



# Harbor Happenings

Cover: Michael Gourzis, Photo Credit to Lana Lee Photography

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HARBOR  
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## Michael Gourzis Finds His Voice

By Melanie Gourzis, Michael's Mother/HRC Parent



Michael learning to play

Michael Gourzis was a happy, friendly, social little baby. He loved to play at the park with other children and was developing as a typical baby would. By age 2, his parents noticed that language still was not forming. By age 3, he started to pull away from other children, not answer to his name and eye contact dropped off. They had him

**...keeping him part of his community is a decision his parents will always be thankful they made.**

evaluated at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia where they lived at the time and it was discovered just how deficient his expressive and receptive capabilities were. He could only form some simple words, recite his ABCs, colors, and numbers.

At age 4, Michael and his family moved to Hermosa Beach. He was evaluated by the head of Developmental Pediatrics at UCLA, who delivered a very uncertain prognosis. "Your son may never speak in full sentences,

may not want to be hugged, not understand what love is, may never live on his own" and on. She directed them to the regional center and recommended Michael be enrolled in mainstream public kindergarten despite his August birthday and his inability to sit still. This was against his parent's intuition, and he was removed after two weeks. In that time, a space became available in a TK program at a new school. His new teacher was amazing – patient, understanding, and took a liking to Michael. After a month in her class with a 1:1 ABA aide, his eloping decreased and his capacity for academics increased.

Michael's autism diagnosis was confirmed at age 5, which was no shock to his parents. He started an ABA program; one that his parents' credit with facilitating the foundation of his language development. Under the guidance of his program managers, his structured program started with helping him sit and attend for short periods of time. After accomplishing this, they

were able to target his language at its core, pulling language skills apart and beginning with the very basics. As little successes were achieved, eloping began to decrease. Michael continued his ABA program at 40 hours a week for 3.5 years. His ABA aide would bring children to him which increased his self-confidence. His breaks were filled with music and community outings were incorporated so Michael could generalize all the skills he was learning. Reflecting on the program, the approach of “quiet hands and quiet body” was the only negative of a very effective ABA program. Stimming always served a huge purpose for Michael. Hand flapping and pacing were ways he would self-regulate and should not have been shut down or reprimanded.

Around the same time ABA began, Michael’s parents started him in T-ball. They soon noticed him turning everything into a guitar – his baseball bat, a wooden spoon in the kitchen, a stick at the park. He was considered non-speaking but he

was definitely communicating. One day, his father played him a video by the band, Green Day, and their lives changed forever. Michael did not move from the television. A few days later, Michael’s parents were stopped in their tracks when he uttered lyrics to a Goo-Goo Dolls song. It was the first time they heard Michael say a complete sentence. It was at this time that his parents decided to put a real guitar in his hands.

Lessons began slowly, about 15 minutes per week for several months. When he heard himself play “When the Saints Go Marching In”, he never turned back. While guitar lessons progressed, so did speech therapy. Michael slowly began to use 2-3 word phrases to get his needs met. Strumming the guitar became a sensory outlet and replaced much of the hand flapping.

Michael remained in public school with an aide. Academics were challenging due to his processing issues, short term memory difficulties, sensory needs, and attention

challenges. Keeping him part of his community is a decision his parents will always be thankful they made. Being part of a community of typical children also had its challenges. Michael was never able to make the lasting friendships the other kids made. Children didn’t know how to connect with him, and he wasn’t into sports – he was a budding musician. Not many kids were doing what he was doing and if they were, it was difficult to find them.

At 9, Michael graced the stage of Saint Rocke in Hermosa Beach for his very first



Air guitar with a stick

## Michael Gourzis Finds His Voice ...Continued

performance with School of Rock in Redondo. He worked for nearly 2 years to attend this music school. While Michael shockingly belted “Grenade” by Bruno Mars, and “Radioactive” by Imagine Dragons, it was discovered quite early that the stage was where Michael was going to shine. Performing allowed him to communicate musically while he worked diligently to communicate verbally. His parents began to immerse themselves in the South Bay music community – a place they knew would be extremely accepting of Michael. Shortly after his Saint Rocke performance, many opportunities arose to perform at local venues with musician friends and even a spot in last year’s Rock 4 Tots charity concert benefitting HRC.

