

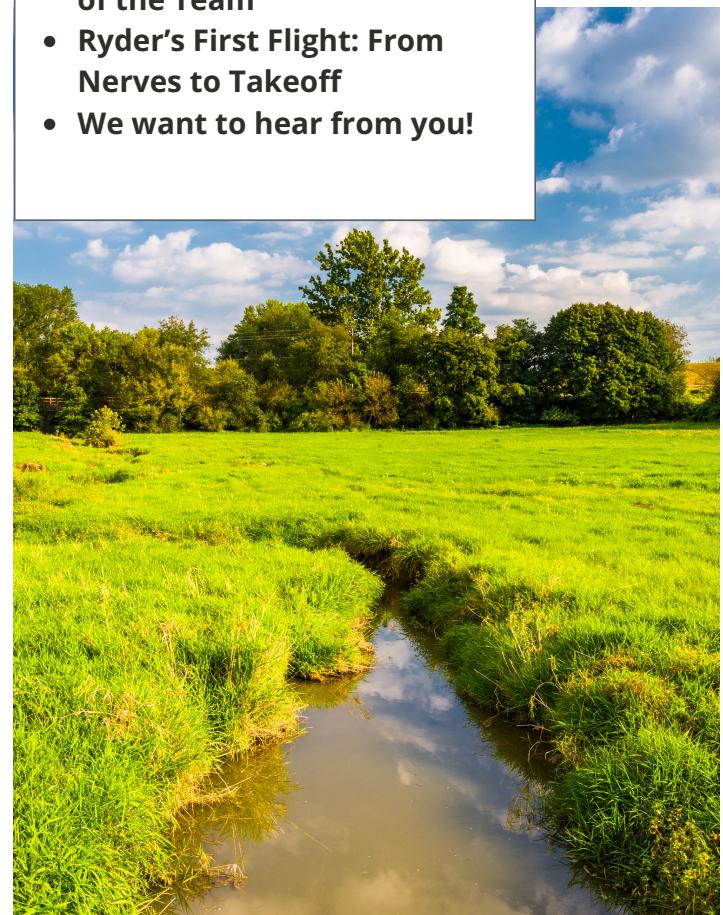
The VFE Insider

“Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

-Francis of Assisi

WHAT'S IN THIS MONTH'S ISSUE:

- Gabe's Voice at the Table
- Thank You For Being Part of the Team
- Ryder's First Flight: From Nerves to Takeoff
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Gabe's Voice at the Table

This year, Gabe Smaglik joined the advisory board for Luzerne-Wyoming Counties Mental Health and Developmental Services (MH/DS), bringing not only his lived experience but also his insight to the table. He's serving as a waiver consumer representative, helping the board understand how the services impact people receiving them.

Listening, Representing, and Being Heard

Gabe attends quarterly meetings where the board discusses different areas of programming like mental health, developmental services, and financial oversight.

“They actually listen to what i have to say.”

But what stands out to Gabe the most is the way he's treated. “I've been on other advisory boards where I felt like a token—like I was just there to fill a spot,” he shared. “But this one is different. They actually listen to what I have to say.”

Building Confidence with Vision's Support

Gabe said that his experience working with Vision for Equality helped prepare him to show up confidently and professionally. “Even though I don't officially represent Vision when I'm there, I still think it's important to represent myself well. You never know who's in the room.”

Setting a Goal- and Reaching It

“One of my goals was to sit on an advisory board,” Gabe said. “When I saw this opening on the county website, I decided to apply. My coworker Carey helped me with the application and even practiced interview questions with me.”



Gabe at the courthouse, being sworn into his position alongside his wife Liz

A Welcoming Environment

The board welcomed him, and Gabe noticed the difference right away. “They were so friendly, and they even offered snacks and drinks—which not all boards do,” he laughed. Beyond the small touches, Gabe sees big potential in his role. “I think this is an opportunity for change—on both mental health and autism services,” he said. “I live with both, so I can speak to both sides.”

We're proud of Gabe and lucky to have his voice—not just on this board, but anywhere change is being made.

Ryder's First Flight: From Nerves to Takeoff

A practice tour—and a little Disney magic

When Ryder and his mom, Chriss, planned their trip to Disney World, there was one big hurdle to overcome: flying. It was Ryder's first time on a plane, and he was nervous about the experience. But thanks to an informational tour offered by the Pittsburgh International Airport, Ryder was able to see, touch, and practice everything that would happen on flight day—from security checkpoints to boarding the plane.

"They walked us through TSA and every step of the process," Chriss said. "They even took us to the actual gate we'd use, so Ryder knew what to expect."



Sensory Support that Made a Difference

Pittsburgh's airport also features Presley's Place, a sensory room designed to support travelers with disabilities.

"He wasn't as nervous and didn't have anxiety at the airport because of that preparation."

Inside is a replica airplane cabin where Ryder could sit in real airline seats, buckle in, and simulate what it would be like on board. "I think it really helped him know what was coming," Chriss said. "He wasn't as nervous and didn't have anxiety at the airport because of that preparation."

