



Together We Dance
INCLUSION MATTER

I would like to welcome you and your family to The Together We Dance Foundation

My name is Mike Barnes and I recently came to the decision to create this Foundation with the hope that we can have young people connect in a profound and meaningful way through internships and volunteer opportunities.

Together We Dance will provide Inclusive social events and activities for our special needs community.

I would like to share a little background about my upbringing and career which led me to follow this new path that I feel very strongly can really bring our community together in a big way.

There are two core components of The Foundation that we really want to focus on.

The first being the ability to offer fun and safe activities and events for parents of children with special needs.

The second area of focus will be giving young people middle and high school aged the opportunity to volunteer and connect through meaningful service opportunities with an emphasis on communication while being completely present in the moment at our events.

Cell phones and social media won't be a part of their experience which we will hope will be an introspective one and give them a new perspective that they haven't had the chance to be a part of at this stage of their growth and development as young people especially coming out of the aftermath and impact of Covid-19.

How did I get here and where did this idea come from?

Growing up in Langhorne Manor, I was born as the youngest of 4 children to very loving parents.

My sister Susie was born prematurely and spent much of her life in the Hospital and at a 24/7 outpatient care facility before she ultimately passed away at the tender age of 16.

I was in the 4th grade when I watched my parents grieve with the loss of Susie.

My brother Bill was also born prematurely with Cerebral Palsy and endured 9 operations on his legs as a child.

Bill instantly became the big brother that I looked up to way beyond our relationship as siblings as he almost seemed like a Super-Hero with the way he moved around with his walker.

The day we dropped Bill off on Broad Street at move in day at Temple after lunch to go back to Peabody Hall was one of the toughest days of my life.

I had no idea how Bill was going to manage getting around such a big campus?

Bill was Temple Tuff that is for sure.

During his summers back home from Temple, Bill ran the Easter Seals Day Camp here in Lower Bucks County where I became a Counselor in Training at the age of 13.

During my childhood, I was in complete awe of my parents who were raising two children with disabilities and did it in a way that was filled with love, faith, and a relentless passion to help other parents who had children with physical disabilities.

Back in the 80's, parents of children with disabilities had limited resources and were often learning on the fly just to understand about their child's disability, let alone putting together a comprehensive plan for school and social activities.

We have come so far since then.

Easter Seals was our home away from home, it not only helped my parents and many lifelong friends who we consider our family today.....

It also provided me the opportunity to find my own passion as I developed an amazing connection with the campers at Camp Surefoot each summer where I served as a Counselor, Athletic Director, and with my favorite role, the leader of morning song time!

The older counselors led by Dawn White who took over the Director position from my brother were all people I looked up to and wanted to be like.

My father passed away when I was a freshman in high school which led me down a very tough path in the years to come.

Although I experienced many personal challenges and hurdles on that path, I always came back to my love of working at Easter Seals each summer and it made me feel like I was valued and helping children who I truly admired and loved with all that they were going through with their respective disabilities.

Quite frankly, I never looked back after my time at Camp Surefoot came to an end.

What once was a very meaningful summer camp job, ultimately paved the way for my career and how I am loving every minute of raising my family with my wife Heather Barnes.

In 2002, Heather and I moved back to Bucks County, PA from Boca Raton, Florida where her family moved to from Bensalem, PA when we met in the early part of the winter of 2000.

While we lived in Florida for those two years, I found an amazing job as a Group Home Manager for United Cerebral Palsy of Broward County in Fort Lauderdale.

Although I was only there for two years at UCP, the amazing people that I worked with taught me so much and it was an experience that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

Serving as a Group Home Manager reassured me that I wanted to continue on and work within the disability community when we went back home.

My next stop took me to the Philadelphia Developmental Disabilities Corporation/The Arc of Philadelphia on 23rd and Westmoreland Street.

I was hired as a Job Developer to help adults with developmental disabilities find employment within the community with the support of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

We created a Job Club on Friday mornings, yours truly was front and center just as I was at song time at Camp as I showed our class what not to do during a job interview or on the job.

It was a fun program as we were able to share critical employment skills through skits that were filled with laughter and emphasized what not to do on the job.

