

Letter from the co-founders of Zack's Place

As we stand at the threshold of our 20th anniversary, our hearts are full. What began as a simple dream for enrichment has grown into a community landmark, fueled by kindness and shared joy. To celebrate this milestone year, we want to share the memories that have shaped us since day one. We owe everything to the people who believed in this vision and the participants who inspire us daily.

The story began with Zack Frates. Born in 1989 with Cerebral Palsy, Zack was a vibrant, cheerful child who lit up every room. Though he could not walk or talk, he loved being social and staying active in his community. As Zack became a teenager, Norm began to worry about what life would look like for him after aging out of the school system. Finding a lack of engaging local programs, Norm had a vision: "Let's purchase the Stone Building in downtown Woodstock and create an enrichment center." He wanted a place where participants would be central to the community, mingling with neighbors every day.

Within a week, we were under contract, and Zack's Place (ZP) was born. In those early days, we painted the building ourselves and spread the word to friends. We started with just five participants, Zack, Keegan, Jessica, Jessa, and Lindsey, meeting after school. Friends volunteered to teach our first classes: fitness with Bari, yoga with Tita, and reading with Ron. A turning point came when the Hanover Red Dress Dance named ZP their benefactor, providing a \$9,000 donation that allowed us to hire our first part-time director, Anthea LaValley.

From there, ZP took off. We formed a Board, received our non-profit status, and watched participation grow from five to twenty-five people as we transitioned into a full-day program. Our signature fundraisers soon followed: the first Turkey Trot in 2007 raised \$12,000 with 200 runners, and our "Stay at Home Tea" appeal became a beloved annual tradition. These events, alongside partnerships for music, art, and Special Olympics, became the cornerstone of our center.

By 2010, we had outgrown the Stone Building. Ever the optimist, Norm found our current home at 73 Central Street. The new location allowed our programs to flourish, but in 2011, we suffered a devastating blow: our beautiful Zack passed away suddenly. Over 1,500 people attended his service at Union Arena, including ten rows of his heartbroken friends from Zack's Place. Though our hearts were heavy, seeing the community gathered for Zack reaffirmed the importance of our mission. We knew we had to continue.

Our participants' creativity led to another ZP staple: the annual musical. What started as a "musical revue" at the Masonic Temple, featuring a school bus trip around the world, has become a massive community event. Most recently, our 2025 performance of *The Lion King* was a flawless showcase of our participants' incredible talents.

Our growth hasn't been without challenges. In 2013, when our building came up for sale, our Treasurer, Jim Godfrey, led a capital campaign to purchase it. Thanks to overwhelming donor generosity, we raised the funds in just six months and added a new kitchen. Jim also recognized the need for long-term

sustainability, helping us launch the Zack's Place Sustainable Fund. What began as a goal to "grow a backbone" for the organization has blossomed; through dedicated fundraising and a transformative one-time gift, our Sustainable Fund now stands at over \$2,000,000, ensuring a future for our participants.

Our reach continues to expand through grants and partnerships, providing trips to museums, sporting events, and local farms via our own Van which was purchased in 2017 as well as seasonal sports with Vermont Adaptive. In 2025, we also celebrated the release of a documentary directed by Jim Sadwith. The film, which chronicles the making of our musicals, has already appeared in 15 film festivals, winning awards and showing other communities the power of enrichment.

As we enter our 20th year, we are profoundly grateful to the foundations, board members, volunteers, staff, and participants who built this center. We look forward to many more years of thriving together.

Stay tuned for more details on our 20th Anniversary Gala celebration, **Dancing with Z Starz**, on December 9th!

With deep gratitude,

Norm Frates, Co-Founder & President

Dail Frates, Co-Founder & Board Member