

MY LIFE NOW ↗



A Mother's Determination:
Gabrielle and Harry's Journey



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MY LIFE NOW

Spotlighting individuals who have transitioned from developmental centers, nursing homes, and family homes to vibrant community settings. **Celebrating their journeys.**

EDITOR

ANN MARTINELLI

DESIGN

LAURA WARNE

“Disability should never disqualify anyone from accessing every aspect of life.”

EMMA THOMPSON

WWW.CLEP.RUTGERS.EDU



What is community living?

ABOUT US

The Community Living Education Project, usually referred to as CLEP, works with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families and caregivers to explore the possibilities of community living.

Our mission is to assist individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in New Jersey to live lives of choice within their communities.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY LIVING?

Community living values each person's strengths and abilities and supports them in pursuing their own goals and aspirations. Person-centered supports and services enable people to establish a valued presence in their communities.

Community living offers opportunities to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to choose where they live and explore their hopes and dreams. A valued presence in a community is something we all strive for, and why should a person with an intellectual or developmental disability be any different? It allows us to be recognized as contributors to our community as neighbors, friends, volunteers, and taxpayers.

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the third edition of *My Life Now*.

After a successful decade as a print magazine, The Community Living Education Project (CLEP) re-launched this publication in 2024 in an online format.

Our mission remains the same: to spotlight individuals who have transitioned from developmental centers, nursing homes, or family homes to vibrant community settings. We celebrate their journeys of empowerment and self-discovery and share how they have embraced choice and control in their lives.

At CLEP, we believe that everyone deserves a life of choice and control. Yet, we also recognize that for many individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, this concept remains elusive. Through our work, we strive to instill the principles of person-centered planning, empowering individuals to shape their destinies.

In this edition, we shine a spotlight on the strength and determination of a mother and son. Gabrielle and Harry Nitti overcame many obstacles and never lost hope that Harry would find a permanent home where he could thrive. We invite you to read their story and see what they were able to make possible.



We are grateful to every person who turns to us for assistance while making these important decisions. We never lose sight of the honor it is to walk alongside them and share their stories.

Ann Martinelli

[CLICK HERE](#)



to read our July 2024 issue of *My Life Now*, which tells the story of Carmelys Vincent

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to read our May 2025 issue of *My Life Now*, which tells the story of Shannon Lewis

A MOTHER'S DETERMINATION

Gabrielle and Harry's Journey

BY ANN MARTINELLI



HARRY'S GREATEST ADVOCATE

Harrison "Harry" Nitti lives the life he does today because of the fierce advocacy and unwavering determination of his mother, Gabrielle. Her belief in his ability to succeed opened the door to a new life in a community setting in Spring 2025. His journey, however, was far from easy. Many obstacles stood in their way before Harry began his transition to a provider-managed group home in northern New Jersey. It was also Harry's own courage—his willingness to try new experiences and learn about himself—that helped him move toward success.

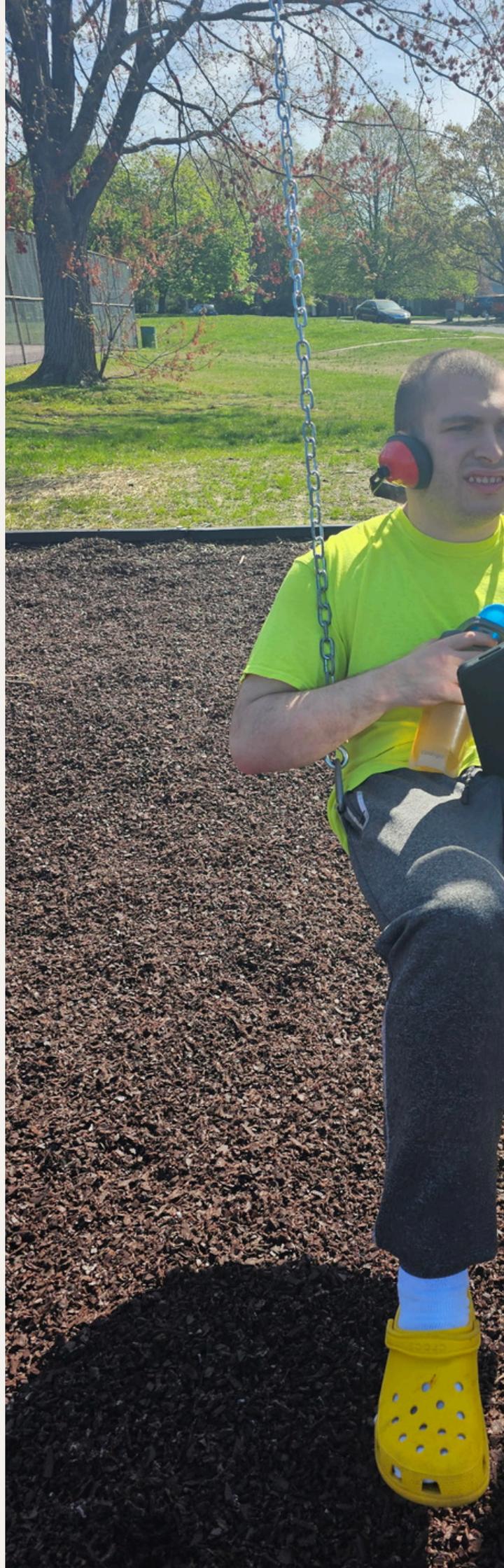
Harry was born and raised in Paramus, New Jersey. He attended local schools in Paramus and Ridgewood before moving to a private school for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Gabrielle admits her expectations of his schools were "over the top," but her drive came from wanting Harry to reach his full potential. She has always been his strongest advocate, ensuring that his behavioral support needs never outweighed his right to a meaningful community life.

