Just over two years ago, Sarah Stelmach-Brown attended a support group for parents of children with diverse behavioral and mental health needs. Through this support group, Sarah formed a relationship with FAVOR’s Eastern Family Systems Manager, Lisa Girard and she fine-tuned her already on point advocacy skills. It was soon clear that Sarah has a passion for caregiving in many capacities – as a mother to 2 children on the autism spectrum, a daughter, a granddaughter, a wife and a certified nurse aide to name a few.

When Covid-19 hit, Sarah began to feel the stresses of being a caregiver in a multitude of ways. Sarah utilized her support system, including the support group and Lisa to try to relieve some of the stress. The pressure of increased family needs, lack of sleep and watching her children decline in the distance learning environment became too much. Sarah reached out to a crisis text line and was connected to additional resources and was able create a care plan for herself. As Sarah began to heal, her drive to help others increased and with support from her husband, Jeremy, a podcast was born.

Jeremy identified one of Sarah’s strengths stating “You are a great talker.” With that and some research, Caregiver Chronicles began. The mission is to connect caregivers from all backgrounds to feel connected, find resources and feel less alone. Caregiver Chronicles covers a variety of topics that no one talks about. “It’s okay to not be okay” states Sarah. Sarah and Jeremy have taken a trying time during COVID and created a space for caregivers and families to feel less alone. Caregiver Chronicles is currently streaming on a variety of platforms including Spotify, Amazon, Google, Pandora, Apple, iHeart Radio, and can be streamed online. We encourage you to check it out!

https://open.spotify.com/show/4yJtTl7WLLXTkLR5wETIMI
Welcome to April and welcome to Autism Awareness Month! That sounds kind of funny, that we are “aware” of Autism for a specific month. As a mom of a child on the spectrum I am “aware” all day, every day, every night, weekend, holiday... The list goes on and on.... But that aside, April is certainly the time when many people acknowledge Autism. But let us not just acknowledge it, let us raise awareness, and most importantly acceptance.

Let’s start with the basics, it is more difficult to accept something when you aren’t aware of what it really is.

So, WHAT is Autism?
According to the CDC, ASD (or Autism) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges. Autism is also called the invisible disability, because there is nothing about how people with Autism look that sets them apart from other people.

WHO is most likely to be diagnosed with Autism?
Autism doesn’t discriminate, and there isn’t any one population that is more prone to being diagnosed with Autism than another. In fact, Autism isn’t as rarely seen today as it once was. Today, one in every 44 children is diagnosed with ASD, and what was once considered “abnormal” is actually pretty normal these days. Fun fact, did you know that the first suspected case of autism diagnosis was back in 1846? Now, Autism wasn’t a term used back then, but looking back at recorded documents, experts say that the symptoms documented back then, and the puzzlement of inconsistency of ability vs areas of superiority, today would be characterized as autism. Autism wasn’t given its official name until 1944.

WHY do people have Autism?
This is an answer many have searched for, however, there is no one known reason for why some are affected by Autism and some are not.
Autism Awareness and Acceptance continued...

Can you tell what people in this photo have autism? All of them have characteristics of ASD.
WHAT are some Characteristics of Autism? Autism is complicated. Social Communication and Interaction skills can be a challenge for people with ASD. Repetitive or Restricted Behaviors or Interests, Delays in Language skills, movement skills, cognitive or learning skills are also among only a few. If you are concerned your child may have Autism, contact the pros. It is really easy to go down the rabbit hole, so go to the source, your pediatrician, or developmental specialist so the correct assessments can be done for your child.

WHAT can you do when you get the diagnosis?
Start building your village! Surround yourself with the people who will support you through the ups and down, because there are a lot of both! Get connected to the right doctors and therapists. Finds support through friends and family, or through support groups where you can meet other people who are going through similar experiences.

SO now that you have a very brief background on what Autism is, what’s next? Remember that people with Autism are people. People with Autism may express themselves differently, or communicate differently. But they want what everyone wants. To be included, to be accepted, to acknowledged for the accomplishments that they have made. To have friends, people who understand them. People who won't pitty or judge them, but people who are also compassionate and understanding of what they need.

This world is more often than not trying to make people who have Autism fit into the society norms. Why is that a one way street? What is it always them having to change who they are? What if society changed a little for them?
I’d like to celebrate a success recently shared by my team and a family we are supporting in Southbury CT. The family came to us needing support in several areas, as they had recently moved to Connecticut from New York, and were unfamiliar with the resources in their new community. They are a large family with multiple generations living under one roof, requiring support in various areas for several family members.

I’m the FPS on the team, and together with Care Coordinator Frazier Termon, I worked to implement the Wraparound process, and support the family in achieving their goals. As part of the Plan of Care, I assisted the Paternal Grandmother, the head of the family, to access supports for her adult son who is diagnosed with Autism. I connected the family with the Department of Developmental Services, achieving access to services including vocational training for competitive employment, in-home behavioral supports, weekend respite and the possibility of involvement with the Special Olympics.

