



# Adults with Disabilities



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**C**hildren with disabilities grow up to be adults with disabilities. How we care for our children with disabilities drastically impacts not only their lives, but yours as well. How is that? Children with disabilities grow up to either be productive members

of society, taken care of by their family members indefinitely or incarcerated or wards of the state in some capacity.

## Productive Members Of Society

Properly diagnosing, educating and caring for children with disabilities when they are school aged helps them become productive members of society. There is no debate or doubt: early intervention is a child's best hope for the future. Early diagnosis and intervention identifies the disabilities, treats them, and helps make the family, school and those in the community understand how to best help these kiddos become healthy, happy adults.

Our middle son, Massimo, has autism. Thankfully he was diagnosed when he was only 18 months old, which at the time was very young. Thankfully we have the means and health insurance coverage to provide ongoing intensive support and medical services for him. Thankfully we have a very loving, concerned and caring family, school district and community that wants to see him succeed. We are blessed beyond measure when it comes to helping ensure Massi grows to be an adult that is a productive member of society. God only knows the path he will take though and at some point, we may need to consider what would happen if Massi is unable to care for himself when he is 18 years old.

## Guardianships

There are those children that no matter how much intervention and love there is, ultimately do not have the mental capacity to completely care for themselves. In New Jersey individuals turning 18 are considered to have met the age of majority. This means that their parents can no longer legally make decisions on their behalf, irrespective of the severity of their disability or whether they are still residing with their parents. Preferably prior to turning 18 years old the family will consider whether it is appropriate to apply for a guardianship. A guardian is defined as "a person or agency appointed by a court to act on behalf of an individual". There is a legal process that must take place for the guardianship to be valid.

Having a child with special needs can be very expensive and not everyone can afford to hire an attorney for their guardianship needs. My husband, Alexander J. Barrera, is an attorney and an officer with the Atlantic County Bar Association. He is genuinely caring, very bright and happens to be among the

few attorneys in our area who take on court appointments for guardianships for children with neurological disabilities who are soon to be adults with disabilities. These attorneys often serve without full compensation or none at all. They represent the impaired persons in guardianship and similar matters to ensure this is the best course of action for the disabled individual.

**South Jersey Legal Services, Inc. (SJLS) is a non-profit organization created to provide quality legal representation and advocacy to low-income individuals. SJLS has a Private Attorney Involvement Program that can assist individuals with guardianships in addition to Hurricane Sandy victims, government benefits, landlord/tenant issues, consumer and finance law, in addition to other services. If you have require legal assistance and do not have the means to hire an attorney, SJLS may be able to help. You can reach them at (609) 348-4200.**



## Incarceration

Here are some facts:

- 1 in 3 individuals that are arrested have a disability, ranging from emotional disability like bipolar disorder to learning disabilities like dyslexia.
- Across the country, students with emotional disabilities are 3 times more likely to be arrested before leaving high school than the general population.
- Did you know that it costs \$53,000 a year to incarcerate a man in NJ, but only \$41,000 to send him to Princeton?

With the rates of incarceration that high for individuals with disabilities, the costs of imprisoning them falls on all of us in the community. We are taught as children, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If we look at children with disabilities as individuals that we all must love and support the rates of incarceration will hopefully decline. This requires a societal change in the way we view individuals with disabilities, but if reading this article helps change the way you think, then hopefully you spreading the word will reach even more people and so on.

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