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Parker Greenberg, 5, works with her physical therapist Laura Boehmer at the STAR Rubino Family Center on Thursday, as part of an expanded multilingual early intervention program in Norwalk. STAR had previously served Parker until age 3 and can now help her again under the expanded program.

Private funding helps nonprofit serve more kids

By Erin Kayata

NORWALK — Figurines of the cast of Sesame Street lined the blue play mat, their plastic faces grinning at Parker Greenberg who sat with her back to them on a red, plastic roller.

"Can you go find Grover?" prompts Laura Boehmer, Parker's physical therapist, who sits in front of the 4-year-old to help her keep her balance. "Let's go see if we can find him."

Boehmer anchors the child by the waist and helps her rotate around and grab the blue figurine while remaining balanced on the roller. Parker is successful, shaking the character in delight before placing him in a bucket.

She continues to twist herself around to grab the figurines while remaining on the roller, maneuvering

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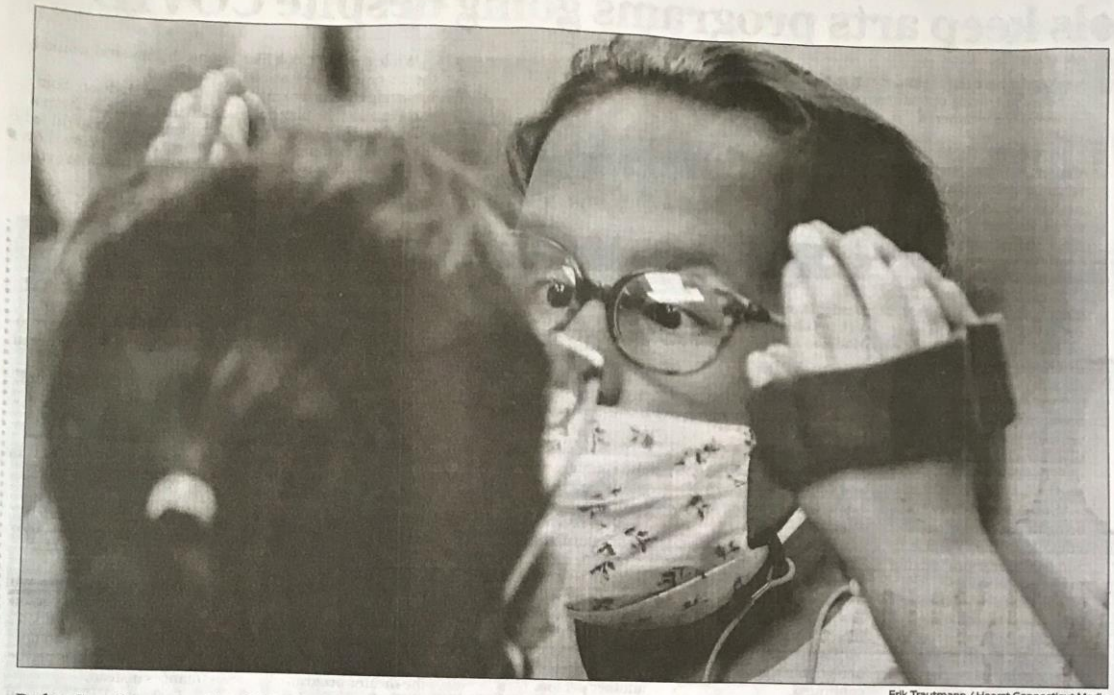

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Parker Greenberg, 5, works with her physical therapist Laura Boehmer at the STAR Rubino Family Center on Thursday, as part of an expanded multilingual early intervention program in Norwalk. STAR had previously served Parker until age 3 and can now help her again under the expanded program. The program includes direct intervention with licensed Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Speech Therapists, Behavioral Therapists and Special Education Teachers

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with the concentration of a Crossfit athlete. When she finishes, she sticks a purple-gloved hand in the air in victory.

Parker, who loves dancing and the color purple, has a rare genetic syndrome which causes language, intellectual and physical delays. Things like rotating around and walking down stairs can be challenging for her. Exercises like the one on the roller can help strengthen her core which in turn helps her postural strength and ability.

It was a "mother's instinct" that led Kimberly Greenberg, Parker's mom, to consult her pediatrician about Parker when she was an infant. Her young daughter wasn't interacting with toys the way other infants might and seemed to have a far off look in her eyes.

