



LARC News
Spring 2021
Edition

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A Sensory Garden at LARC

LARC has been awarded a grant from Thomaston Savings Bank Foundation to create a sensory garden behind the agency's 314 Main Street offices in Torrington. The sensory garden will be an important part of LARC's new Autism Resource Center as a place for programming, as well as respite for program participants, family members, staff, and guests.



Matt Laukaitis, facilities manager, Mike Zaharek, Zaharek Landscaping and Michael Menard, LARC executive director standing where the Sensory Garden will be created.

'We commend LARC's ongoing efforts to support those with developmental and intellectual disabilities,' said Stephen Lewis, President and CEO of Thomaston Savings Bank. 'The sensory garden at their new Autism Resource Center, which will offer guests a place to safely explore their senses and support therapeutic programming, is another example of how their contributions positively impact our community.' (continued on page 3)

School is open at LARC's DSO!

LARC's DSO (Day Services Option) has been open for programming for a few months now. Individuals and staff are back and engaged in learning through a variety of activities. 'We are organized in some ways like a classroom,' explained Veronica Epres, DSO coordinator. 'Our days are structured so that we can make the most of our time together.'



Since the program reopened last fall, the number of individuals returning continues to grow. Staff have taken advantage of the reduced number of participants to focus on individual goals and interests. (Continued on page 6)

IT'S ALL Set!!
Our New Virtual Raffle Fundraiser!
Online Raffle Tickets available
May 24th - June 4th.

See page 2 for details!

**LARC Board of Directors**

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Executive Director  
 Michael Menard, Ph.D.

Dear friends:

As I write this letter, it becomes even more clear that we are all in a much better place than a year ago. Our doors are open again. We are meeting in person and welcoming individuals back to the programs they had to leave when the pandemic forced LARC to close our physical structures. Staff made great progress working remotely, using technology and creativity to keep in touch with individuals who were staying safe at home.

Our new Autism Resource Center is up and running with programs starting in the fall. The Sensory Garden will welcome visitors this summer. LARC's first virtual fundraiser is underway and we have a fall event coming up in September where we can meet up with old friends and make new ones. Stay tuned to LARC.

Michael Menard, Ph.D., Executive Director, LARC

## “It’s all Set” — LARC’s first virtual fundraiser

Planning a baby shower? Getting ready for the big game? How about inviting friends over for a Mediterranean Alfresco dinner? Look no further than LARC's website for an opportunity to win one of these tablescape—all filled with just about everything you need to put together an entertaining table or picnic setting. LARC's first virtual fundraiser, “It's All Set” is made possible thanks to the many Torrington organizations, businesses, and residents who donated a wide array of table settings.

For moms to be, Prime Time House donated a baby shower package with everything that will make a shower complete including a clothesline with baby clothes, bathtub, delicious cupcakes (made to order), party favors and supplies to serve 24 people, and a handmade quilt. With a retail value of \$400, this amazing tablecape will make the event very special! Sports fans and campers will enjoy The Cork Fine Wine & Spirits donation. This tablecape includes a \$100 gift card, a Yuengling Large Cooler on Wheels (Igloo), a Smirnoff Sling Chair, t-shirts, baseball caps, and more. With a retail value of \$350, this is the perfect package for the next tailgate party! “Whodunnit?” is an Agatha Christie-themed tablecape donated by Torrington Library. Perfect for book lovers, this murder mystery set up requires no skills...just a love of mysteries and the challenge of figuring out who did it! Many more selections can be found at <https://www.litchfieldarc.org/its-all-set.html> where you can purchase raffle tickets for a chance to win your favorite tablecape.

Ticket prices vary based on number purchased. The event goes live for sales on May 24th. Raffle sales will end on June 4th.

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## Sensory Garden (continued from page 1)

According to Michael Menard, executive director at LARC, the agency is “so grateful for the support from Thomaston Savings Bank Foundation.” The grant will enable LARC to create an outdoor program area that will be utilized by our Autism Resource Center, which is in the early stages of planning and development. The sensory garden will offer a place to explore the natural world, socialize with peers in an invigorating area, and host special program-related events and activities. Additionally, DSO, Vocational, and other LARC programs will have opportunities to share in some of the activities associated with the garden and surrounding area as a way to engage individuals in healthy outdoor activities.

“We can envision this to be a special space at the Center,” confirmed Cheryl Lindstrom, Community Outreach Officer of Thomaston Savings Bank Foundation. “The foundation supports new initiatives that serve families in the Torrington area and we are pleased to help LARC make this project a reality for the benefit of those who visit.”

