

BrightStar Lights The Way For Newtown Family



Alan Brown, president of BrightStar of Danbury, a provider of in-home assistance, left, visits with client Beth Meszaros and her 5-year-old son, Ben. Ben has benefited, as well as Beth, from having a BrightStar certified nurse assistant come into the home four times a week to help with the Meszaroses 8-year-old twins, Peter and Nicholas, both diagnosed with low functioning autism.
—Bee Photo, Crevier

By NANCY K. CREVIER

Caring for one child with autism is challenging for any family, but raising twin boys, both with low functioning autism, is a monumental task. Beth and Andy Meszaros of Newtown know this intimately. Their 8-year-old twin boys, Peter and Nicholas, were diagnosed four years ago with autism. They are also the parents of a 5-year-old boy, Ben.

A former preschool teacher, Ms Meszaros was aware early on that there was a developmental lag with the twins. "Nobody was using the word 'autism' at that point," she said. That diagnosis was at the back of her mind, however, as a neurologist had suggested autism might be the difficulty their sons were experiencing. "We got a little insulted, I have to admit," said Ms Meszaros. "Nobody likes to think there is something really wrong with their firstborn."

The Meszaroses did enroll Peter and Nicholas in the state birth-to-three program while living in Stratford, before moving to Newtown when the twins were almost 3 years old. "Then we entered the Newtown special education preschool, and that was excellent," Ms Meszaros said.

But life at home was increasingly difficult. "Twin autistic boys are very mischievous. They are constantly running away if I let go of their hands. We even have bells on the door in case they try to go out. One was always running one direction and the other, the other direction. I couldn't take them anywhere, or they'd have meltdowns," she said.

A "meltdown" with an autistic child is much more intense than

the usual toddler meltdown, she explained. "It's not just kicking and crying. It's screaming, and biting, and pounding their heads on the floor."

The teachers at the preschool hinted that the Meszaroses needed to consider having the boys assessed. "We visited a behavioral psychologist in Cromwell, and he said it was autism. We were devastated," Ms Meszaros said.

It was a diagnosis that was hard to hear, but it did get her into a good support group. "Then it took some time to admit I was not Super Woman, and needed help," she said. Her parents, who live in Oxford, lent a helping hand whenever they could, which enabled Beth to continue caring for the twins and Ben on her own for an extended period. "But they were getting bigger and stronger, and just from the point of safety, I needed some help," said Ms Meszaros.

Andy Meszaros's job as a computer engineer in Stratford meant that coming home late was the norm, and when he did come home, it was frequently to chaos.

"We both felt a little trapped," admitted Ms Meszaros. That was when a truly "bright star" appeared on the horizon.

BrightStar is a homecare agency in Danbury headed by Alan Brown. Newly franchised in 2009, it is the fourth career for the businessman, following 26 years with IBM, and two decades in consulting and construction loans.

"I started looking for what I wanted to do when I grew up, after the construction loan business slowed down in 2008, and I thought a franchise would be the

route to go. A friend steered me toward BrightStar, which has been franchising nationwide since 2005, and I liked what I saw," said Mr Brown.

BrightStar gives good support to its franchisees, he said, and with an experienced RN, Claire Joudy, as his director of clinical services, he feels that BrightStar's 40 per diem employees are able to provide the kind of hands-on, personal care that the "sandwich generation," those with kids at home and aging parents, especially, needs.

The majority of BrightStar employees are certified nurses' aides, and the others are certified caregivers. The agency, said Mr Brown, also requires each employee to undergo drug testing, a criminal background check, certification check, and a motor vehicle records check. They are bonded and insured for malpractice and liability.

"Most importantly, we check our employees' capabilities," said Mr Brown. "Claire walks each one through caregiving skills, and we also check for attitude. Not everyone is right for every situation. We probably hire only three out of every ten people who apply," Mr Brown said.

Safety A Priority

These things that BrightStar routinely demands of employees are all things that prospective clients need to ask about when seeking outside help from an agency, he said. Safety for both clients and employees is a foremost concern with his company, Mr Brown stressed.

An area that Mr Brown zeroed in on with BrightStar was the need that he saw for not only elder care, but for "kid care,"

such as what the Meszaroses needed. "We are one of the only agencies in the area that offers kid care," he said.

