

## Westchester program opens doors for special needs kids to play sports

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### Nancy Haggerty

Rockland/Westchester Journal News USA TODAY NETWORK

Melissa Ponzio remembers the first time she took her son, Nicholas, to an Able event two years ago.

Call it belonging and something more. Maybe relief. Maybe hope.

Nicholas, who will turn 6 later this fall, was born with autism. He also has non-stop energy. The combination made it very difficult for him to participate in mainstream sports.

The Ponzios had tried gymnastics and soccer. A physical therapist suggested Able, then called Able Lacrosse, and now Able Athletics, which translates to Able almost anything.

Ponzio, a Fox Lane physical education teacher and assistant varsity field hockey coach, is a fan and true believer. She's a volunteer who can't say enough good things about the Westchester-based program that, thanks to its success and a lack of similar programs in the region, has attracted families from as far away as Saugerties.

When she arrived for the first time to a clinic at the Somers Indoor Sports Arena, she was told to take a seat on the bleachers while her son was steered away.

"I said, 'I have to be with him. He's a runner,'" she said. But Ponzio was again directed to the bleachers.

Nicholas wasn't on his own, though. A couple of Yorktown High boys lacrosse players were soon by his side and Nicholas wasn't running. He was playing.

"I sat there watching him play and I started crying," Ponzio recalled. "I was so grateful."

For maybe for the first time ever, she could sit back and just observe, sipping coffee while drinking in something that may be the norm for most other parents but was a rare gift for her.

### Backyard mission becomes region-wide explosion

Able has been a gift that has kept on giving.

The program's roots trace back to 2020 in the grass backyard of a Scarsdale family where two young, lacrosseloving brothers wanted more for their special-needs little sister.

Rowan and Christian Dias, now 15 and 12-year-old students at Deerfield Academy and Brunswick School, respectively, saw how their sister, Elle, struggled at a mainstream mother/child class, "crying and feeling overwhelmed," their mother, Vanessa, said.

Elle loved hanging out with her brothers, so they started teaching her lacrosse. Rowan used his allowance to buy her a stick. Her brothers taught her how to scoop balls from the ground, shoot and other skills.

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Then they got to thinking: Why not volunteer to teach the game to her special- needs-program classmates? With help from one of Elle's therapists, Rowan, Christian and Vanessa developed a curriculum to "help these kids be successful," she said.

Other parents loved the idea and the boys started coaching more kids.

Realizing the positive response indicated an unmet need, the Dias reached out to Scarsdale High boys lacrosse and ice hockey coach James Synoweiz to enlist his support for an actual program. His participation would help validate the program, Vanessa Dias said.

Synoweiz, who has a special needs child of his own, was all in. Scarsdale High players helped as lacrosse clinics launched on an unmowed field in the spring of 2021.

### **Zero to 60 growth**

Since that humble start, Able's growth has been on a "fast track," Vanessa Dias said.

So far, it has introduced multiple sports to about 100 kids with various challenges, either physical, mental or both.

"It has grown into something amazing," said Yorktown resident Kara McCloat, whose 10-year-old son Paul, is an Able athlete born with autism and attention- deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD.

Able Athletics, a nonprofit run by volunteers, has more than 1,000 of them, including Dr. Erica Maiorano, a physical therapist, who was instrumental in helping form Able's curriculum, and occupational therapist Allison Quincoses. (At least one on the therapists is on hand each session.) Athletes from more than 20 area schools – most in Westchester, some in Connecticut – help out as coaches.

To some Able athletes, just holding a stick was an accomplishment. Others could dodge, shoot and score.

The level of accomplishment wasn't the focus. Taking part was.

"Able is all about meeting athletes where they're at," explained Kim Gigante, the Fox Lane field hockey coach, who volunteers with the program.

The high school student coaches, as with all of Able coaches, were instructed beforehand on how to interact with the Able athletes – how to encourage, not demand, and how to support small feats.