The pediatrician eventually sent the Westport family to STAR, Inc., Lighting the Way, a Norwalk-based nonprofit which offers services to families of children with intellectual and developmental delays. Through STAR, Parker was able to get physical, occupational and speech therapy as well as additional resource classes starting from the time she was 4-months-old.

"Everyone at STAR became my sounding board," Kimberly Greenberg said. "I have all their numbers, I can text them any hour of the night. All the therapists became my friends...they became our extended family which I think we needed."

All this came to a halt the day Parker Greenberg turned 3. STAR previously received about 70 percent of its funding from the state Office of Early Childhood, which meant they could only offer services from birth to three as per state guidelines.

STAR could also only serve people who qualified under state criteria and received referrals. At age 3, the school district would begin providing services.

Now, with the help of a donation from an anonymous donor and grants from the likes of Community Fund of Darien plus the New Canaan Community Foundation, STAR is able to offer services to children up to age 5 with additional services available for children until they're 8 years old which can be used in addition to those offered in school.

STAR accepts Medicaid, most medical insurances and private pay so families of all income levels can access their service.

The nonprofit also reopened the Rubino Family Center on East Avenue in Norwalk on Sept. 1 for therapy appointments. Staff previously went to a family's home for services; now it has space for families from Greenwich, Stamford, Darien, Norwalk, Westport, Fairfield, Bridgeport, New Canaan, Wilton, Ridgefield, Easton and Trumbull to visit.

It's in one of these rooms, lined with toys in primary colors, that Parker Greenberg gets her physical therapy sessions to supplement the services she gets at Stepping Stones preschool in Westport. She kicks off her sessions by doing the hokey-pokey as a warm-up before using a set of toddler stairs to practice her steps.

"We're always working on some sort of balance skill," said Boehmer. "She's gotten a lot better. She used to be very, very anxious on the stairs. She gets nervous every time she feels off balance."

While Kimberly Greenberg said she's happy with the services her daughter receives at her preschool, there's something special about what she gets from STAR.

"They're making her stronger. Everything they work on is core-related, strength to get her to best possible ability," Greenberg said.

"For her, crossing midline or just rotating was always such a challenge. Laura worked on that all the time with her and now she's able to do it. They all love her. They've gotten to know her. They care about her. I never once got the sense my daughter was another random kid to these therapists. They connected me with other parents I can lean on. They've been so supportive in every aspect."

Boehmer said one of the benefits of extending STAR's services to older children is getting to build trust and a relationship with a child which improves the service they're getting. As a therapist learns a child's abilities, they're better able to cater their treatment to them.

"It's wonderful to see the child be able to understand you and follow directions better," Boehmer said. "Parker, when we first started, she was very, very nervous with most movement activities. Even moving outside her base of support in any way made her very, very stiff. There was a lot of crying. Over the last two years, she's really come a long way. She's much more comfortable, she's more trusting. We read her cues very well."

Families who've used STAR services before said the expansion is an added bonus for their children and the community.

Kate Bagnati, vice president of STAR's Board of Directors, got involved with the nonprofit when she and her family moved to Norwalk from Greenwich. Bagnati's daughter, Wolf, then two, has a rare genetic condition and needed services.

Wolf aged out of STAR services when she was 3. But the family stayed in touch with the organization and when they launched their services for older children a few weeks ago, Kate Bagnati immediately signed her daughter up to receive physical therapy again.

Bagnati said they offer personalized care in a field where many providers don't bother to connect with patients.

"They really, really know how to keep in touch with families," Kate Bagnati said. "Some therapy offices are kind of cold. If you choose to leave, there's someone right behind you to take your spot. STAR has gone above and beyond to make you feel more important. You're not just a statistic, you're a human with needs."

She said she'd like to also use STAR's group therapies when they launch again. Once social distancing guidelines are eased, STAR plans on having movement and feeding groups to connect families and children with special needs.

With grants from both local and wider scale providers, along with fundraising, STAR plans to continue providing their expanded services for the long-term.

"We'll reach that many more children," said Barbara Fitzpatrick, director of the Rubino Family Center. "It gives us many more options too which we're pleased to have."

erin.kayata
@hearstmediact.com