As a young child, Harry enjoyed swimming, but even that activity became difficult due to his behavioral needs. Community outings were often unmanageable, and therapists began coming to the house after school to provide necessary services.

Gabrielle shared that by the time Harry was four or five, she realized he would need to move from the family home at an early age. As he grew, his behavioral challenges became increasingly difficult to manage. Harry's sibling was deeply affected—he often had to retreat to another room for safety and call the police to protect their mother. He loves Harry but has not seen him in ten years.

When Harry was about 11 years old, he moved into his first pediatric residential setting and has not lived at home since. Gabrielle visited him every week and some visits were better than others. Multiple medications were prescribed to manage his behavior, with mixed results. Young and inexperienced staff made things more difficult, and as Harry reached puberty, his strength and aggression increased. At times, five to seven staff members were needed to keep him from hurting himself or others. Gabrielle described that period as "hell."

When Harry first entered this pediatric residential program, the provider told Gabrielle their support would be lifelong. However, as Harry approached his 21st birthday, that commitment was rescinded—a change that proved to be a "blessing in disguise" according to Gabrielle. She began to search for a new home he could go to before he turned 21 in May 2024.





MORE THAN HIS DISABILITY

Gabrielle reached out to CLEP in late 2022, and team members Melanie McGackin and Natalie Trump collaborated closely with her to learn more about Harry. The CLEP Team attended his final IEP meeting in February 2023 and gathered information to create a One-Page Profile for him—a person-centered document that describes who a person is beyond their support needs.

The profile includes four sections:

- What you and others admire about the person
- What is important to the person
- What others need to know and do to support the person
- The person's hopes and dreams for the future

This tool helps prospective staff and providers see someone through a human-centered lens rather than solely through their disability. Even though Harry's One-Page Profile highlighted his strengths and positive qualities, his behavioral support needs made it difficult to find a provider as he approached adulthood. Throughout late 2023 and early 2024, multiple attempts were made but “no one wanted him,” Gabrielle recalled.

With just months left before Harry turned twenty-one, Gabrielle sought help from Paul Aronsohn, the Ombudsman for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Their Families. She also requested an NJCAT (New Jersey Comprehensive Assessment Tool) reassessment to ensure his support level accurately reflected his needs.

In March 2024, a referral was made to the New Lisbon Developmental Center Stabilization Unit, part of the state's Acute Behavioral Stabilization Unit (ABHSU) program, which provides short-term comprehensive supports to adults with behavioral or psychiatric treatment needs that exceed what community providers can offer. CLEP's Melanie McGackin stayed in close contact with Gabrielle, advising her to continue to be transparent about Harry's behavioral needs with both the Stabilization Unit and any potential providers.

Harry was accepted. Plans were made for Harry to enter the Unit on May 1, 2024. A search for a provider to support him afterwards began immediately, as a stay in the Unit was supposed to be three months at a maximum.

Gabrielle's thorough preparation and advocacy were key to Harry's success at New Lisbon. She ensured every detail—from communication plans to daily routines—was considered. Meetings included representatives from his pediatric residential program, New Lisbon staff, CLEP, and Paul Aronsohn. Gabrielle also advocated strongly for Harry to have “meaningful community outings.”

A few days before Harry's transfer to New Lisbon, Melanie contacted Mike Marotta at Disability Rights NJ's Richard West Assistive Technology Advocacy Center to ensure Harry had access to his iPad and Proloquo2GO, an app he uses to communicate.

MOVING TO NEW LISBON

Harry moved into New Lisbon on May 1, 2024. Gabrielle stayed in close contact through weekly Zoom meetings and frequent emails. By July, Harry needed fewer restraints, cooperated during meals and showers, and required less medication. Gabrielle visited weekly, bringing food, cookies and sat with him while he ate. She also cut his nails as needed and continued to advocate when she saw he needed more support.

Despite his progress, behavioral concerns remained, making Gabrielle's continued search for a permanent home for Harry more difficult. Harry's DDD information packet was sent out again; three agencies expressed interest, but none moved forward. With help from his DDD case manager, CLEP, and Paul Aronsohn, Gabrielle pressed on. It took one year to locate a provider agency willing and able to support Harry upon discharge.

FINDING TENDER CARE

By January 2025, hope emerged. An agency called Tender Care expressed interest in meeting Harry and supporting him after discharge. Gabrielle also requested that the New Lisbon Stabilization Unit arrange community outings to help Harry acclimate to a more natural setting.

