

# ProActive Caring e-News



April 17, 2023

## ***Mother of son with autism shares how they benefited from ProActive Caring training***

During the past year, the ProActive Caring Program offered a Train-the-Trainer Program on mindfulness strategies and meditation. Master Trainers associated with the ProActive Caring Program taught mindfulness strategies and meditations to parents and other caregivers of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and they in turn taught these strategies to the individuals in their care.

One of the participants, Whitney Wittcop, recently spoke about the impact of the training on herself and her family:

*The ProActive Caring Train-the-Trainer Program changed my life —it changed my day-to-day experience! When my son Logan, now 4 years old, was unexpectedly diagnosed with autism last year, I knew nothing about autism. Logan flapped his arms a lot and got upset by loud noises. He wasn't reaching milestones with words. He was active, but clumsy.*

*Once the doctor diagnosed him as nonverbal autistic, everything started to make sense. I felt guilty I hadn't realized he suffered from more than delayed language skills. I enrolled in the Train-the-Trainer course and other programs because I wanted to educate myself and be the best mom I could be. The strategies taught in the mindfulness training helped both me and my son. At first, the training seemed a bit goofy, too simple. But when I applied it, I saw that it worked!*

*My favorite strategy is something called reframing, which is changing the way a situation is viewed. For instance, when someone says that Logan can't focus, I say,*



**Logan with his mom, Whitney Wittcop, and his dad, T.J. Fulcher**

*so he can be grounded. Deep breathing and grounding help him the most. Logan can be overwhelmed by excitement or disappointment, but he now recognizes when he needs a break and initiates these techniques at school and at home. For instance, when we went to the zoo, he got overwhelmed. He knew to take a break, to sit down. He is able to calm himself before behaviors get out of control.*

*There are now plenty of wins to celebrate. My son's school just wrote an article about him — he was in a self-contained classroom because he was aggressive. Now he can express himself and he is in an inclusive class that has students with and without disabilities. The training has helped him to live a rich life like everyone else.*

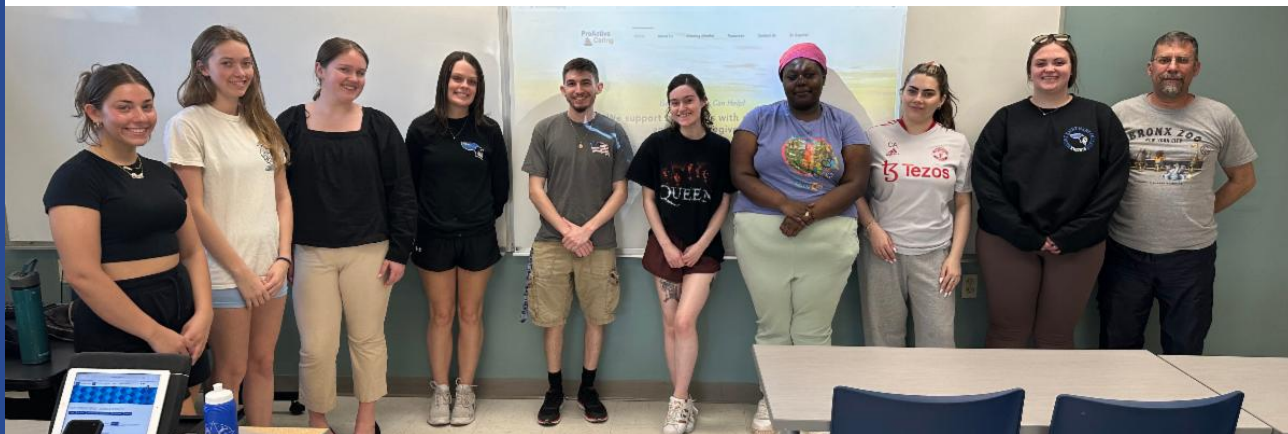
Whitney now discusses mindfulness techniques with the professionals who work

*“OK, he’s curious about his environment.”  
When someone tells me he is pushy, I say,  
“He’s independent and such a great helper.”*

*My son has learned a great deal, too. Using  
the breathing technique, his behavior has  
calmed. He has also learned to take a break*

with her son and with other parents. She  
has also gained the confidence and tools to  
become a support broker, and she has  
become a strong advocate for her son and  
for other children.