Ponzio calls the connections she has seen forged between varsity athletes and Able kids one of the program's "coolest" elements.

"It's so special for them," Fox Lane athlete Parker Altman said during the recent clinic. "It's nice to make every moment count for them and make it special."

New sports are being added, too. Able Athletics will offer volleyball sessions for the first time next month at Bedford's Rippowam Cisqua School, a big supporter of the program. The winter will include basketball clinics at Somers High, another big supporter. Field hockey is also scheduled for the winter.

Lacrosse will be held again in spring, which promises to be a busy season. Plans call for more flag football, and track will be introduced for the first time.

Spring will also mark the beginning of Able's wheelchair athlete program, also at Rippowam.

Able previously received a USA Lacrosse National Diversity grant and Gatorade G-Force Visionary Equity

in Sports Initiative grant.

But the wheelchair program comes after its latest grant, a Hartford Insurance Move United allocation. It will allow Able to purchase the first 10 of a hoped-for 30 sports wheelchairs.

### **First tournament and more to come**

Last winter, seven Able athletes, including Ponzio's son, traveled to Pennsylvania to play in a three-team tournament that was run as an offshoot of USA Field Hockey's National Invitational Tournament.

The USA Field Hockey sanctioning of a specialneeds division was a first for the organization and was a huge success in the eyes of Able parents and athletes. Able's team ranged in age from 5 to 11.

"We had a chance to give those athletes a true tournament experience," Ponzio said, pointing to a hotel stay, team dinner, uniform, swag bag and, of course, games.

Athletes from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, were on hand, cheering.

"It was just the biggest and proudest moment when he went to nationals," McCloat said of Paul, a fifthgrader at Yorktown's Crompond Elementary School. "He was truly playing in a scrimmage. It was truly a team sport experience."

Siblings often attend Able events, forging their own friendships. Parents have also found support in each other.

"As a parent of a child with special needs, you feel so alone in so many ways," Vanessa Dias said. "But you go out (to Able sports events) and the love of the community is palpable."

The impact on kids extends, parents say, beyond Able's fields and courts.

"My son has trouble making friends. He has found his community," Ponzio said, noting that he'll have friends at his birthday party for the first time.

The program promises to be around for a long time with more and more sports offered – just like the Dias brothers envisioned.

"I always wanted it to be this big because I always thought everyone should have the opportunity to be involved in a sports program," Christian said.

His mom calls his sister, Elle, the center of their family and "one of the coolest kids I know."

That was true even before Able. But Able has given Elle, who has both neurological and physical problems, things that have made one of the coolest kids even cooler and happier.

"One of the biggest things it has provided to her is confidence," Christian said. "We adapt the program, so it builds confidence. And it has given her a sense of community."

*More information about Able Athletics, including how to donate to the program, is available online at <https://ableathletics.org/>.*

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**Jeffrey Naranjo, 6, of Bedford Hills, and Carly Schierloh, 12, of Yorktown Heights, high-five each other as they play field hockey during an Able Athletics field hockey program at Fox Lane High School on Sept. 24. Able Athletics offers children with special needs the opportunity to take part in field hockey, lacrosse, wheelchair athletics, and flag football. Field hockey players and coaches from Fox Lane and Horace Greeley high schools volunteered to help teach field hockey skills to children with special needs during the session at Fox Lane High School. SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS**



**Gloria Moraes, a field hockey player at Horace Greeley High School, high fives Jeffrey Naranjo, 6, of Bedford Hills during an Able Athletics field hockey program at Fox Lane High School on Sept. 24. PHOTOS BY SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS**



**Aaron Chica Ledesma, 6, of Bedford Hills is cheered on during an Able Athletics field hockey program at Fox Lane High School on Sept. 24. PHOTOS BY SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS**



**Brittany Paulus, assistant field hockey coach at Horace Greeley High School, and Mia Brown, a field hockey player at Horace Greeley, work with Addie Wilson, 10, of Saugerties during an Able Athletics field hockey program at Fox Lane High School.**

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