The very nature of a garden makes it a sensory experience. Through sight, smell, sound, and touch we experience a sensory impact when walking through a garden. A sensory garden is designed to maximize the impact on the senses. With the inclusion of colorful flowers, fragrant herbs, tall grasses and fruit trees, a sensory garden can provide countless hours of sensory experiences that are therapeutic and inspiring. Sensory gardens are user-friendly--guests will be able to enjoy the garden through the senses of sight, touch, sound and smell. Visitors will also enjoy the birds and butterflies that are frequent visitors to sensory gardens.

LARC’s garden was designed based on many designs of sensory gardens around the state and on the east coast, and in consultation with several master gardeners as well as graduates from the Ellis Clark Agricultural program at Nonnewaug High School. Mike Zaharek (Zaharek Landscaping) will do the landscaping, including a path, and is ordering all of the plants wholesale, which will result in savings for the project.

Additionally, the garden will provide opportunities for families to commemorate loved ones who were at one time associated with LARC. Janet Kozlak, a long-time LARC parent, has chosen a purple butterfly bush to commemorate the years her daughter, Jean, was a program participant at the agency. “This is such a wonderful way to remember Jean’s time at LARC,” said Janet. Many of the staff who knew Jean are still with the agency. “I only knew Jean for a brief time but have learned about her from staff who knew her well,” shared Mary Ellen Kunz,

director of development at LARC. According to Janet, Jean loved nature and flowers, and “her favorite color was purple.” Janet’s choice of a purple butterfly bush will add so much color and



attract the plant’s namesake. “Whenever I see a butterfly land on it, I will think of Jean,” said Kunz.

## SAVE the DATE

**September 25, 2021**



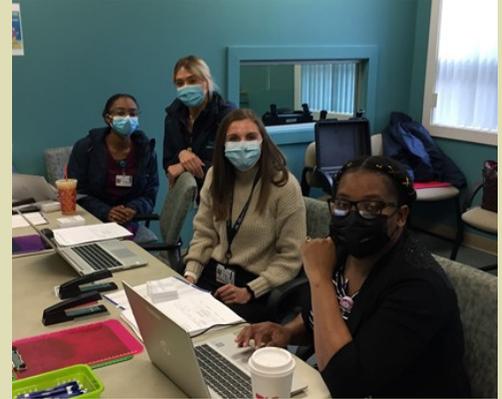
**Forest Bathing is good for the mind, body and soul!** Join us at our fall event, “Nature is Nurture” for an exploration of forest bathing amidst the great outdoors. Enjoy a lively presentation by Alex Lowry, Integrative Life Coach on the topic of Shinrin Yoku, better know as Forest Bathing, while sampling sumptuous hors d’oeuvres, selections of fine wines and craft beers, and bidding on an array of nature-themed silent auction items and experiences.

Sponsorships available. Tickets go on sale July 2021!

[www.litchfieldarc.org](http://www.litchfieldarc.org)

## LARC opens its doors to host first DDS Vaccine Clinic

As soon as Governor Lamont announced that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) aged 16 or older would be a priority for the next round of COVID vaccinations, LARC reached out to the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) to learn more about when scheduling for vaccines would be available in the Torrington area. After learning from DDS that the vaccine provider, Griffin Hospital, had a few slots open in the first week of April to run a dedicated clinic for DDS-eligible individuals, Michael Menard, LARC executive director, offered LARC's Main Street office location. The clinic was scheduled to take place at LARC on Good Friday, a holiday for the agency. DDS notified eligible families and guardians, providing instructions on how to register for the vaccine.



At the registration table, Griffin Health employees, (right to left) Kemesha Vaughan, Rachel Gordon, Bobbianne Buck, and Andrea Santos, prepare to sign in people registered for a COVID vaccine clinic at LARC.

“We were happy to offer our Main Street office building to serve as a dedicated vaccine clinic and are grateful for all Griffin Hospital and DDS are doing to protect vulnerable populations,” Menard said. “We are very pleased that so many of the individuals in our programs took advantage of the clinic.” LARC staff, along with DDS and Griffin Hospital staff, set up an efficient and highly organized process at the agency's main office. The second dose was given on April 23 at LARC. In total 250 vaccines were administered.

## Off to a great start!

LARC's new Autism Resource Center is off to a great start—and making great progress—since its creation this past January. Phase 1 has focused on preparing LARC's lower level with fresh paint, furniture, materials and comprehensive resources.



Autism Resource Center

“Since coming on board, I've been so excited with the response from our community,” said Kathy Riberdy, Special Education Consultant. “Families, educational professionals, advocates, and agencies have all responded positively to this much-needed program for the Northwest corner,” Kathy has been spreading the word about this new program and cultivating relationships with area school districts, Connecticut Department of Developmental Services (DDS), Department of Social Services (DSS), Rehabilitation Services Bureau (BRS), and Birth to Three (B23).