While the onset of puberty introduced many new obstacles for Michael, he began to experience what his Harbor Regional Center Service Coordinator, Valerie Hassell, coined as an “awakening”. Covid hit during Michael’s freshman year of high school. The lockdown proved to be very beneficial for him.

Being at home took social anxiety off him and allowed many other aspects of his development to flourish. Learning remotely at home with essentially 1:1 academic instruction only half the day opened up more time to focus on his music. His language abilities exploded, and his parents worked endlessly to get him out into his community to work on his anxiety of being in public places.

At age 17, language is still difficult for Michael but music is not. His autism diagnosis can now be broken down to severe ADHD, language disorder, and processing disorder. He has learned to self-regulate his sensory needs. He is now considered highly verbal but his ability to have conversations and elaborate on topics is very much still emerging. While

**Once we realized just how many learning opportunities a day presents and that he was capable of learning...we took that and ran.**

he still navigates academics and schedules with 1:1 aide assistance, he is a second-year culinary arts student finishing his junior year of high school. Michael may not be on the diploma track quite yet, but he perseveres and continues to learn his academics at his own pace. He wants to show the world that you don’t have to fit the mold to be successful.

Michael has been a student at Coast Music for nearly 4 years with whom he performs and takes guitar

- **Find Michael on Youtube at: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCpSenZVszAQm9ZB0BKVHcUQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpSenZVszAQm9ZB0BKVHcUQ)**
- **Instagram: [@michaelgourzismusic](https://www.instagram.com/michaelgourzismusic)**
- **Rex and Friends: [www.artsupla.org/rex-and-friends](http://www.artsupla.org/rex-and-friends)**
- **Rock For Tots: [rock4tots.net/](http://rock4tots.net/)**
- **South Bay Music Connection: [www.southbaymusicconnection.rocks/](http://www.southbaymusicconnection.rocks/)**
- **Coast Music: [coastmusicrocks.com](http://coastmusicrocks.com), [@coastmusicmb](https://www.instagram.com/coastmusicmb)**
- **Lana Lee Photography: [www.lanaleephotography.com](http://www.lanaleephotography.com)**



and voice lessons. He also collaborates with Rex and Friends, an LA based music group that provides support, training in musical abilities and performance opportunities for individuals who are blind or autistic. This year he joined South Bay Music Connection, a local group whose mission is to support teen and young musicians in the South Bay.

If you ask Michael's parents what stands out the most about him, they would point out his dedication to his authentic self. Also of note is their family's dedication to itself. "We completely changed our lives when all this happened and wouldn't have done it any other way." "Approach every hurdle with patience and understanding, take one day at a time, and work on them together", his mom and dad said. "We have always met Michael where he was at but didn't accept all medical advice we were given." His parents took his development into their own hands, acknowledged his challenges, but continue to "challenge him to be the best version of himself." "Once we



Michael Gourzis performing live at Saint Rocke

realized just how many learning opportunities a day presents and how capable he was of learning...we took that and ran...no limits", his mom said. "That wasn't always met without protest, but at nearly 18, Michael understands that this approach will help him achieve his ultimate goal of "not living with my parents my whole life."

If you see Michael around Hermosa Beach, you will

likely notice a kid who is extremely content – dancing down Pier Avenue blaring Spotify on his cell phone. Despite still working to overcome social anxiety, academic hurdles, and difficulties with social interactions, if you put him on a stage with a guitar around his neck and a mic in his hand....he's golden.

