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Inclusion Means Many Things: Sergei Wolfley's Journey

By Sarah Cedeño; Photos by Jenna Wolfley

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Sergei Wolfley, a graduate of Gates-Chili School District's homeschooling program, has been fundraising with his mother Jenna for years. Sergei says, "During the pandemic, my mom and I started cooking and baking and offering items on the Residents of Chili Facebook Page for anyone who was depressed or running out of food. We had a small outdoor food cupboard called the Loyalist Ave Food Cupboard."

This Easter, Sergei and his mother Jenna donated new toys they collected to Golisano's Children's Hospital, something they also do during the Christmas holiday season. Having spent nearly a year at Strong's UPMC, Sergei wants to support children who can't be home for their traditional celebrations.

Sergei is Jenna Wolfley's youngest child. Jenna shares, "He happens to be adopted. Every day has been a blessing. I was meant to be his mother, and he was meant to be my son."



When Sergei was first diagnosed with special needs, Jenna says nights were long, explaining, "Having a special/medical needs infant is something few people are prepared for. The amount of worrying a parent has is endless." Both Jenna and Sergei reflect on the frequency of appointments, specialists, therapies, and prescriptions. Jenna was grateful for the Medicaid waiver that helped with the overwhelming cost of medical services.

Early on, an area school district told Jenna that Sergei would never read or write, that his limitations were "too profound." Jenna says, "They would write daily notes home and only highlight negativity. At meetings, all I heard

Sergei's Graduation

was what he could not do,” adding “It is wise to always find something positive to tell a parent

or caregiver.”

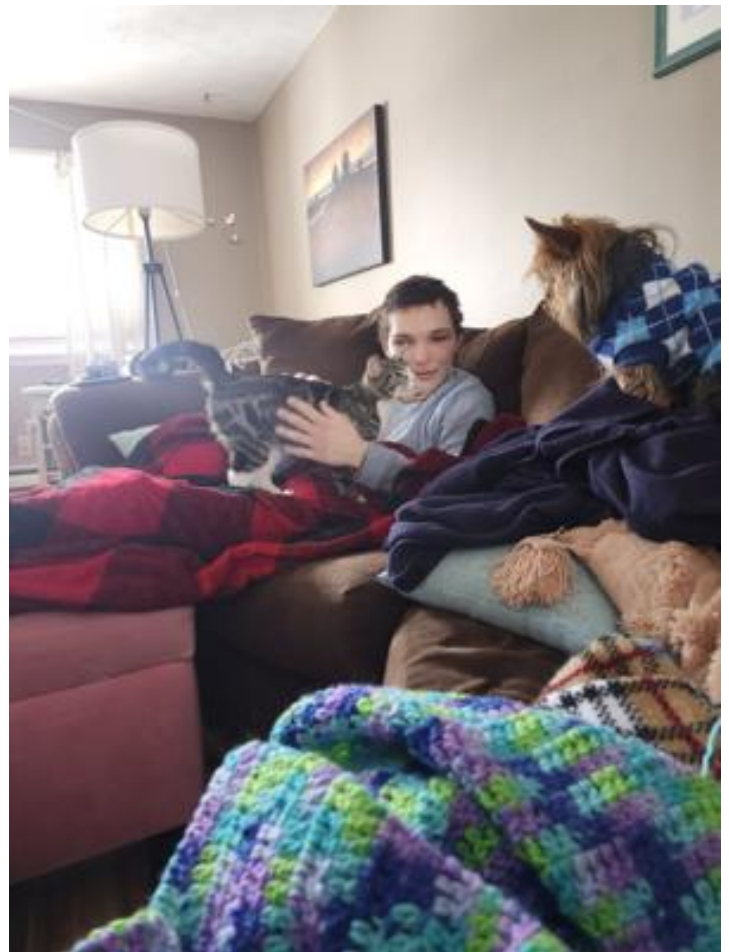
Sergei says his parents and brother have believed in him from the beginning. Jenna enrolled Sergei in Gates-Chili's Homeschooling Program and began to teach Sergei, saying, “We used the community of Gates-Chili as a school classroom.” Almost every day found Jenna and Sergei at the library, developing what Jenna calls “local interests,” and then they ventured out into the community.

“We watched trains here in the area, researched what they had on board—chemicals, foods, grains, consumables—and then researched the items as subtopics,” Jenna says. Another day might involve visiting a restaurant and researching ingredients or exploring a different culture through cuisine. “We went to Black Creek Park, often at dusk, to see deer and observe their pack behavior. We researched all the critters in the park to understand hunting, gathering, and mating habits,” Jenna shares.

“I said to Sergei one day, ‘If you can read it, we can order it.’ He began to sound words out fast because he saw results.” Jenna used common practices like practicing vowel and consonant sounds and using words in sentences, saying, “Seemed the more conversation we had, the greater the exposure to language, syntax, and grammar.”

Many parents of special needs children “are simply exhausted,” Jenna says. Some parents handle physical care up to ages 14,15, and 16, when some children grow larger than their caregiver. Emotionally, “A special needs parent often finds there are no invitations to parties, and in turn, many neurotypical people might not see the value in coming to a special needs party.”

Now Jenna works to educate others on intellectual/developmental disabilities, autism, and fetal alcohol syndrome. She says, “Inclusion means many things: not being stared at, being



Sergei fosters cats

invited and welcomed into community, having meaningful programs open to all persons with a variety of skills.”

Sergei is a graduate of New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities' (OPWDD) decision-making course through Article 82 of NYS law, which became operative in December 2025 and legally gives Sergei the agency to make decisions for himself as a special needs adult with the support of a trusted caregiver. Jenna says, “At one time, someone like Sergei would have been sent to a facility. Today, he is a vibrant member of the community.”

As parents of special needs children age, Jenna emphasizes concern for when parents can no longer care for their children. Courses like the OPWDD decision-making course empowers people with disabilities and offers their parents peace of mind.

In the course, Sergei learned how to make decisions about housing options and lease agreements, finances and budgeting, healthcare, treatment options, and navigating appointments. The program also educates participants on social interactions and employment, interviewing, and workplace expectations.

Sergei's been working out and improving his diet. He says, “I am no longer on kidney and blood pressure medication. I have friends and hobbies.” He's also been fostering cats from Jeanine the Bean Rescue. He and Jenna enjoy attending fundraisers to meet others in the community.

For Sergei, success means being involved, not winning: “I look at it this way: Even if I join a race and I finish last, I still won because I was there. It isn't so important to me to win anything. It is important I am there.”