I would like to acknowledge the dedication and perseverance on the part of the matriarch of the family. Her love and dedication to her child shined bright as she continuously reached out for help in researching and pursuing programs referred by both IFCS and other providers among the family support network. She invested her time as well as her heart in locating what was best for her child. I am inspired by her fearless pursuit of the family vision, and am proud to be a part of the team that helped her achieve this success.
Celebrating Shari

A collective FAVOR Staff contribution

Although Shari Lee Bieber entered eternal rest on December 2, 2021, her dynamic legacy will endure in the FAVOR community forever. Shari spent years serving parents and youth as a Family Peer Support Specialist with our organization. Her efforts were particularly instrumental during FAVOR’s early years. Shari’s own family recalls, “Her favorite job by far was for FAVOR. She was determined to make sure that each of her clients got the help and resources that they needed to succeed. Even after her retirement, she still helped give advice and advocate for desperate parents.”

(source: https://www.legacy.com/us/)

Shari’s example as an amazing parent and her impact as a family advocate transformed countless lives. Youth, adults, families and organizations were equally inspired by Shari’s gift for connecting with others human-to-human and heart-to-heart. Spring is a season that celebrates rebirth, vitality, motherhood, hope and divine victory. All qualities that leap to mind when thinking of Shari’s indomitable spirit! As her life becomes a legacy, those who loved and learned from Shari honor her memory by championing her values:

“Shari was larger than life! She had a heart of gold and was style personified. She was a Child of God, a Voice of the Voiceless and a Joy to All!” – L.B.

“I remember wanting to get a tattoo to celebrate a big birthday. Shari never judged or made fun of my wish but went with me to look into it! She was the coolest person I have ever met. She always sparkled.” – L.H.

I remember we used to call Shari, “The Chameleon”. We gave her this name when FAVOR hosted events celebrating the diverse cultures of the families we serve. During these occasions, Shari would be decked out from head to toe as a woman from the country each event was honoring! – L. M.
Celebrating Shari continued...

“When I first joined FAVOR as a family advocate, Shari was one of the first to welcome me into the family. I remember arriving at a staff meeting scared to death and not knowing anyone. She came right up to me and introduced herself and told me to come sit by her. She then proceeded to introduce me to each person as they entered the room. She made me feel welcomed and accepted into the organization. She will be sorely missed.” – J.R.

“The most fun I had with Shari was our carpool rides up to the office. Shari would tell story after story. I will remember Shari as the most loving, spiritual and funniest person I have ever met.” – C.W.

“I grew up knowing Shari and her family. Regardless of age, race, class, gender, religion or position, Shari treated everyone with acceptance, unconditional love and respect. Her character was consistent and her integrity was supreme. In an age when many worship media idols, Shari was a humble person yet a true superstar!” – R.W.
The last two years of the COVID pandemic has taken an emotional & spiritual toll on not just our children but parents and professionals as well. The impact of the pandemic has been undoubtedly the biggest challenge within the past 100 years. Personally, I had become overwhelmed, emotionally drained and spiritually broken. It became apparent that I needed to take some time to take care of myself. We hear the phrase self-care thrown around a lot but what does self-care look like? Self-care looks different for everyone and as individuals we need to figure that piece out for ourselves. I would like to invite you to come on this journey of self-care.

I had to figure out, how do I get balance back into my life? As I walked through Barnes & Nobles I came across this book on Chakras. It was only $10.00 and it peeked my interest so I bought it. In reading the book, I became aware that Chakras are the energy center of the body and is believed to stem from ancient Hindu teachings. It’s the movement of energy within and around our bodies which influences our state of mind and actions.

According to the book “The Power of Chakras,” Chakras are the energetic channels of the human body. Restoring imbalances in the flow of energy can clear emotional disturbances and strengthen your physical body, helping you to operate at your optimum level of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Creating more mindfulness, calm and happiness in your daily life. Exactly what I needed! There are a total of seven chakras; Muladhara (Base chakra), Svadhisthana (Sacral chakra), Manipura (Solar Plexus chakra), Anahata (Heart chakra), Visuddha (Throat chakra), Ajna (Third Eye chakra), Sahasrara (Crown chakra).
The Power of Chakras continued...

Interested? Let’s start with the first one – Muladhara or base chakra. You’ll find it at the base of the spine and is considered the root chakra of the body. It connects us to the earth and our basic fundamental needs – food, shelter and the health of our physical body. If this chakra becomes blocked or weakened we can lose connection with nature and the world around us. As a result we might feel spacey, ungrounded and less stable.

