

Website **continued from Page 1**

Ultimately, Alana was diagnosed with microcephaly, a rare neurological condition in which an infant's head is significantly smaller than the heads of other children of the same age. Generally there is no treatment for microcephaly, according to medical experts, but early intervention may help enhance a child's development

Ms. Eisner said her daughter has severe developmental delays, and is virtually non-verbal. Ms. Eisner said she often asked herself if Alana was the only child like this.

"We were struggling where to go, who to talk to or what to do," Ms. Eisner recalled of the early days.

"She saw every doctor," Ms. Eisner said, "and was in both occupational and physical therapy many times a week."

Ms. Eisner said a physical therapist once told her, "I don't know why you are spending money. She won't sit up or walk."

At that point, Ms. Eisner began calling around trying to find out who can help, often doubling her efforts, wasting money and engaging in trial and error.

During that period, Ms. Eisner then asked herself, "Why isn't there a database out there?"

There was information on conditions like autism, but not one comprehensive website where families could find the information they needed.

While she continued to find those answers, Ms. Eisner and Mr. Gohn decided to take the matter into their own hands.

With the help of the National Council of Jewish Women, a group of which Ms. Eisner is a member, the pair created a website.

Livespecial.com, which launched in 2013, is a comprehensive resource guide to "everyone and everything special needs," Ms. Eisner explained.

In describing how the website was born, Ms. Eisner explained that NCJW had been looking for a signature project to support. Every 10 years, they do a major initiative for the community to help an area that is not otherwise served.

She presented the idea for the website that would cover the continuum across ages and disabilities, sort of a modern-day resource guide where families could find all they needed in one place.

"We look out into the community and we look for gaps," said Mindi Axner, executive director of NCJW, explaining how the group identifies signature projects. "We did research and analyses and did not find anything quite like this," the Moreland Hills resident said. "There are sites very focused on a particular special need or an age, but nothing that covered the entire gamut."

That is when they began to build Livespe-



Photo by Geoff Powers

**Lindsey Marks, left, and Juliana Greene, right, read to 6-year-old Alana Gohn. The Solon High ninth-graders, both 14, visit every week for a little play time.**

cial.com. The site offers information on just about everything, from doctors to dentists, therapist and financial planners. Users can search by service or diagnosis.

"Livespecial.com is very near and dear to all of our hearts as it has been instrumental in helping so many families," Ms. Axner said.

Currently, the site has more than 10,000 users already signed up and using the site regularly. Mr. Gohn did the site's technology development.

The average length of time someone stays on the site is significantly higher than the average user across other similar websites, Ms. Axner noted. "We know people are getting the information they need, demonstrating the value of this site."

NCJW, who has a history of helping people with disabilities, is currently expanding its marketing services and working closely with the schools and the service providers on the data base, which number about 900.

The website will get even more exposure this spring, when it partners with Northeast Ohio Parent Magazine to do a special insert, which will reach hundreds of thousands of households.

Ms. Eisner described her own epiphany in realizing just how effective Livespecial.com could be for families.

"One day a group of volunteers was working on the site in the area of camps and recreation," she explained. It was then she saw

a camp that Alana could attend.

"You mean there are camps for kids like Alana?" she asked. "They gave me a list and I sat there and bawled in front of this group. How would a parent know this?"

Through the research of NCJW, Ms. Eisner also came to find an au pair for Alana from Germany. The 19-year-old woman has lived with the Eisner/Gohn family since last April and will stay a year.

She adds consistency to Alana's life and works with an applied behavior analysis coordinator who puts a program together for Alana to teach her basics like brushing her teeth.

Through the research for Livespecial.com, Ms. Eisner also discovered the Friendship Circle, an organization based in Pepper Pike that provides peer "friends" to children with special needs.

Currently, two Solon High School freshmen, Juliana Greene and Lindsey Marks, play with Alana each Monday. Of the 215 teen volunteers for the Friendship Circle, 25 are in the Solon Schools.

On one recent Monday, the teens completed an art project with Alana. On other days, they sing songs, dance and read books.

Juliana, 14, said Alana has enriched her life in many ways.

"Working with her, I learn that each per-

son, despite the challenges they may have, are unique and beautiful," she said. "Alana is very intelligent, and although she is non-verbal, we have created our own communication system for understanding one another. For example, she may grab my hands and start to rock back and forth when she wants to sing and dance."

Ms. Eisner said the high school students are "friends at home" for her daughter.

Lindsey, 14, said the benefit goes two ways. "This experience has given me so much joy to brighten Alana's day, but also brighten my day. It has changed who I am and has brought me so much love and happiness.

"Watching Alana smile makes me smile. There is not a better facial expression in the world than when Alana smiles after listening to us sing 'Row Row Row Your Boat,' or when bubbles are blown in her face."

Ms. Eisner said there are hundreds of resources on the website.

Ms. Eisner, an attorney who owns the Eisner Gohn Group, and insurance planning firm in Beachwood along with her husband, said that it is a challenge to find resources that families can afford. Oftentimes, she noted, insurance does not cover all the services that a child with special needs may need.

"Where do you put your resources every day?" she said of finding the right fit, noting that many of her days consist of arguing with insurance companies.

While she has not found other families with children who are the same as Alana, Ms. Eisner and her husband have met many on their journey who have children with special needs and have been a great support.

"It's always great to talk to another mom," Ms. Eisner said. "We're all trying to deal with the same thing."

Alana, who is currently followed by a team of doctors for a variety of issues and is on a special diet, is a preschool student at Arthur Road Elementary School. After three years, she learned to walk with some assistance. She loves music, reading books, blowing bubbles and playing ring around the rosy.

One of her greatest loves is swimming, Ms. Eisner said, and Alana regularly swims at the Solon Community Center and works with an aquatic specialist.

"One of the biggest things for us is having Alana in an environment in our community that she can be a part of," Ms. Eisner said, and hanging out with other kids.

Livespecial.com continues to evolve, she said.

"I think the most important thing right now is to always continually figure out how to get the information out to families that need it," she said.

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