit www.FriendshipCircleNC.org.

LIBERTY Tops the Charts

Congratulations to LIBERTY (Temple Beth El's 8th-12th grade Temple Youth Group) for being number #1 in the country. The Union for Reform Judaism's North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) publishes their national participation data each year, and for the second straight year, LIBERTY ranked #1 in congregations with the most participants. We were also on the charts at #7 for congregations with the most registrations.

We thank Andy Harkavy, our Director of Youth Engagement, our LIBERTY Board, our Youth

Engagement Committee, and our entire congregation for their support of our TBE Youth. For these statistics and more, visit the Temple Beth El website at www.beth-el.com.

From enriching social and cultural programs to fun weekends with Jewish teens from throughout the Southeast, LIBERTY offers teens an amazing way to get involved, develop their leadership skills, make life-long friendships, and set the course for their own Jewish journeys. For more information, see www.beth-el.com/youth. ☆



Women's News

Hadassah Health Night 2013

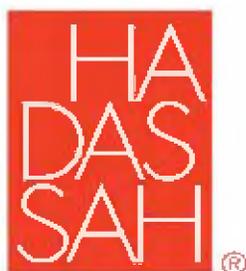
Ask the Doctor - The Latest and Greatest

Please join us for Charlotte Hadassah Health Night 2013. This is a free program open to the entire community on February 11, 7-9 PM in the Temple Israel social hall.

Guest speakers will include Dr. Adam Berliner from the Comprehensive Pain and Spine Center on The Latest in Back Care; Dr. Patric McElgunn of Piedmont Plastic Surgery and Dermatology on The Latest in Aesthetic Dermatology; and Dr. Michael Rotberg from Charlotte Eye Ear Nose and Throat Associates on The Latest

in Eye Surgery and Eye Care.

Please watch for more information on this informative and exciting evening. ☆



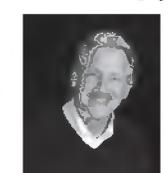


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Photos [L to R]: Stacy Marx, the original Mitey Rider, with Harry Swimmer | Swimmer Insurance Today

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