The 2nd is known as Svadhisthana or the sacral chakra and is located in the lower abdomen. This is where creativity flows and is also the source of our sexuality. It can manifests itself in the form of vitality and a passion for life – pleasures, desires, nurturing ourselves and creativity. This chakra brings an immense amount of pleasure into our lives if we are in balance allowing us to see the beauty and possibilities in all things and people. However an excess amount of energy here can blind us to focus only on our desires. But if the energy is blocked we will find little pleasure in our lives and/or stifle our creativity.

The Manipura or Solar Plexus chakra is next up and this energy is all about personal power, a sense of our place in the world, confidence and self-esteem. We will be able to take responsibility for our actions and be confident in our abilities. We won’t need or look for outside approval from others. We will be free to be who we are and can continue to determine our own life course. But when this chakra is out of balance or the free flow of this energy is blocked, things can look totally different. We tend to be overly sensitive to the reactions of others; feelings of rejection and any feedback that is less than positive is taken as criticism; we may feel unworthy, or have little confidence in ourselves or our capabilities and even our chances of being loved. Connecting to one’s self and allowing this energy to flow can become very empowering.

Anahata or Heart chakra, is located...that’s right you've guessed it! In the middle of the chest and it represents unconditional love. According to the book, “It is the connection between our intellect and our spiritual selves.” If we are able to connect with this chakra and allow the free flow of energy we can have a greater sense of inner peace and wellbeing. Anahata affects our ability to be gentle with ourselves, to consider others and to have compassion and empathy. If a person is unable to have either one for others, then this chakra is depleted of its energy.

Visuddha or Throat chakra is about communication. Verbal and non-verbal alike, some people even believe that this energy has telepathic intuitions. This is the theme of the 5th chakra. How we communicate with others and what we say has an impact on those around us. When in balance, we are thoughtful and considerate of others during our communication with them. We are able to speak our truth without being hurtful to others. Say what you mean, mean what you say but don’t say it mean – makes sense?
The Power of Chakras continued...

Ajna also known as the Third Eye chakra is located in the center of the body just above the eyebrows. This is where the conscious meets the unconscious, where our imagination and inner sight resides. This involves the developing our awareness of our intuitions and extrasensory perception. The flow of energy from this chakra helps us in combining information with our innate wisdom to make decisions not based on fear or ego. Wow! I can’t even imagine. We would be able to use the mind and the power of visualization to have a positive impact on not only our lives but those around us as well. A block or imbalance of this energy can lead to a person being narrow-minded or set in their ways type of thinking. They might become uncomfortable with anything that challenges their own tunnel-vision.

Sahasrara or the Crown chakra is the last one. It’s known to be the crown because it is located at the top of the head. This chakra’s energy is centered on insight, inner knowing and self-realization. It is the home of our spirituality and connection to the divine. This is the portal through which the human life force enters the body. It is represented by 1000 lotus petal which symbolizes the unlimited nature of our thought processes. According to the author, this is the chakra from which all the other chakras and body receive energy. This energy in a person depicts their level of personal development. In its fullest capacity, this energy brings about the highest level of consciousness and has mastered all the challenges of the other chakras.

These seven are the major chakras in the body but there are also minor chakras in your hands, feet, and knees. There are many ways to get the energy moving or to unblock the chakras; meditation, exercise, tapping and healing techniques. The free flow of energy is amazing if we can connect with it allowing it to move through us. It’s effortless because it’s always been there, in us, it is what makes us and moves us.

Thank you for allowing me to take you on one of my many roads into the journey of healing and self-care. If you liked this article please follow us on the Western Region/Region 5 Facebook page @Region5Western.
It Really Makes You Think...

Cause I Ain't Got A Pencil
Written by Joshua T. Dickerson

I woke myself up
Because we ain't got an alarm clock
Dug in the dirty clothes basket,
Cause ain't nobody washed my uniform
Brushed my hair and teeth in the dark,
Cause the lights ain't on
Even got my baby sister ready,
Cause my mama wasn't home.
Got us both to school on time,
To eat us a good breakfast.
Then when I got to class the teacher fussed
Cause I ain't got a pencil.
**Our Programs**

Connecticut Medical Home Initiative (CMHI) at FAVOR
Provides eligibility information on applying for durable medical equipment and other approved extended goods and services including prescribed medications & specialized nutritional support formulas.

CMHI at FAVOR also provides eligibility information about consideration for respite funding. Respite is care provided in or out of the home for the purpose of giving relief to the family/caregiver from the daily responsibilities of providing care to the child or youth with special health care needs.

