

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB637
Children - Therapeutic Nursery Program - Funding

Hello! My name is Cat Valcourt-Pearce. This is my husband Larry, and our son, Cree. We also have an older neurotypical son and younger neurotypical deaf twins.

At birth, Cree was diagnosed with a heart defect. At 4 days old, he was diagnosed with a rare syndrome and at one month with a rare genetic disorder. He had open heart surgery at 7 weeks old. Once Cree was discharged, we had a home care nurse. I told her how terrified I was to go back to work because I had no idea where Cree could go, who I could trust, and who could deal with his complex medical needs. She told me about Karasik. Soon after, we went to visit the Center.

It was exactly what we were looking for. It has the critical full-time nursing staff and teachers skilled in caring for children with mild to severe disabilities. This is absolutely rare; most centers won't accept children like Cree, and many parents end up having to quit work and stay home. When Cree was 1.5 years old, the Center opened up to neurotypical children as well as children with disabilities.

Inclusion in a typical setting has been wonderful for Cree, especially as we are trying to determine the least restrictive environment for him. Not only is Cree helping to normalize disabilities for neurotypical children, which will reduce the incidences of bullying later, but he has the chance to be included in all kinds of "typical" childhood experiences. Our nonverbal, nonambulatory son has never faced exclusion at the Center because the children know he's one of them. They play with his hair, tickle him, sing and read to him, and talk to him. Cree has been fully accepted into the Karasik community.

Our twins have also attended Center since they were babies. They have introduced their hearing peers to Deaf culture and even taught them some sign language. They go to deaf school during the year, and then improve their auditory skills during their time at Karasik. It's a wonderful balance for them.

It is absolutely critical that funding and support continue for Karasik and other centers like it. These invaluable programs, with their essential nursing staff, allow my medically fragile son and others like him a safe place not only to grow but to thrive. Thank you.

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