On January 22, a virtual "Meet and Greet" was held with Gabrielle, Melanie, Unit staff, and Tender Care representatives. They discussed a home in Succasunna that could be a good fit. Gabrielle was transparent about Harry's preferences and triggers, explaining that his behavior could be affected by "persistent loud noise, constipation, or unmet needs." She emphasized that Harry needed "his space respected, gentle approaches and staff that would be completely honest with him." Gabrielle also shared that "if Harry trusts you, he will comply with uncomfortable procedures and undesirable activities, such as shaving." New Lisbon staff noted that while his aggression had decreased, its intensity remained high when it occurred. The agency shared that a BCBA would visit twice a week to provide ongoing behavioral support.

In early February, Gabrielle and Melanie visited the home and were "extremely impressed" with the staff and layout. Although Tender Care does not have a traditional day program, plans were made for Harry to have day activities planned in a person-centered manner that would be more flexible to meet his needs. Gabrielle believed this to be an improvement over classroom settings that she had visited in a traditional day program.

Before the next meeting, Gabrielle and Melanie updated Harry's One-Page Profile. He was described as "extremely patient, intelligent, kind-hearted, and possessing a charming smile." Harry's interests included trampolines, swings, walks, swimming and being outdoors. He enjoyed watching *Kipper* and *Dragon Tales* on his iPad, and his favorite foods included McDonald's chocolate shakes (with Lactase), ice cream sandwiches, pancakes with syrup or ketchup, and BBQ ribs without bones.

These details were essential in ensuring the right supports were in place. His caregivers needed to be "quiet, calm, patient, friendly and completely honest with him" according to Gabrielle. In addition, "people who communicated clearly, gave him time to process information, and respected his personal space" would be essential for Harry to succeed. Gabrielle also shared that Harry is "very patient unless frustrated," he is also "very intuitive" and would react to inexperienced support staff.

Biweekly Zoom meetings continued as the transition plan developed. Although two additional agencies expressed interest, Gabrielle chose Tender Care. The Stabilization Unit requested Tender Care join the calls before the transition began. In late February, the agency visited Harry in-person, and the formal transition process began, including medical and medication documentation, adaptive equipment lists, and discussions about new healthcare providers in northern New Jersey.

Melanie also requested photos of Harry's new home and staff to create a Social Story picture book—a visual tool to help Harry prepare for the move.



(Above) Harry and his former Direct Support Professional Kristin Harper Flores

MAKING THE TRANSITION

By early April, concerns arose about whether Harry was fully ready for community living. Gabrielle's advocacy went into overdrive. She organized outings herself—renting a van, hiring private staff familiar with Harry, and taking him to places like McDonald's, ShopRite, and a local park. Each outing was calm and successful.

A move-in date was set for April 30, 2025. The combined effort of Gabrielle, the Stabilization Unit, DDD, CLEP, and Tender Care, every detail was finalized, including furniture orders, medical appointments, a 30-day medication supply, and the transfer from Institutional Medicaid to the Community Care Program. Gabrielle shared that she received "lots of guidance from Melanie (McGackin, CLEP) and Paul (Aronsohn, Ombudsman).

At 9:25 a.m. on April 30, Harry left the New Lisbon Stabilization Unit for the last time, beginning his new life in the community. Staff accompanied him in a van and Gabrielle met them at his new home. It was a three-hour drive for Harry, marking the start of a new chapter—one defined by choice, courage, and love.

The transition was stressful for Harry, which led to behavioral challenges. However, the staff at Tender Care were able to manage the process well and help Harry adjust. Video calls to and from Harry and his support staff all went well, with Harry smiling and happy. Harry's love of being outdoors was quickly noticed by his staff and a pergola-style covering was built in the yard for Harry to be protected from the sun. Gabrielle was extremely happy that "they took it upon themselves to build it because they saw the need."

Gabrielle also shared how kind Harry's staff is to him and how they are doing "a beautiful job" in recognizing and supporting all his needs. They recognize that he is an adult able to make choices and that one of those choices is to be outside, in all weather.

Although Harry does not attend a day program, he does visit other agency homes including one that has a large game room. He is also swimming at Envy Sports Club and Pool and visiting a trampoline park regularly. Gabrielle has been supported, too, by the staff as they listen to her "simple solutions" to questions they may have about Harry. She has been "creative" because she learned from Harry. Although Harry has been living with Tender Care for a short six months, Gabrielle knows he is happy "because of his smiles and giggles."

It cannot be overstated how much planning, persistence, and advocacy are required to achieve a successful transition like Harry's. Each member of the team played a vital role, but Harry would not be where he is today without the powerful and tireless advocacy of one person—his mom. Gabrielle's advocacy has impressed the provider agency, too. She was asked to be on their Human Rights Committee. Harry's move was huge step for mother and son and is a new beginning for their family. With Harry now settled, Gabrielle's relief is immense: "You don't realize you're not breathing until you breathe."

(Below) Harry with Dustin Delfin, a Direct Support Professional at Tender Care



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