**Contact:** Amanda M. Knef, Director/Coordinator, (860) 729-4153 | Aknef@favor-ct.org and Iris Hellandbrand, Assistant Coordinator, (860) 436-6544 | ihellandbrand@favor-ct.org
1-860-436-6544 Fax: 860-563-3961 | CTMedicalHome@favor-ct.org | Toll Free 1-855-436-6544

Family Peer Support Specialist Program (FPSS)
- Assist parents and family members to be equal partners in all levels of assessment, planning and implementation of services for their children.
- Assist family members in accessing appropriate supports and services, that are family centered and community based.
- Assist family members by providing education, support and training families on how to become advocates for their own children.

**Contact:** Carolyn Westerholm, (203) 943-1431 | cwesterholm@favor-ct.org
For Referrals Contact: Lynette Cruz, (860) 578-0048 | lcruz@favor-ct.org

Family System Managers Program (FSM)
- Collaborate with partner organizations and encourage family participation in policy development and the legislative process.
- Offer training, technical assistance and support to parents and caregivers to assist them in becoming active partners in the Systems of Care network.
- Strengthen the family voice to self-advocate and engage in building the parent/service provider partnership.

**Contact:** Maguen Deslandes, (860) 463-0758 | mdeslandes@favor-ct.org

Learning and Leadership Academy (FLLA)
- Providing infrastructure to guide and mentor youth and family champions interested in developing their leadership and peer support skills.
- Allows school and community communication through online training participation.
- Virtual Learning & Leadership Academy is convenient and promotes community learning and reflection.

**Contact:** Jacquese Patterson, (203) 707-0740 | favorlla@favor-ct.org
Connecting to Care Workgroups

Get to know the CONNECTing to Care workgroups
Written by our CONNECT partners at Beacon Health Options and Stephanie Lusczak

CONNECTing to Care is the statewide effort to integrate ALL child-serving systems into a Network of Care that equally and effectively serves all of Connecticut’s children and families. In accordance with Connecticut’s Behavioral Health Plan for Children, families, state agencies, and service providers work together in partnership to implement changes that promote wellness and help children and families thrive in their communities. This work happens at local, regional and state levels.

Connecting to Care workgroups focus on specific areas of the work. These workgroups are inviting family members and youth to participate in their work. Incentives are available for participating family members and youth.

Please check out these five workgroups and contact the chairperson, if you are interested in participating or would like to find out more.

CareHubs
The CareHub workgroup is developing a family driven model that better integrates pediatric healthcare, behavioral healthcare and school supports. An important piece of this work is the goal of having all providers utilize one individualized coordinated plan of care that supports a child’s social, emotional, and physical health.

Workgroup Contact: Daniela Giordano, Beacon Health Options,
Daniela.giordano@beaconhealthoptions.com
Designated Meeting Time: Second Friday of every month | 9:00 – 10:30 am

CLAS (Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Standards)
The CLAS workgroup promotes the use of the enhanced national Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards into Connecticut’s Network of Care, to ensure that care is equitable for all of Connecticut’s families. The workgroup supports activities such as ongoing technical assistance and learning communities for organizations and providers committed to incorporating racial justice and health equity planning into their organizational processes, policies, and practices.

Workgroup Contact: Lisa Palazzo, Beacon Health Options,
lisa.palazzo@beaconhealthoptions.com
Designated Meeting Time: Fourth Friday of every month | 12:30 – 2:00 pm
Get to know the CONNECTing to Care workgroups

Written by our CONNECT partners at Beacon Health Options and Stephanie Lusczak
(Continued)

Social Marketing and Communications
The Social Marketing and Communications workgroup uses social marketing and communications strategies to enhance awareness and information sharing about mental health, suicide prevention and the available behavioral health services in our state. Informational campaigns are used to reduce stigma and discrimination, and promote system of care development, principles, and philosophy.

Workgroup Contact: Kenisha Creary, Beacon Health Options,
kenisha.creary@beaconhealthoptions.com
Designated Meeting Time: Second Thursday of every month | 12:00 – 1:00 pm

Trauma-Informed School Mental Health Taskforce
The vision of the Trauma-Informed School Mental Health Taskforce is that Connecticut will ensure that every student and family achieves equitable academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and physical well-being. The Taskforce supports activities to support systems organization and accountability within schools; health promotion, prevention, and early identification through a trauma-informed lens; integration amongst pediatric primary care and the behavioral health system; and ensuring equitable access to culturally appropriates care.

Workgroup Contact: Jeana Bracey, Child Health and Development Institute,
bracey@uchc.edu
Designated Meeting Time: Fourth Monday of every other month | 9:30 – 11 am

Workforce Development
The Workforce Development workgroup supports increased capacity, knowledge and skills of youth, families, providers and community members related to Connecticut’s Network of Care transformation efforts. The goal of the workgroup is to train, support, and mentor youth and families to provide leadership in the care, delivery, and oversight of their own care and the system of services.

Workgroup Contact: Maguena Deslandes, FAVOR,
madetona@favor-ct.org
Designated Meeting Time: Second Friday of every month | 1:00 – 2:00 pm