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Extraordinary people

Giving thanks for those with disabilities



hese days, it's easy to lose perspective. • After all, we are constantly beset by images and stories of a world gone bad. The gun violence. The extreme weather. The political infighting. The human suffering. It's all very real and very serious, and it's all coming at us in nonstop fashion. The "breaking news" is unrelenting and unnerving. Social media only adds fuel to this fire. • Against this backdrop, we live lives full of personal challenge. Raising families. Managing finances. Coping with health scares. Working through loss. Our day-to-day realities have become seemingly harder, more complex and more emotionally charged. And through it all, we always seem to be stressing to

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keep up with our emails and text mes sages and other "conveniences" of mod-

At times, it all just seems so over-At u... whelming. For this

Thanksgiving reason, couldn't come at a better time. It not only provides a much needed respite from the daily grind. It also provides an opportunity for us to take stock of those things that bring joy and meaning to our lives – those things for which we are most thankful. That includes our faith, family and friends. That includes all of tamily and mends. That includes all of the people and experiences that help fill our lives with purpose and happiness. For me, that also includes my work. My office is a new one. It was created

My office is a new one. It was created by the New Jersey Legislature in De-cember 2017 to serve individuals with intellectual or developmental disabili-ties and their families – to help make sure that they get the services and sup-ports they need and deserve. Signed into law by former Gov. Chris Christie the office was made operation-

Christie, the office was made operational when Gov. Phil Murphy appointed me a few months later and has been kept busy by the administration's determination – across departments and agencies – to move the needle on the full range of issues affecting people with disabilities.

The bipartisan origin of this office is important. It underscores that – even in these politically divisive times – it is possible for people of goodwill to come together in common cause. More specifically, it highlights a critical truth: that doing the right thing is not a partisan imperative, but rather, an American tra-

Adding to this solid foundation, the work of my office benefits from the part-nership of dedicated professionals throughout New Jersey's robust disabil-ity community – professionals whose lives are largely defined by their service to others. Some work in government. Some work in our nonprofit community and in our schools, our hospitals, our provider agencies and our homes.

Collectively as well as individually,

these professionals are the lifeblood of our system of care. They are passionate. They are purposeful. They are the reason that so many New Jerseyans with disabilities live safe, fulfilling lives.



Former Ridgewood Mayor Paul Aronsohn meets with residents of one of the group homes at the Eastern Christian



Pastor Mack Brandon with Paul Aronsohn.

But the very best part of my job is the people for whom I work: the thousands of New Jerseyans with intellectual or developmental disabilities, whose lives are at once challenging and inspiring. Simply stated, they are extraordinary

people living extraordinary lives. Their disabilities are lifelong and range from autism spectrum disorder to cerebral palsy to a host of other conditions that impact their lives in ways big and small. But it is their abilities - their unique skills, talents and capacity for overcoming adversity – that more accurately define them.

Through my work, I get to know and work with them, directly and personally. I get to see, hear and feel their situations through one-on-one conversa-

tions with them and their families. I witness their struggles. I experience their genius and potential.

And this Thanksgiving, I am thinking

about them and their families, thankful for the role they all play in my life. II am thankful for those who em-

brace and reach beyond their disabili-ties to excel academically, professionally and socially, proving that while many of us have special needs, all of us – each

and every one of us – has special gifts.

I am thankful for the "self-advocates," who look past their own disabiltites to push for policies that benefit the greater community and whose leader-ship and partnership make them first-rate colleagues in the fight for civil and human rights.

■ I am thankful for those with signifi-■ I am thankful for those with signifi-cant disabilities – such as severe chal-lenging behaviors or medical complex-ities or both – who embody pure resil-ience, courage and beauty and who prove that even the highest expecta-tions can be exceeded.

■ And I am thankful for their families, who rise to challenges each and every day – families whose unconditional love runs deep and whose strength and grace are testaments to the human spir-

Taken together, I am thankful for all

of them – for their example, for the way they live their lives. Working with and they live their lives. Working with and for them has been a transformative experience – one that has taught me sc much about love, about endurance and about the overall human experience.

Admittedly, my work is very personal to me. Like many others, I come from a family with disability, and much of my understanding and passion are routed.

understanding and passion are rooted in the experiences of those closest to

Indeed, I learned so much from my remarkable sister, Patti, whose chal-lenges began at birth and ended two years ago with her untimely passing. years ago with her untimely passing. I also learned a great deal from our wonderful mother, Margot, who was Patti's roommate, best friend and caregiver and whose own untimely death preceded my sister's by only three days. They were my teachers. They were my heroes They were two of the most important people in my life.

Clearly, I am blessed to work in a job that has such a deep, personal connec-tion for me. It is a real godsend. It is one of my main reasons for giving thanks. The author is New Jersey's ombuds-

man for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities and their families. He can be reached at paul.aronsohn@treas.nj.gov.