**At age 17, language is still difficult for Michael but music is not.**

## The California Developmental Services Budget Update for 2022-23

By Nancy Spiegel, Guest Author



Helping with an app

Last summer, the 2021-2022 budget deal crafted by state legislators and the Governor gave our system tremendous reason for hope.

### From ARCA

“Better than anticipated state finances, in combination with short-term federal investments in response to the pandemic, provided a much-needed infusion of resources into California’s

developmental services system. These funds were wisely invested in advancing several critical initiatives to improve services to young children, expand service options and flexibilities, enhance services to diverse communities, support the expansion of the Self-Determination Program, and incentivize good individual and systemic outcomes. Implementation of these critical policies has begun and

will yield benefits for many years to come.”

We are now more than midway through the 2021-22 budget year. Some of the measures in last year’s approved budget have already gone into effect, while others were timed to be implemented later in 2022 or in the coming fiscal years, such as funding to hire more service coordinators to reduce case-

loads, and a five-year phase of rate reform for developmental services.

The Governor has proposed an updated budget for the remainder of this fiscal year and for 2022-23, to continue investments in regional center services for individuals with developmental delays or disabilities.

Between now and June, our state legislators will review these, and possibly additional funding proposals, for approval:

### **Employees with Developmental Disabilities**

The Governor's Budget proposes an additional \$8 million to fund employment services to support adults. This includes young adults graduating from secondary education, as well as adults who wish to move from other types of support programs into employment.

### **Deaf or Hard of Hearing**

It is estimated approximately 14,300 individuals supported by regional centers have a developmental disability and are either deaf or hard of hearing. Regional Centers are currently in the process of adding Deaf and Hard of Hearing Resource Specialists to their professional staff. The Governor's Budget proposes over \$14 million to fund communication assessments for those served by regional centers who are deaf or hard of hearing.

### **Young Children**

California's Early Start system, implemented by the regional centers, provides needed services for infants and toddlers under the age of three who have identified delays or risk factors for developmental disabilities. On the child's third birthday, responsibility for many therapies and interventions shifts to the school system. This transition has always been challenging for

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## The California Developmental Services Budget Update for 2022-23

young children and their families, but has grown even more so during the pandemic. The Governor's Budget proposes to include over \$13 million for new Special Education Specialist positions at the regional centers, to support transitions from Early Start into public school and to develop more inclusive preschool options.

The Governor's Budget also proposes \$51 million for fiscal year 2022-23 to reduce caseloads for serving the youngest children supported by regional centers. For families new to disabilities services, this will provide more frequent and responsive contact.

### **Direct Support Professional Training**

The FY 2021-22 Budget included funds to better compensate Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who complete additional training and certification. This is designed to provide people with developmental disabilities with a more highly-trained direct service professional workforce, as well

as encourage greater staff longevity. The Governor's Budget proposes over \$11 million for wage augmentations for approximately 10,000 DSPs who are expected to complete at least the first level of certification.

### **Service Provider Rate Model Implementation**

The 2021-22 Budget included a four-year phased-in implementation of the rate study released by the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), which had identified the serious underfunding of service provider rates. The first phase of this investment in long-term service provider stability was scheduled for April 2022. The Governor's Budget for 2022-23 includes just over \$427 million, continuing this implementation for a full year.

### **What Else Would We Like To See?**

We need our state legislators to continue to recognize the critical importance of sufficiently-funded providers, for the delivery of stable, quality services. The second phase of implementation of rate re-

**We need our state legislators to continue to recognize the critical importance of sufficiently-funded providers, for the delivery of stable, quality services.**



...Continued



The great seal of California

forms for service providers is not scheduled to begin until July 2023. The Association of Regional Center Agencies (ARCA) joins with The Lanterman Coalition, composed of many of the leading statewide developmental services organizations in California, in seeking to speed up the implementation of the rate model, and begin the second phase in 2022.

