

# THE INCLUSIVE INITIATIVE

WELCOMING NEURODIVERSITY IN OUR COMMUNITY

In today's day and age, it seems like inclusivity  
...of e-v-e-r-y-o-n-e... should be a given!

We've had the Civil Rights Act since 1964; and the Americans With Disabilities Act since 1990; there are laws in many states, including New York and Connecticut, requiring education in the workplace to prevent sexual harassment; the Supreme Court's ruling in Obergefell v Hodges in 2015 extended the protection of the 14th Amendment to same sex marriages, and; 'Me Too' is now an established part of our culture.

But when it comes to neurodiversity...there's work to be done!

Even in our relatively enlightened area, there's a general lack of understanding about neurodiversity, and even a stigma when it comes to those on the autism spectrum, or who just present differently.

Wendy Belzberg's 25-year old daughter, Leigh, is neurodivergent, and so Wendy is more aware than most of how people act and react around people who are different – and how the interaction can feel to the neurodivergent individual. "Everybody is a little bit different," Wendy often says. "I want to live in a community where those who are neurodivergent, and their families, feel welcomed. Where everyone feels welcomed! ...And the answer is education. You can't legislate empathy, but I believe education results in awareness, sensitivity, and acceptance."





Wendy is a force in the community's charitable, cultural, and social affairs who, in addition to being Co-Head of the Inclusive Initiative, serves as President of the Bedford Riding Lanes Association and Co-Chair of Bedford's Open Space Acquisition Committee. "I was inspired by what I saw in Rhinebeck, New York, where they'd established what's called an Autism Supportive Community - the first in the Hudson region - with the mission 'to train volunteers, businesses, and community leaders to help make the community more welcoming for people on the autism spectrum and with other disabilities'," Wendy explains. "Being an autism supportive community made Rhinebeck a destination for families with neurodivergent children. I wanted Bedford to be similarly inviting and welcoming. A place where families would want to visit for the day or choose to live."



To get started, Wendy enlisted another local community leader, Cynthia Brill, who is an accomplished attorney and past Chair of the outstanding Mt. Kisco-based Neighbors Link, to Co-Chair Bedford's Neurodiversity Task Force. The Town of Bedford - with the notable personal involvement of Town Supervisor Ellen Calves and each and every Member of the Town Board - formed a Committee that researched training, delivered recommendations and outlined action items. Fulfilling one of those action items, as an example, the Town added a 'Neurodiversity Page' on the Town's website, where residents can find local services and resources for neurodivergent community members.



## **"EVERYONE CAN USE MORE SUPPORT AND COMPASSION."**

"After completing the Report, it was clear to the Committee that the local community needed to 'own' the initiative, and we knew the next and critical step was to get the community to 'buy-in'. ...So we sunsetted the Neurodiversity Task Force and created the Inclusive Initiative, which Melissa Dilmaghani and I are Co-Chairing, with the purpose of providing education and training around neurodiversity to residents, businesses, and everyone who is publicly facing in our community."

Melissa and her husband Dave Dilmaghani moved their business, Old New House, a retail and to-the-trade supplier of antique and vintage rugs, to Katonah in 2013, and moved the store to its current location at 33 Katonah Avenue in 2016. Melissa has been quite active in the local business community, including having served as the Vice President and Event Chair of the Katonah Chamber of Commerce. Melissa and Dave have two boys, ages 11 and 8. "Our family is neurodiverse," Melissa says. "One of the reasons we moved to Katonah was the sense of community, and we've found nothing but good people and good families here. I want to give kudos to the Bedford Playhouse, the Jacob Burns Film Center, ACT of Ridgefield, and the Prospector Theater in Ridgefield, each of which have programming designed to make neurodivergent audiences feel comfortable. But, even here, there's a general lack of understanding surrounding neurodiversity, and

we've encountered a fair degree of awkwardness, and even some outright discrimination, around the circumstances of raising our kids and interacting in the community. Despite the fact that something like one-in-every-thirty-six kids in the school district is formally diagnosed with autism, it can be really difficult to connect with other neurodivergent families to compare notes, share strategies, find comfort in a group, or project any kind of message from the group to the larger community. In my opinion neurodiversity exists on a spectrum and

we're really talking about people with developmental delays, autism, and mental health issues. Everyone can use more support and compassion. ...So when Wendy came to me in early 2023 with the idea of providing education about neurodiversity to our community, and starting with the Katonah Chamber of Commerce, I was thrilled to join forces."