The center's free monthly webinars have been very popular, providing valuable information from experts in their field. Past webinars included “Toleration Techniques” and “Learning to Eat New Foods.” Attendance has increased over the last several months with 25 attendees at the first webinar and 140 RSVPs for the DSS presentation on the “Autism Waiver.” May's webinar is titled an “Evening with DDS”. Webinars are recorded and re-plays and attachments can be viewed on LARC's Autism Resource Centers webpage <https://www.litchfieldarc.org/larc-autism-resource-center.html>.

Through the webinars and outreach, a database with almost 300 contacts has been established. The agency is spreading the word about this exciting new opportunity for LARC and developing a reputation as a resource for facilitating these informative presentations. (Continued on page 5)

## Off to a great start (continued from page 4)

Staff are in the process of hiring a permanent coordinator to bring the program into Phase 2 in September. The goal is to have an after-school homework/social club for teens with ASD two times per week as well as a twice weekly Pre-K playgroup to support children on the autism spectrum. Both programs aim to support the individuals as well as families. Resources, literature, Chromebooks and contact information will be available to families and the individuals.

A Sensory Garden is under development, which will be a welcoming addition as part of the Autism Resource Center and utilized by all LARC programs.

“We appreciate the expertise, experience and commitment of the Autism Resource Center’s Advisory Committee, comprised of Julie Stachowiak, Beth Lambert, Matt Carbone, Rebeka Antonelli, and Davyne Verstandig,” noted Kathy. Their biographies can found on the center’s webpage at [www.litchfieldarc.org](http://www.litchfieldarc.org).

“It has been rewarding to get such an overwhelming response from people who are looking to access important information. I am excited about the future impact this new program will have on our ASD community,” shared Riberdy.

## Newest members of LARC’s Board of Directors



**Barbara (Barb) Canary’s** interest in supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities started when she volunteered as a “Citizen Buddy” with Best Buddies International over 15 years ago. Her friendship with an adult with intellectual disabilities motivated her to provide financial support to LARC through both her personal donations and her company’s matched donations. Joining LARC’s Board seemed like the logical next step in supporting individuals with disabilities and their families to lead their best lives. Barb is a compliance professional who works for Optum as a full-time telecommuter from her home in Litchfield County. Barb is married to her husband Mike who recently retired and has two adult sons, one of whom lives in the area and the other who lives in Massachusetts. Barb looks forward to contributing her time and skills to fulfill LARC’s mission.

**Kathleen (Kate) Orr** is a reading teacher at Torrington Middle School. She is familiar with LARC as the stepmother of a special needs daughter who has participated in LARC programs for over ten years. Stepdaughter Melissa has been involved with Special Olympics, competing in skiing, swimming, and bowling. Both mother and daughter have met friends through their involvement in LARC programs. They have enjoyed many evenings together bowling and socializing with the children and moms they met through LARC. Melissa also is employed through LARC’s Vocational Program.



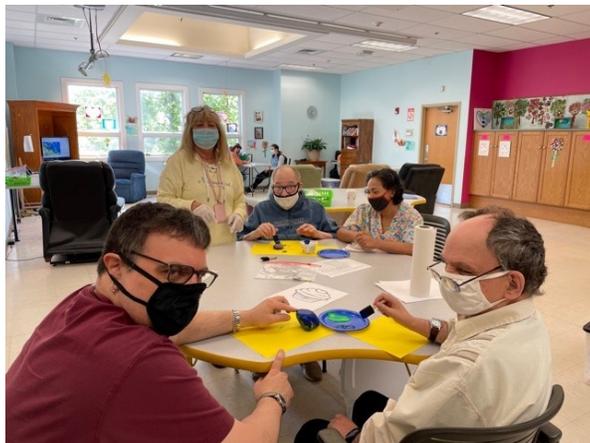
Kate is interested in learning more about opportunities for her daughter to live independently. “Melissa is able to do a lot on her own but needs supervision,” Kate explained. This is a topic that LARC is working on as the need for residential opportunities for younger adults continues to grow. State funding is limited for young adults to live more independently in a group home where there is 24-7 supervision. “I’m really looking forward to participating in initiatives that will help my stepdaughter,” Kate confirmed.

## ***School is open at LARC's DSO! (continued from page 1)***

Brian Wilson, a program participant, has been practicing his writing and appreciates the improvement he is seeing. He also updates the daily calendar, which provides information on each day's theme and the scheduled activities—and makes sure the weather report for the day is updated. “The days are packed with so many activities and at the end of each week, everyone has a stack of what they created or completed during the week,” Veronica noted. “The classroom atmosphere is more structured and everyone loves it.”