We also hope that the legislature and the Governor continue to recognize the value of service coordina-

tion for every person with a developmental disability, as they navigate various service systems. We applaud them for providing an influx of funds this year, toward the hiring of more service coordinators. As we use the approved funding to bring these staff on board, we hope that this year they will take the opportunity to correct outdated funding formulas. With insufficient funding for so many years, service coordinators' caseloads have grown to unsustainable levels, while demands have

increased for more and more administrative requirements. We look forward to our staff being able to devote more time to building closer and more responsive individual relationships with the people and families they serve.

**Stay tuned as budget hearings and more information about the budget approval is received.**

## Investing in the Right People: Jenna Has Heart

By Maria Elena Walsh, Manager, Family Resource & Assistive Technology Center



Jenna Valledor began her internship at the Harbor Regional Center Resource & Assistive Technology Center in January 2022. Jenna is currently a junior at Cal State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH)—go Toros! She enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in Human Services degree program. Before attending college, Jenna attended Mouna Lua High School in Hawaii, lucky her! She is taking a full course load at CSUDH and this is her

first internship. As a current intern at the HRC Resource & Assistive Technology Center, Jenna participates in her internship a little differently than those who came before her. Since HRC is not currently open to the public, she is working on projects remotely. This enables her to attend our clinical training series, tag along on virtual Quality Assurance visits to HRC service providers, and observe clinical consultations taking place at HRC.

Jenna first had an interest in interning at the Resource Center because of how it relates to her current degree path. Jenna decided to tackle the Human Services major because she is motivated to work in the helping field. She is not committed to a specific population that she wants to work with once she graduates and wants to explore and experience all that the field has to offer. She is also motivated to be a helper to others by her own personal



life situations. Jenna shares that having a genetic condition and experiencing the passing of her father made her understand the importance and necessity of having support systems that offers both emotional support and access to resources.

As Jenna looks towards the future, she is considering attending law school. She is contemplating combining her desire to serve others and her interest in becoming an advocate. She states, "I feel like I have a heart to help. And even if you only help one person you have helped a lot." With that in mind, she is considering working with juveniles who are in need of guidance and advocacy and feels like a law degree might be the best way to accomplish this.

In her free time, Jenna enjoys going to the beach and listening to music. She describes herself as easy going

and shows her adventurous side by trying new foods! But the thing that is most important to her is being able to spend time with her family and friends. She is happiest when she is connecting with them. And, last but not least, she has a faithful companion, her dog Harley, who is the recipient of a lot of her love and affection!

The Resource & Assistive Technology Center feels very lucky to have Jenna as a current part of our team! If you happen to cross paths with Jenna in a training or presentation, please feel free to welcome her to HRC!

**"I feel like I have a heart to help. And even if you only help one person you have helped a lot."**





## Social, Recreation, and Fitness Ideas



Siblings walk on the beach

With summer quickly approaching, you can plan to take advantage of the vast local programs and activities for people of all ages and all abilities. Are you looking for a new program or not sure where to find ideas? Check out HRC's updated Social Recreational and Fitness Guide on our website at <https://www.harborrc.org/post/social-recreation> or ask your Service Coordinator! There are many opportunities that include free and low

cost programs.

Did you know that many Los Angeles County Beaches offer beach wheelchairs? Beach Wheelchairs are equipped with large, wide wheels that can roll across sand without sinking. This type of wheelchair usually requires users to be accompanied by someone who is able to push them, although there are several locations that offer motorized chairs that may be self-propelled!



### Wellness Tip

Spending time outside is a great way to be physically active and reduce stress. When spending time outdoors, there are several simple, easy things to do that can protect your skin against damage caused by too much exposure to ultraviolet(UV) light. UV rays are an invisible kind of radiation that comes from the sun that can damage skin cells. Here are a few simple tips to protect your skin from the sun...