After several years in that role, I expressed an eagerness to help PDDC and The Arc of Philadelphia with their fundraising efforts and to find a way to create a buzz around an Organization that was 60 years old at the time.

We worked together to create "First Friday Dances", which were met with immediate success as our clients from PDDC and from many other providers throughout the city loved coming out to dance together on First Friday's of each month.

I knew that St. Joe's University had an extraordinary program geared towards service learning as my sister received her undergraduate degree many years before.

The next call was made to get St. Joe's students over from City Line Avenue to Westmoreland Street.

Our First Friday Dances became a home away from home for our friends over on Hawk Hill.

We had St. Joe's students volunteer at the Dances, and soon thereafter we implemented a program in which students could volunteer during the day at our facility through the Cultural Arts Program.

The synergy and relationship with St. Joe's was certainly one of the more profound partnerships that I have ever been a part of in my career.

Many of those students are still a big part of our family and volunteered for all 13 years that I was a part of The Barkann Foundation.

St. Joe's even invited me to represent PDDC and The Arc of Philadelphia on their Faith Justice Institute Board which was the catalyst to get even more involved on campus and within the community..

Community Day at St. Joe's is as special as it gets and we were lucky enough to have PDDC and The Arc of Philadelphia be supported with service projects in a wonderful manner.

Hand in Hand day as well....

We expounded on the relationship with SJU and then welcomed students who volunteered from Villanova University and Chestnut Hill College.

We even welcomed students from Athens, Georgia who came to us to participate and complete service projects as part of their Alternative Spring Break.

Certainly not a week in Sunny Panama City, Florida for a fun-filled spring break....

The UGA students packed into a van and drove to Philadelphia from Athens and slept on a Church floor in Mount Airy and woke up each morning and came to the facility to complete service projects each day.

Those Georgia Bulldogs are still making their impact here in Philadelphia.

I spent 12 amazing years at PDDC and The Arc of Philadelphia.

The Barkann Foundation was created in the fall of 2012 and I was honored to be chosen to serve as the Executive Director of the Foundation by Ellen & Michael Barkann.

With a mission that was predicated on providing immediate financial assistance to families in need, much of my role was focused on fundraising and creating unique events to keep our supporters engaged in The Foundation's Mission.

Most of those supporters from the early days were young families who we were meeting through school when our daughter started at Pearl Buck Elementary School in the Neshaminy School District.

Without question, watching so many young families with children who supported The Barkann Foundation essentially grow up through The Barkann Foundation will be what I will cherish the most with the role that I was truly honored to have.

When the dust settled after Covid-19, the impact it had on us being able to host events due to the sheer expense, coupled with the relentless expectation for me to fundraise became more of a challenge that I didn't find as rewarding as I once did.

I left The Barkann Foundation in late March of this year in complete awe of our supporters who generously gave their time and hard earned money time and time again....

They were the backbone of The Barkann Foundation and undoubtedly helped us navigate through a two year shutdown during a Pandemic with the ability to continue to support families with assistance without any type of pause while social workers referred families for us to support while our world was shut down.

I learned so much as my eyes were wide open as to what I thought was missing after the Pandemic.

In April, I started looking back and reflecting on all of my experiences throughout my career, and I started to put all of the pieces to the puzzle back together.

Now more than ever, I truly believe it is the right time to create opportunities in which young people can connect in a way where they are engaged in social settings where they aren't constantly distracted by looking down on their phone and TikTok.

Instead, we want them to be speaking and communicating in a way that not only impacts our special guests with a fun time in a social setting.....

It will also bring out qualities within each volunteer that will help them discover on their own while trying something different that is out of their daily routine and comfort zone.

In the days ahead, I look forward to sharing all of our upcoming events and important information that we will have in regards to the internship applications and volunteer opportunities.

While you just read my story and where I've been.....

This Foundation is being created for you and your family to enjoy.

Together We Dance will be a way for our community to connect an inclusive manner that only leads to new friendships and special relationships.

It is my hope that the outcomes from the infancy stages of The Foundation provide an opportunity for us to get together an overwhelmingly positive manner as we Celebrate Inclusivity.

We hope you will consider joining our family on this new path that everyone is welcome to be a part of.

Let's Dance Together,
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