It was not one particular incident, but rather the culmination of the day-to-day stress and the long, hot summer of 2010 that drove the Meszaroses to finally seek outside help. "Having the boys home every day and being stuck here in the house was just too much," said Ms Meszaros. But the one good thing about last summer, she said, was that the boys were accepted into the Department of Developmental Services program, and the family was provided with a grant to offset the cost — usually than \$20 per hour — of outside help.

"It made it possible for us to afford to get help, and all we had to do was find the respite care ourselves," said Ms Meszaros.

It was actually Mr Meszaros who contacted BrightStar and

set up the meeting with Mr Brown and the clinical director. "I not only supported the idea, but encouraged it," said Mr Meszaros, who could see that his wife needed help with just daily living activities, meal times, and bed times.

The Meszaroses had some reservations at first, but Mr Meszaros was impressed with BrightStar and the fact that the agency did a lot of the leg work for them, and seemed most capable of meeting the family's needs and making sure a reliable and responsible person would be put in place. As BrightStar does with every potential client, Ms Joudy performed an in-home assessment.

Assessing Needs

"Most of us in a situation like Beth's don't even know quite what they need, or what to ask, so the assessment helps us to know that they are getting the best qualified help for their situation," Mr Brown said.

"I was afraid they wouldn't have someone up for the task," said Ms Meszaros. "I needed someone who was independent and could see what needed doing to relieve me," she said.

Within just a few days, BrightStar had sent a caregiver to their home, "Halle." The four to five hours a day that she spends with the family, four days a week, has changed their lives, said Mr Meszaros.

"Having Halle as an extra pair of eyes, ears, and hands has made a world of difference," he said. "Beth no longer has to deal with [Peter and Nicholas] by herself, all of the time. It has allowed us more time to get the basic things we need to do, done. We've even started taking Halle with the family on shopping trips," he said.

Halle also accompanies the boys to doctors' appointments, meaning that Mr Meszaros no longer has to take time off from work to help his wife do so. "In a round about way, it has also helped us speed up the process of getting the boys the additional help they need from both a medical and educational perspective," Mr Meszaros said.

"I don't feel so overwhelmed anymore. And I'm happier," said Ms Meszaros, "so the boys are all happier, including Ben, who loves Halle. It's a much calmer atmosphere for us all." Peter and



Even posing for a family photo had been a challenge for Andy and Beth Meszaros, with Ben, and twins Peter and Nicholas, prior to admitting that they needed outside help with the autistic twin boys. Having a helper from BrightStar of Danbury come into their home has dramatically improved family dynamics, say the couple.

Nicholas are not very social, she said, but they also like Halle and seem to like having someone else around.

The household is running more smoothly, thanks to the Halle's taking over many household chores and her ability to step in when Peter and Nicholas begin to unravel. Nonetheless, the twins' issues need professional attention. The Meszaroses are hopeful that they will also be able to receive regular input from a skilled child behaviorist at some point in the future.

BrightStar is a "bright star" for Mr Brown, too. "BrightStar fits my concept of what I should be doing with my personal and professional life. I learned years ago that if you do something only for the money, you're making a mistake. I go home each night now thinking I did something good."

People like Beth and Andy Meszaros are his heroes, added Mr Brown. "It's difficult for people to have a stranger come into their home, to admit that they need outside help. I see it over

and over again; people wait until they are 'out of gas' to finally have someone come and help. Pride is one of the biggest barriers to getting people the care that they need," he said. So when a family like the Meszaroses reaches out, he is happy to be able to provide that assistance.

Now that the family has outside help, Ms Meszaros said that she cannot imagine life without Halle. "I was too proud at first, but my experience has been such a positive one. Families in these situations should not feel bad that they cannot do everything on their own. It really helped my family to say, 'We need help!'"

The icing on the cake, said Mr Meszaros, was that Halle's presence meant that for the first time in four years, the couple was able to get away for their anniversary in October.

For information on the Department of Developmental Services, visit ct.gov/dds or call 860-418-6000. For more information on BrightStar, visit brightstarcare.com or call 203-826-8291.