



# The NOODLE

Open up and say AHHHH!!!



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**W**elcome to the June 2023 edition of *The Noodle*, written and published by members of The Florida Youth Council! For this special issue of *The Noodle*, members of the FYC wrote about how The Family Café has changed their life. This allowed members to ponder, share, express and explore their personal insights, experiences and memories. We hope you enjoy learning about our experiences and our thoughts and opinions in this edition of *The Noodle!*

## Current Members:

*Catalina Andonie*  
*John Baldino*  
*Shevie Barnes*  
*Derek Carraway*  
*Alexander Gonzalez*  
*Leah Gorman*  
*Morgan Griffin*  
*JJ Humphrey*  
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*Vanessa Muniz-Pellicer*  
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*Josue Tapia*  
*Lilibeth Vega*  
*Christina Waldron*  
*Serena Wetmore*





## The Family Café Changed My Life!

The Family Café has changed my life for the better for so many reasons. It has provided me with a lot of wonderful resources to help me with school and beyond. The Family Café has also helped me with advocacy in my community and school.

I have better learned how to speak up for myself and others who are too scared to speak up and speak out for themselves. It can be hard to ask for help when you are scared to speak up. Sometimes people think they know what is best for others. What is often needed is allowing them to speak for themselves and hearing what they have to say.

Sometimes the best thing that can help someone achieve their goals and dreams is to move out of the way so they can be successful on their own. It will be very beneficial to learn while they have that opportunity to have the help that they need instead of being thrown out into the real world without the support of their family or group home.



The great thing about family is that they can make it very easy to adjust. When you need them the most, they will be there to help you with the challenges that come up.

The same goes for The Family Café, here we are all family! It offers all the best tools to make sure you have the best information and support to make the transitions in your life manageable. This is how The Family Café has changed my life and will continue to help me. So, what are you waiting for? apply to come to The Family Café next year and every year after that!

By Morgan Griffin

## Empowerment!

When I was in elementary school, I first heard of the Family Café Conference. From the very beginning when I arrived, I felt at home. There were all these people who looked like me and I didn't have to struggle to fit in; I already did. There were so many fun games, face-painting, and activities suited for kids with disabilities.

When I was about eleven or twelve, I went to a presentation called "Finding Your Inner Diva," or something close to that. I thought those girls who gave that presentation were the coolest people in the world. They told me I should join the Florida Youth Council one day, but I had



to wait until I was fifteen to join! I absolutely could not wait for my fifteenth birthday, but somehow, I got there and turned in my application. And here I am today writing a Noodle some eleven or twelve years after that presentation and eight years after joining the council.

I reflect on why I joined the Florida Youth Council in the first place. I think it boils down to this. I wanted to empower people just like those girls did for me so many years ago. I feel like that is what the Family Café does. It allows people to seek their own path in life, and not let other people tell them what they can or can't do. Whether those people be doctors, teachers, your own family, or anybody else, I believe the Family Café teaches us how to believe in ourselves, how to know what we are capable of and how to shout it to the world.

By Serena Wetmore



## The Family Café & FYC: A Real Life-Changer!

How has the Family Café and being a part of the FYC changed my life? Where do I begin? You might say it began before I was old enough to know what it was all about. My involvement started when my mom received a random flyer in the mail advertising the very first Family Café conference held. She decided to attend so she could learn how to better navigate the system and get me the services I needed to succeed. Though I didn't make that first one with her, I started going with her the second year and have only missed one other year since due to a conflicting engagement.



Those first couple of years I mainly stayed up in the room while my mom attended the sessions. As I grew older though and really started to learn what it was all about, I started wanting to go to the keynotes and some sessions to broaden my own knowledge and the rest was history. It became a tradition going every year and I looked forward to seeing everyone who had come for the same reason – to learn and have a fun-filled weekend together with some of our fellow disabled Floridians.

Some years we'd even incorporate a trip to one of the theme parks before or after the conference. And getting to stay at and experience all the different hotels it was held at over the years was very nice too! I've received the "Parade of Hotels" over the years!