## Stay Safe in the Sun

- ① Try to stay in the shade
- ② Wear clothing that can provide protection from UV rays, including a hat and sunglasses!
- ③ Put on broad spectrum sunscreen that blocks both UVA and UVB rays with SPF 15 or higher



## New Social, Recreation & Fitness Opportunities

By Kerry Ryerson, Public Information Specialist



Exercising in the pool

Are you interested in participating in a sport, finding a social group, or a weeklong summer camp? Are you looking for groups or programs for your child or an adult that you support? Recent changes in the law have restored regional centers authority to fund camping services, social recreational activities; and in some circumstances, educational services and non-medical therapies.

New options may be available for individuals who may not have the stamina or

interest for some physical activities. At one of our events some years ago, a group home provider was in attendance and hoping to find activities for his aging clients. After the presentations, he asked Amy, a yoga instructor, if she would be able to provide instruction to the group home residents. Amy agreed to visit the home one to two times per month on Sunday mornings where she taught the residents meditation and yoga. She shared with me that the residents enjoyed the yoga, but they enjoyed

the meditation even more!

Watch for updates on the new Disneyland Disability Access Services pass program; when you should get it, how to use it and the many benefits. The new Sesame Place Amusement Park near San Diego just opened this March. This park is a Certified Autism Center and offers a host of accommodations for children with disabilities. It is fantastic!

As always, the planning team makes the decisions





Snowshoeing Team

about all of these services as part of the Individual Program Plan process. If you have questions, or are interested in any of these services, please contact your service coordinator for more information. For information on upcoming events where you can learn more about some of the new options available, please contact Maria Elena Walsh at [mariaelena.walsh@harborrc.org](mailto:mariaelena.walsh@harborrc.org).



Learning the art of fencing



Friends pose with gift



## Harbor Help Campaign: Choosing to Make a Difference

By Kerry Ryerson, HRC Public Information Specialist



Build-a-bear packages ready for delivery

In late March 2020 and with the Safer At Home policy newly in place, the parents of one of our young clients called to say that they wanted to help other HRC families during this challenging time. They offered to purchase gift cards in bulk and have them sent to HRC for distribution. A couple days later another parent of two teenage clients called and asked if she could help by purchasing gift cards

for our clients and their families that were experiencing food insecurity. From the compassion and generosity of these two families and their donations that helped several families at the beginning of this pandemic, the HRC Food for Clients Campaign was created.

Throughout the past two years, our friends and partners in our community have

continued to donate to the Food for Clients campaign, and their support has been greatly appreciated each and every day.

Along with the ongoing purchase and distribution of gift cards from the monetary donations, many of our clients have been able to benefit from other types of supports including the very generous donations



Ready to open gift!



Waiting to open presents

**From the compassion and generosity of these two families and their donations that helped several families at the beginning of this pandemic, the HRC Food for Clients Campaign was created.**



## Harbor Help Campaign: Choosing to Make a Difference



Festive team

listed below over the last two years. This list will give you an idea of the variety of ways that our amazing community sponsors have provided extra support for our clients and their families year-round:

- Donations of 200 backpacks and school supplies for a back to school event
- Donations of 170 pairs of new athletic shoes, backpacks, tote bags, cinch bags, t-shirts
- Proceeds from the Rock 4 Tots Virtual Concert
- Supporters that contribute to the Food for Clients Campaign
- Donations of new toys and beanie babies
- Many returning and new supporters prefer to Adopt A Family
- Donations to the Holiday Giving Campaign
- Donations to the Merry Beary Christmas event
- The purchase of Chrome-books for our clients

As you can see from the list above, there are many ways to help our clients throughout the year. We sincerely appreciate the kindness and generosity from all donors and sponsors! If you would like to provide support for our clients, whether through a monetary donation or other contribution, please visit our website at [www.harborrc.org/support-harbor-help-fund](http://www.harborrc.org/support-harbor-help-fund), or email our Public Information Specialist at [Kerry.Ryerson@harborrc.org](mailto:Kerry.Ryerson@harborrc.org).



...Continued



Gifts packed and ready to go

...the parents of one of our young clients called to say that they wanted to help other HRC families...



Happy gift recipient





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