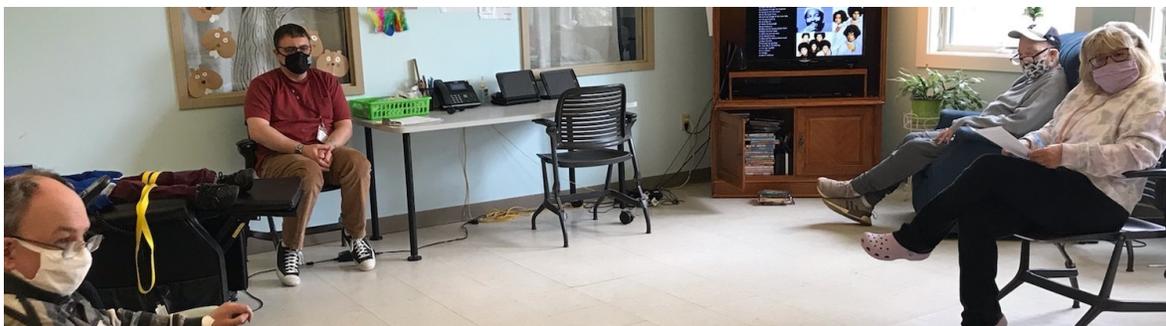
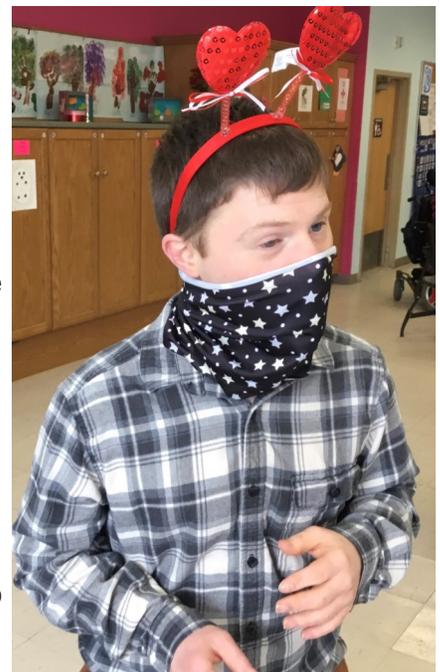
Staff and individuals are involved with maintaining a clean environment with sanitation protocols in place and practiced daily. “As a group, we work together to keep the space clean. There is work to do to set up for each activity and to clean up after projects, prepare for and clean up after snack time. Everyone takes ownership of their area, keeping it clean and tidy,” Veronica added. “We are all very proud of the classroom and work together to make sure it is ready for whatever is next on our agenda.”

Since the arrival of spring the group has been getting out whenever the weather cooperates. They have visited Laurel Ridge Farms daffodil fields which are blanketed with daffodils every spring. Visits to Lee's Stables to see the horses is a favorite trip for many. Community outreach is an important component of the DSO. Recently cards were created for residents of a nursing home in the area. The home provided to DSO the dates of



residents' birthdays and the individuals created cards, which they delivered to the home. There are many sports fans in the program who like to follow games, check on scores and cheer on their favorite

teams during March Madness, World Series and other competitions. April is poetry month and participants learned to create poetry using acrostic, which is a poem where certain letters in each line spell out a word or phrase. (continued on page 7)



## **School is open at LARC's DSO! (continued from page 6)**

Some of the challenges the staff had to resolve before opening the doors included scheduling of the arrival and departure times of individuals. This involved a considerable amount of coordination with the drivers who transport individuals to and from LARC to ensure times were staggered so that everyone doesn't show up at once. Upon arrival, each individual has their temperature taken.

A typical day includes a lesson in one subject area such as math, followed by a physical activity (chair yoga is very popular). Snack time is enjoyed at 10 a.m. followed by another activity such as art or music. If the weather is favorable, the group heads out into the community. Being outdoors, getting fresh air, enjoying wildlife and nature are high on the list for just about everyone," according to Veronica. The group has begun preparation for seed planting at their community garden plot at Five Points Gallery's new location, which is the former UCONN Torrington campus. They have also been watching YouTube videos and visiting areas where flowers are already blooming. "We couldn't do all we do without our dedicated and enthusiastic staff," Veronica confirmed. "It's so great to be back with everyone."



The **Can Do Crew** from Thomaston Savings Bank was at Camp MOE recently, preparing the facility for the Summer 2021 camp season. On behalf of the campers who will arrive in June ready for fun in the sun, **THANK YOU** for all your help!



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Our vision, *Community for All*, strives to achieve inclusion for all individuals.

The principles which have guided LARC in its delivery of programs since 1964 are individual empowerment, choice, respect and dignity.

**COMMUNITY FOR ALL**