Fast forward a few years, I was still attending the conference every year and as a

disabled youth, I wanted to do more so I eventually applied to be a part of the Florida Youth Council (FYC) which I had learned was part of the Family Café. As a member of the FYC, I could be involved in things that could spread real history and awareness on disabilities and help work on other projects to further our mission and cause. I've loved every minute of being a member of the FYC. Though members have come and gone since I joined, our members at any given

time have always been tight and got along well and even have socialized sometimes outside of official FYC functions. We always look forward to getting together for weekend meetings and our monthly calls.

Being a part of this great organization of the FYC/Family Café is truly an honor and is a BIG part of my life. I'll probably try and figure out a way to keep attending once my time on the FYC comes to an end. Probably a third of my closet at home is filled with Family Café and FYC shirts. Anyone else re-

member when a free Café shirt used to be a staple in your conference bag of goodies? And although I half-jokingly say every year that helping stuff those bags every year is my least favorite activity of the weekend every year, I wouldn't trade it. In closing, I just want to publicly thank the one who started it all – Lori Fahey!

By Derek Carraway



## My Favorite Things About The Family Café!

The family cafe changed my life by meeting a lot of people who have different disabilities. I have many favorite things about The Family Café Conference, one thing I love is doing our different Youth Council sessions. One of my favorites is called Come and Chat!


I also like it when I go through the exhibit hall making my way back and forth through the different exhibitors. I love seeing all the different vendors and what they have at their booths to share!

Of course, I can't list my favorite things about The Family Café without mentioning The Florida Youth Council! I joined The Florida youth Council in January 2019 to help people with disabilities and empower them. I was nervous at first until I got to know my FYC and Family Café family. Eventually, I started to get more friends and family within the FYC, and it's amazing.

Another unforgettable experience at The Family Café is having to get all those conference bags stuffed! It is a hard but fun experience! Another unforgettable activity is when we have the duck race! The Youth Council often gets to go to the pool and help get them, so many people have a fun time. By far one of my favorite parts of the event is a very big deal, it is a super awesome cool dance party!

It's been such a cool experience overall. It is just amazing how many families with disabilities we have, and it's crazy the amounts of people who are always at the Youth Summit and The Annual Family Café. It's amazing getting to meet families





of people that have so many different disabilities. My life has changed because I never knew that there were so many different families with shared experiences in the disability community. To anyone who gets nervous or scared like I used to, remember that you can stand up and be empowered!

By Leah Gorman

## How The Family Café has Changed My Life

The family café has inspired me to be more confident in speaking: The first time I spoke at the family café I was afraid to speak in front of a big crowd: The second time I went I felt more confident speaking in front of a big crowd.

I have been able to make new friends: My first time at the family café I was afraid to make friends, but I talked to a person, and they were the nicest. My second year I made another friend and now I have two friends that I am looking forward to seeing this year.

I have learned that I am not the only person who struggles in life: my first year I heard a person tell their story about how they struggled with getting support in their life. So, my second year I was able to share my story about how I struggled and overcame those struggles.

Ways the family café can change your life:

It will help you make friends.

It is encouraging to hear other people's stories along with your own.

It can inspire you to become an advocate and a lead.

By Michelle Sandiford





## How The Family Café Has Helped Me

This year will be my second time attending the family cafe. Even though last year was my first time attending, The Family Café has done a lot for me. It has provided me with skills and info that can help me, groups that can help me, and a lot more! I learned about The Florida Youth Council from The Family Café.

If I hadn't attended The Family Café last year, I probably wouldn't be a part of the Youth Council and gain all the skills that the Youth Council offers. The family cafe has even helped me with school. While attending the family cafe I

learned about things that I should add to my school accommodations list, and I learned suggestions for my personal accommodation needs as well. Overall, The Family Café has helped me a lot!

By James Kuhlman







## Opportunities

The Family Café has given me many opportunities. One of those was learning about the Florida Youth Council (FYC) and being able to join them. I have met many people at the Family Café, as well, especially through the Florida Youth Council. I got to know the other council members and one of them happens to live in the same city as me!



The Family Café has also made me step out of my comfort zone. The first time my family and I went to the Family Café it was Star Wars themed, and I remember seeing the Florida Youth Council members dressed up and thinking how neat that was! Then I saw the Florida Youth Council members helping at the Family Café. I wanted to be in on all the fun and a couple of years later I found out that I could join the Florida Youth Council. Last year, I finally stepped out and pushed for it. And because of that I made it and am now an FYC member!