On the actual travel day, they also used TSA Cares, a program that offers guided support through security for people with disabilities. Ryder had a staff member walk with him, explain the process, and make the experience smoother and less rushed.

"No, no, no, no," Ryder answered when asked if he felt anxious that day. He was calm, prepared, and knew exactly what to expect.

By the time their flight rolled around, Ryder was relaxed and confident. And after his successful trip? He's already planning another. "He's trying to convince me to buy tickets to go back!" Chriss said.



Four Parks, One Magical Day

At Disney, Ryder set himself a challenge—and crushed it. “Four parks in one day!” he said proudly.



Using Disney transportation, he and his mom hit all four parks, rode at least one ride in each, and even tried two new ones: Mickey & Minnie’s Runaway Railway and Avatar Flight of Passage.

“**Seeing it all through his eyes —that’s the best thing**”

He met characters like Edna Mode and Donald Duck (his favorite—at least that day!), and loved rides like Slinky Dog Dash, Frozen Ever After, and Ratatouille.

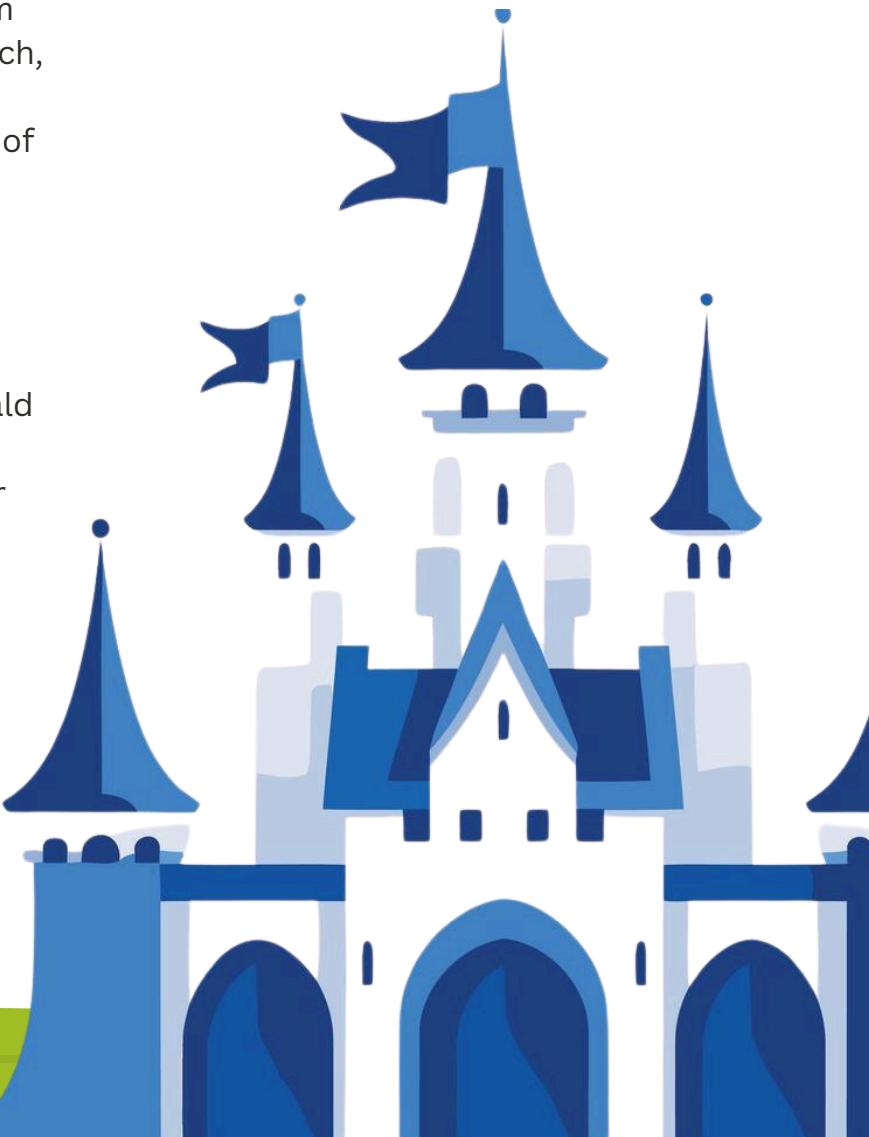
“Seeing it all through his eyes—that’s the best thing,” Chriss said. “He’s just starting to ride the bigger rides. He used to stick to the slower ones, but now he’s getting into roller coasters. And now I have someone to ride with, which is really great.”

What Other Families Should Know

Chriss recommends calling your local airport to ask about similar programs—even if you’re not near Pittsburgh.

“It helped me too, just knowing where we were going and what to expect,” she said. “The more you can do to ease that unknown, the better the experience is for everyone.”

And as for Ryder? He’s ready for round two, with Dad joining them next time.



We want to hear from you!



Please email all story ideas to Kourtney by the 20th of each month to be included in the following issue of the Newsletter.

Email: kmiles@visionforequality.org