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Voluntoddlering

Or Volunteering with a Toddler
by Dan Bulgarelli, PAC CFO

“What a beautiful face, how old is he?”

“Will he enjoy playing with the ball?”

“Can he come over here?”

I couldn't tell you how many times I have been asked these questions as my wife and I volunteer at the two Brown Centers in the Metro-Detroit area. These questions may make it seem like we are bringing our yellow lab with us, but really, it's our two-year-old son, Benji. When he walks into the room, every eye turns to him. The faces of our friends light up, and Benji loves going to them and showing them his toys, asking for help with getting something from a shelf, or asking them to come with him to look at the birds and fish. In his eyes, these aren't people that are losing skill or struggling with brain changes, they are merely friends to play with. His smile is as big as theirs as he bounces from Mr. Arthur to Miss Esther to Mr. Roger and so many more. My wife and I like to joke that he is our two-legged therapy dog.

My wife, Amanda, and I are school teachers by trade. We both taught for about a decade, her in elementary school and me in middle school. We chose to leave the world of education when we moved to my home state of Michigan and there just weren't any good teaching jobs available. Her mom, a woman named Teepa Snow (maybe you've heard of her), had a company that was growing fairly quickly. We agreed to help out while we did other things, but soon realized that we loved what we were doing and didn't miss the classroom as much as we thought we would. Amanda and I have been working with Positive Approach® for just over three years now, teaching and speaking to many people.

We quickly realized that, while we knew and practiced many of Teepa's skills, we didn't have much real-world experience with People Living with Dementia (PLwD). Through our contact with Deb Yamstein, VP of Non-vocational and Senior Adult Services at JVS, who had sent several of her employees to Amanda's Champion Courses, we were set up to volunteer at the Brown Jewish Community Adult Day Program in West Bloomfield and Southfield, Michigan.

Amanda developed engaging activities that had the attendees singing, laughing, stretching, and even dancing. Being an introvert, I was in charge of Benji and keeping track of the activities. When Benji joined in the dancing, all eyes turned to him. Soon, everyone wanted him to come and dance with them. For some friends, they got up and danced, while others moved in their chairs, and Benji's smile once again matched theirs.

In between Amanda's activities, and then again during lunch which followed our designated time slot, Benji would make the rounds with me in tow, which is when the questions would be posed to me. When it was time for us to leave, as long as Benji wasn't too tired, he would go around blowing kisses and hugging his friends, which would bring more smiles and requests for us to come back.

I am sad to say that with our schedule changing with another baby on the way, we have had to step away from our time at the Brown Centers. We are really hoping to pick back up and join our friends when we are able to do so.