The Family Café has also taught me many things through the many breakout sessions they offer and has provided us with many helpful resources. I am very grateful for the Family Café. I believe if you put yourself out there and are willing to engage, you will make it. I believe if you're interested in learning and engaging, all you need to do is step out! Talk to others and ask questions! Be willing to learn and you will learn!

By Catalina Andonie



## How Family Café Has Influenced My Life

I joined the Florida Youth Council in 2020. Meetings were online and the Family Café was online as well. During our FYC meetings, we were trained in leadership, communication, and disability history. These training sessions during our FYC meetings helped me to be a better leader, communicator, and more aware of disability needs and advocacy.

In 2021, that was my first in-person Family Café. I was nervous because I didn't know what exactly to expect. But everyone from the Family Café and the FYC members were so helpful and friendly. Many great friendships started forming that day. I learned how much work goes into the Family Café. And I had so much fun and worked so very hard.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Family Café was life changing for me. I knew a local theatre was doing a stage read of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. I was going to audition for this. However, thanks to the Family Café, bigger things were in store for me. My youth advisor introduced me to one of the keynote speakers, Mickey Rowe. My life was changed in this instance. We quickly became friends and stayed in contact after the Family Café. One day, he asked me if I checked my email because he had recommended me to a professional theatre who was looking for someone to play Christopher Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Sure enough, in my spam folder was this very important email. I responded to the email. Auditioned for the role. And suddenly became the youngest, professional actor, to play the role of Christopher Boone. Mickey and I continue to stay in contact periodically.

The 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Family Café was also life-changing for me. During the Come and Chat session, it was announced to the public that I had become the co-lead of the FYC! I am honored to be the padawan to the grandmaster, Alex. From this point on, so much more was expected from me. And many more responsibilities as well. Everyone on the FYC has become so much closer to me. I have formed true friendships. Spent many late nights on zoom calls planning the Face-to-Face meeting,



the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Family Café and monthly meetings. Shevie and Alex have taken me under their wing to train me to become a great leader. They have supported me outside of the FYC as well, coming to cheer me on in outside endeavors.

I am in deep gratitude to the Family Café for making these opportunities possible. I look forward to the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Family Café, and everything the future holds.

By J.J. Humphrey



# Making Memories



Over the years I have had many experiences at Café. The most memorable is one that I had no idea would become a core memory. This year I lost my Gram, (my maternal grandmother). I know that lots of people have feelings when they lose a loved one but my Gram, she was my best friend. She was the one I shared everything with, who understood without words. My Gram was raised in a different time, this made understanding my disability hard for her.

There were times in my life where she would declare I could not do this or that, or that I needed to get married so someone could care for me. I spent a lot of time wondering if I would ever make her proud. This is until she experienced The Family Café. I was the presenter and I spoke about finding strength within. For an hour my Gram got to see me in my element. Doing the thing that makes my heart happy sharing my truth while getting others to see their own. She watched, listened, and even participated in all the activities.

As I packed everything to leave for the day my Gram walked over. She scooped me into a hug and made sure I was paying attention. “Shev, no matter what anyone tells you. You can do anything.” I know that most people will reminisce on how awesome the resources are at Café (and they are) or how much fun they have each year. This year for me Family Café has my heart because it’s how I knew my Gram understood me.

By Shevie Barnes



## Time Flies!

Can you believe it's been 25 years already? Gosh, I think I am getting old! It felt like yesterday we were celebrating the 15th annual Family Cafe Conference. It wasn't too long ago that we even celebrated the 20th Family Cafe. I lost count of how many sessions I have attended. There are so many family cafe stories that I would love to tell, but it will be a book rather than just a noodle article. I remember the first time I met some of the Florida Youth Council members, got a chance to meet Gov. Bush, saw Dan Marino in person, and made a friend for the first time. There are so many firsts, and I could spend hours just writing about the best moments I had attending the Family Cafe Conference. I had old photos when I was a child, just enjoying myself.