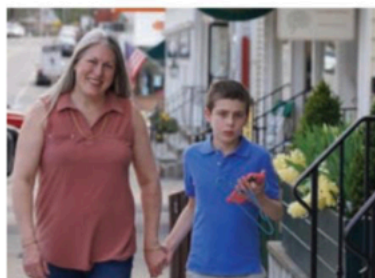


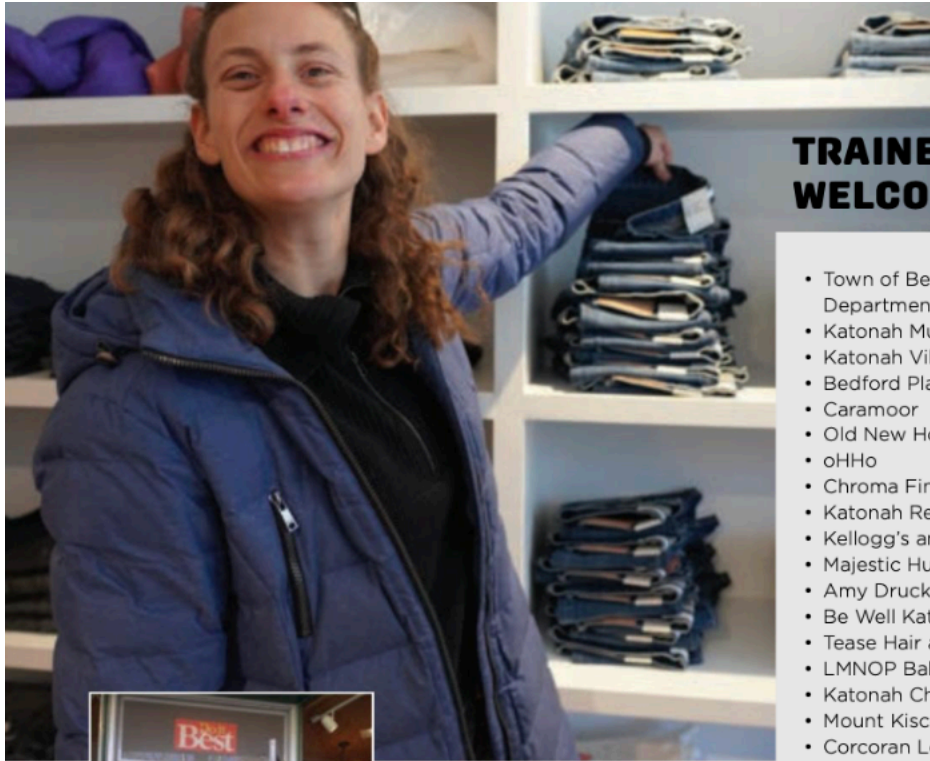
## "I THINK WE HAVE REAL MOMENTUM,"

WENDY REPORTS.

"The Katonah Library graciously agreed to host our trainings. Our first large session, in October 2023, was underwritten by the Dilmaghani's Old New House, and our second largest training session, in January 2024, was underwritten by the Katonah Chamber of Commerce. Both events were filled to capacity. Among those who attended the training were the Town Supervisor and her 10 Department Heads, Bedford's Police Chief, and a long list of other participants, including the staffs from Kelloggs & Lawrence, LMNOP, Katonah Museum of Art, and Caramoor. And we've now been contacted by leaders in Mt. Kisco, Lewisboro and Pound Ridge, who are interested in introducing training and other programming in their communities."

Angela Garofalo, who lives in Katonah and has an 11-year old son named RJ who is neurodivergent, echoes the need for inclusivity awareness and emphasizes the effectiveness of educating the community-at-large. "We've certainly experienced some uncomfortable moments. People who don't understand neurodiversity can react in ways that make the neurodivergent individual feel incredibly anxious. RJ and I not only want, but need to feel others accept him. We hope everyone can embrace and celebrate the differences," Angela says. "While it's impossible to quantify, we've already felt a difference since the Inclusive Initiative's trainings when we've been in and about Katonah. People seem more welcoming of RJ, and like they're looking at all their customers with a new perspective. ...I'm going to do whatever I can to support the Inclusive Initiative's work moving forward. Sensitivity training really does have an immediate and substantial impact!"





## TRAINED & WELCOMING:

- Town of Bedford Recreation Department
- Katonah Museum of Art
- Katonah Village Library
- Bedford Playhouse
- Caramoor
- Old New House
- oHHo
- Chroma Fine Art Gallery
- Katonah Reading Room
- Kellogg's and Lawrence
- Majestic Hudson
- Amy Drucker Photography
- Be Well Katonah
- Tease Hair and Beauty Bar
- LMNOP Bakery
- Katonah Chamber of Commerce
- Mount Kisco Chamber of Commerce
- Corcoran Legends
- KISCOCLEAN
- Compass Real Estate
- Yellow Studio
- Houlihan Lawrence
- King Kone
- Bedford Hills Library
- Endeavor Therapeutic Farm
- Ginnel Real Estate
- Katonah Classic Stage
- Jaxd Fitness
- Assistant Mount Kisco Village Manager/Deputy Clerk
- BluePath Dogs
- The Hair Wharf
- This and That Vintage
- Katonah Lewisboro School District
- Lasdon Park
- Stepping Stones Museum
- The Harvey School
- Bedford Free Library
- Community Center NW
- Bedford Police Department
- Grit Ninja
- Bedford Audubon



Looking forward, Wendy projects, "We want to make neurodiversity education available for every business, in our public and private schools, for the staff in all municipal buildings and operations, including part-time summer camp counselors and lifeguards, and for the staff in our local hospitals, supermarkets, restaurants and stores."



We want to engage the entire community in this effort! Look for our 'NEURODIVERSITY CERTIFIED' window stickers at local stores. Follow us on Instagram @inclusiveny. And please send an email to [info@inclusiveinitiative.com](mailto:info@inclusiveinitiative.com) to let us know what you think, and if you're willing to help," Wendy charges. "Inclusivity is good for our families, good for business, and good for our community!"