

Jill's House Gives Parents Time to Plan Child's Future

Family Spotlight: The Conleys



Help make time together more carefree for people like Tobin, Spencer and Susan Conley.

"Without respite, you just don't have the perspective to make the best choices for your child," said Tobin Conley. Tobin, a tech consultant who works with non-profit groups, is the current President of the Arc Montgomery County, an organization for individuals affected by intellectual and developmental disabilities. His wife Susan is the firm administrator for a local accounting firm. They are also the parents of Spencer, 13, who has autism and regularly visits Jill's House.

As we recognize National Autism Awareness Month, Tobin shared how regular respite plays a role in supporting families raising children with autism.

"Without the kind of respite we get from Jill's House, my wife and I would not be able to make good decisions regarding our son's future," said Tobin.

"It's hard, if not impossible, to do this when Spencer is at home because his care requires us to be constantly vigilant. He recently developed a seizure disorder which manifests in throwing up and going into full seizure mode. At six feet tall, that kind of fragility can make it difficult to physically manage Spencer when it happens. Spencer is a good-natured guy and it's clear he has a lot going on in his head, but sometimes he just has trouble getting it out. Recently he hurt his leg at school and kept saying 'boo-boo scratch,' not identifying the location of the pain and making it difficult to address the injury. Sometimes he can put a sentence together, but it takes time.

"I used to worry about what people thought when we took him out in public, but not anymore. Spencer learns from others, just as they learn from him. Inclusion is important, but it's equally important for Spencer and his friends to have Jill's House, a place that is 'just for them'. He loves his time there and especially enjoys the pool and sensory room. Another joy is that the break makes us excited to see each other when he comes home -- we appreciate each other even more!

"There are many families like ours, and in order to advance your cause, you need to think rationally, to be on an even keel. But most of the time you are too tired to think. When Spencer is at Jill's House we use the time to thoughtfully plan his future including special needs trust funds, living wills, and making sure his insurance policies are sufficient. Of course, we also take time to spend with one another, which is critical to keeping a balanced family life.

"Without regular respite, I am not convinced we would be able to make the best decisions for Spencer's future. The time we get from Jill's House is a blessing that means the world to us, and something we never want to take for granted."

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Many children with autism have difficulty with sensory perception. Spencer especially loves the sensory room at Jill's House and sometimes wears headphones to block out noise.