Since then, I've attended at least 20 conferences, one of the few to do it. Of course, none of these experiences would have happened without my parents making the sacrifices. Every year they save money for the Family Cafe because they didn't qualify for the hotel stay. No matter what, we always come to these conferences. Initially, I didn't see a purpose coming. I wanted to know why I needed to attend these events. It took a while to appreciate what this conference did for me finally. It helped my mom understand me better, and it helped me to be a better advocate; it enabled me to network with many people, and with the Family Cafe Conference, I am where I am in life. I'm still learning new things along the way, and this conference gave me a broader understanding of our community. At the end of it all, there is no place that I would want to be than here!



By Alex Gonzalez



## The Family Café:

### A Great Place to Learn and Connect



The Family Café has taught me three things. It has taught me about disability rights, how to be an advocate, and how to network with people at the annual conference.

What are the rights of individuals with disabilities? The U.S. government says that “Persons with disabilities have the same rights as all people to non-discrimination, access, equality of opportunity, inclusion, and full participation in society. These are the basic principles underlying the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.” The Family Café focuses on my rights as a disabled person, and I learn a lot

when I go to the sessions at the Café.

What is an advocate? A disability advocate is a person who supports a particular cause and that causes disability rights. The Family Café has taught me how to be a good advocate through the Florida Youth Council (FYC). I support disability rights through my Noodle articles, vlogs, and the sessions that the FYC presents at the Café.

I get to go the FYC Conference because I am a member of the FYC. There are a ton of things that we do and ways that we communicate. We all get together and have a meeting to discuss what is going on with the Council. We often talk about Noodle Articles and Vlogs. We help with registration, we put together conference materials, and man a table at the expo hall. We are greeters and ushers at the main sessions and the keynotes. We have our own sessions. With all these things, I get to meet a lot of new people and network with them. I connect and work with them.

By John Howard Baldino



As Summer Comes To An End,  
 Join The **Florida Youth Council**  
 For One Big Last Hurrah At The  
**16th Annual Youth Summit**  
 On **August 4-5** In Orlando!



The Annual Youth Summit is a place for young people with disabilities between the ages of 15 and 30 from communities across the state of Florida to come together to lean, share, and network. This two-day event is hosted by The Florida Youth Council (FYC), a group of youth and emerging leaders with disabilities who have a passion for encouraging leadership and advocacy among their peers. The FYC is all about youth empowerment and youth involvement, and the entire Annual Youth Summit is planned by youth, for youth!

The 16th Annual Youth Summit will bring together over 200 youth and emerging leaders to attend engaging youth-only sessions on a wide variety of topics, including transition, workplace preparedness, and post-secondary schooling. We will have a great, youth-friendly keynote and fun activities at The Summit, including a dance party to cap off the festivities. There were plenty of opportunities for attendees to network, and share their thoughts, experiences, and aspirations.



The **16th Annual Youth Summit** will be held at The Florida Hotel and Conference Center in Orlando **August 4-5, 2023**. Limited financial assistance is available. If you are not requesting financial assistance, please contact The Florida Hotel and Conference Center directly at **407-859-1500** to make reservations. The room rate is \$112 per night.

**We look forward to seeing you in Orlando in August!**





You can register for The Annual Youth Summit online by going to our website:  
[www.floridayouthcouncil.org/register/](http://www.floridayouthcouncil.org/register/)

You can also follow the QR Code Below.







## How Do I Become Part of The Florida Youth Council?

The Florida Youth Council is a group of youth (between the ages of 15 and 17) and emerging leaders (between the ages of 18 and 30) with disabilities or special health care needs that live in Florida.

The Florida Youth Council is all about getting youth and emerging leaders involved in self-advocacy, peer mentoring and other activities that will improve the quality of life for youth and emerging leaders with disabilities in Florida. The program empowers youth and emerging leaders to decide what issues are important to their generation, to discuss those issues in their state and local communities, and to develop strategies to address them.

We are seeking a group of enthusiastic, motivated youth and emerging leaders to participate. If you would like to take a leadership role in advocating for youth and emerging leaders in Florida, please visit The Florida Youth Council website at [www.floridayouthcouncil.com](http://www.floridayouthcouncil.com). The program is open to application year round.

We hope to hear from you soon!



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