*“Not everyone wants to jump on the train,”  
she says, “but they’re the ones missing out.”*



## Center on Aging and DIS-Ability Policy Research Assistants Create New Resources

ProActive Caring, a program of the Center on Aging and DIS-Ability Policy (CADP) at Mount Saint Mary College, recently provided opportunities for 13 students to connect research and scholarship with theory and practice. The students, members of a class on Aging and Society and a College Club called Aging United, became Research Assistants for ProActive Caring.

First, the students formed teams that were tasked with researching agencies that provide community services to people with developmental disabilities and their families in one of four regions of New York State. They also connected with the CEOs of these organizations.

After learning about how mindfulness can be used to relieve stress, members of the teams joined together to create posters marketing ProActive Caring’s Train-the-Trainer program and integrating technological platforms to support aging and family systems. The posters and resource lists created will be made available to the community agencies they identified and posted on [proactivecaring.org](http://proactivecaring.org).

## Research Assistants reflect on ProActive Caring

*Mindfulness allows you to be in the very moment, not overthinking what has happened in the past and not overthinking what will or might happen in the future, but immersed in what is happening here and now, in the present.*

— **Rachel Berkoben, Robert Bottone,  
and Mario Sticca**

*Being able to research this type of preventative care has been very eye-opening for us. We can incorporate mindfulness strategies, coping skills, and stress relief in many aspects of our careers.*

— **Ciarra Quinn, Alexis Grippi  
and Kate Hughes**

*We were surprised to discover the vast resources one has access to, even for just a section of New York. ProActive Caring: “Making things comfortable and easy to access in the comfort of your own home.”*

— **Ashley Simeon, Olivia Sickler,**

Thanks go to all who helped develop, market, and deliver the ProActive Caring Train-the-Trainer course: Valerie Capalbo, Theresa Drum, Dr. Larry Force, Dr. Jeffrey Kahana, Dr. Maria McWhirt, Lisa Nathan, Peggy Pisano, Dugan Radwin, Dr. Mindy Scirri, Emily Souter, Elaine Sproat, and Kevin Winslow; the amazing parents, educators, and service providers who provided the training to individuals in their care; the CADP Research Assistants; the New York State DDPC; and members of the ProActive Caring Advisory Council.

*ProActive Caring and the resources it provides will be beneficial to anyone who uses them. The videos on the ProActive Caring website can help any demographic help themselves. These resources provide self-help skills and strategies to reduce stress.*

— Rachel Munro, Emma DeLancy  
and Molly Morales

## Documentary explores advances for people with disabilities in wake of Willowbrook

The year 2022 marked the 50th anniversary of Geraldo Rivera's New York exposé of Willowbrook State School, which at that time was the largest institution in the world for people with disabilities. This 1972 exposé, entitled *Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace*, shocked the nation and forever changed the treatment of people with disabilities across the country. In recognition of this landmark moment, the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (NYS DDPC) produced a half-hour documentary about the Willowbrook State School and the exposé that raised awareness of the conditions there. This new documentary, *The Path Forward: Remembering Willowbrook*, recognizes changes implemented in the past 50 years and includes insightful interviews with former staff and parents and siblings of former residents. This powerful and inspirational video is now available on YouTube. The links below will take you to the documentary and a recording of the livestream event where the documentary was recently debuted.

- [Full Documentary](#)
- [Livestream of Event](#)

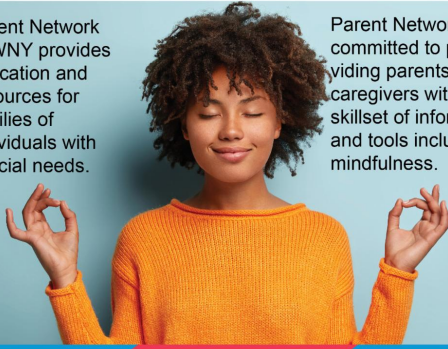
The livestreamed video includes the panel discussion that took place following the debut screening. The panel, moderated by News19 Anchor Christina Arangio, included key gamechangers in the Willowbrook story and disability rights movement.

*Please note: These videos contain images that may be disturbing for some viewers, as well as archival material with outdated language referring to people with developmental disabilities; these clips are used solely for historical context.*

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## Developmental Disabilities Planning Council

The ProActive Caring Program is funded by a grant from the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council.



[Proactive Caring Digital Resource Center](#)