

Accidentally ON PURPOSE

By Aaron Notarianni Stephens

The nineteenth century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard is quoted as noting, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." Given this thought, it is important to take pauses in life and examine what we have learned thus far. Taking time to pause does not come naturally to me. I wish I paused more. It is something I work at.

However, I do find that a natural pause in the rhythm of my family's life occurs early in fall when school is back in session. Although I prefer the carefree summer months, I find comfort in the return to routines... the ballet classes, soccer games, swimming lessons and concert band events. It might not be the most peaceful time of year, but when the humid summer nights bow down to fall's cooler commands, I find myself pausing for reflection.

This fall is a particular time of reflection for my family. My wife and I are the proud parents of a high school senior, high school freshman, first grader, and preschooler. For each, it is a monumental year. A time they have each prepared for in their own way. A time when what they have learned so far will carry them on their way. Not all of their travels will make sense in the moment. But as they pause and reflect, things might make more sense looking backward.

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As I make a retrospective review of my life, I realize that many things that seemed to happen as accidents actually occurred for a meaningful purpose. A parallel journey to my family's life can be reflected in my professional career with The Arc of Frederick County. It is a career that I deeply enjoy, but most likely would not have considered had it not been for particular family circumstances.

Our oldest son, Tyler, is deaf. In 1998, my wife and young family moved 300 miles from what was home to the Frederick area in pursuit of the best educational opportunities for him. That fall, we enrolled Tyler in pre-kindergarten classes at Maryland School for the Deaf. While researching scholastic possibilities around the country in preparation for our move, I learned of networks of educational, non-profit and support organizations that exist to serve the community.

I'd never really paused to reflect on how individuals in communities interact, organize, and work to support each other. This network was foreign, yet intriguing to me. Where did this speech therapist who worked with our son come from? Where could we learn sign language? Could we talk with other families who had been in our shoes?

In searching for the answers to these questions, our family got to know a variety of nonprofit agencies. We began receiving support and we wanted to give back. Within a few months of relocating, I accepted a position with The Arc of Frederick County. And within a year, both my wife and I were working in the nonprofit field. And we were not alone.

According to the 2010 Nonprofits by The Number Analysis of Maryland's Nonprofit Sector researched and compiled by Maryland Nonprofits, there are 7,635 people who are employed by nonprofit agencies in Frederick County. This figure represents 8 percent of the Frederick County workforce.

I have worked with The Arc for more than twelve years. During

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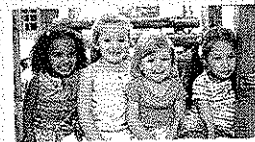
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those years, our family has grown. Instead of two children, we have four. Twelve years later makes Tyler a senior. And his youngest brother, Gideon, is right where Tyler was when we moved here.

As I reflect, my family's journey and my professional career still intersect in ways I would not have imagined. The Arc has taught my family how to become more effective advocates for Tyler. Lessons learned from The Arc gave our family the courage to seek out a truly individualized educational path for Tyler. In our particular situation, that was a path that ultimately led Tyler to enroll in a public school with hearing peers where he receives support from a sign language interpreter and is fully included in educational and other school activities.

At this stop on our path, Tyler is looking toward college. At the same time, The Arc has the privilege of partnering with Frederick Community College and Frederick County Public Schools to expand post-secondary educational opportunities to students with a variety of disabilities through the Leadership Enrichment Achievement Program. For many of these students, attending courses on a college campus was not something that was even considered when they and their families first began their journeys.

As we move forward, new and exciting possibilities are created in the Frederick community. This forward motion is strengthened when individuals, families, nonprofit agencies, government, businesses, and entire communities work together. Pausing to look backwards and seeing the joint accomplishments that are made over time helps make sense of why we must all work together as we live our lives forward. ☺

*Aaron Notarianni Stephens
is an assistant director at The
Arc of Frederick County.*



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