NOVEMBER 2026

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A PRIVATE MAGAZINE FOR THE RESIDENTS OF ATHERTON, CALIFORNIA

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Sophia Henderson: Making Space for Everyone

For Sophia Henderson, a playground can be much more than a place to swing, climb, or slide. It can be a place where a child gets to simply be a child without having to think about whether the space was designed with them in mind.

That is part of what makes Magical Bridge parks so meaningful to Sophia, an Atherton resident and disability advocate. At Magical Bridge, Sophia can use her wheelchair to play alongside her younger siblings rather than watching from the sidelines.

"Part of what makes Magical Bridge so special to me is that it gives me a place to play with my brother and sister," she says. "When I use my wheelchair, a lot of parks get closed off to me, so having a space where I can take my little brother independently and play with him is a huge deal."

Today, Sophia serves as Magical Bridge's Accessible and Inclusive Engagement Strategist, helping the organization think about accessibility and inclusion across its playgrounds, programs, and website. Having spent much of her life navigating environments not designed for how she learns and moves, the work is deeply personal.

"Accessible does not just mean something being physically accessible," she explains. "It means being accessible for people of all body-mind variations. And inclusion just doesn't mean giving someone a place to sit on a playground. It means finding meaningful ways for people to participate and feel a part of the community."

Sophia's connection to Magical Bridge began through Best Buddies, an international organization that fosters one-to-one friendships between individuals with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities. Her buddy was the

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By Abbie Burgess



Sophia and three of her four siblings. Photo by Lulu Jane.

daughter of Magical Bridge founder Olenka Steciw Villarreal. "Being buddies with Ava and getting to meet Olenka was such a great gift in my life and really allowed me to start to find and use my voice to advocate for both inclusion and accessibility."

Learning to Advocate

Sophia's understanding of inclusion began long before she had a professional title in the field.

Growing up, she experienced severe dyslexia, learning disabilities, and ASD. She learned early that being capable and being able to access information in the conventional way were not always the same thing.

It took three elementary schools before she found Athena Academy, which specializes in dyslexia and learning differences. In that environment, she was finally able to learn how to read.

When she returned to public school in seventh grade, the transition was difficult. By the time she reached Palo Alto High School, the challenges had become more complicated.

"On the outside, I looked like the average student, but the way I learned was very different," she explains. "Teachers sometimes struggled to understand how someone who was extremely verbal, could understand and discuss complex topics, and could 'talk like an adult' could also struggle to read a relatively simple paragraph, spell, or physically write at the level of my peers."

In higher-level classes, some teachers told her they had never taught a student with accommodations like hers: having material read aloud, voice typing, and sometimes a scribe were essential for her to demonstrate what she knew.

Getting those accommodations was not always easy. Sometimes a reader would not show up. Sometimes a teacher gave a pop quiz with too little notice to arrange accommodations. In one particularly frustrating instance, Sophia was told she could not have a test read to her because doing so would give her partner an "unfair advantage."

Those experiences taught her early on the importance of advocacy. "You are your own best advocate because you know you best," she says. "Treat people the way you would want to be treated."

A New Understanding of Disability

As Sophia grew older, disability became part of her life in another way. Chronic pain and physical health issues eventually changed how she moved through the world. She is now an ambulatory wheelchair user, meaning she can walk and stand for periods of time but uses a wheelchair to increase her access, independence and ability to participate.

Her wheelchair has helped her reclaim activities she once thought might no longer be possible. She has traveled to Europe and returned to coaching water polo, a sport that has been an important part of her life since childhood. She played water polo from age 9 through high school, but her health eventually forced her to stop. Today, she coaches junior varsity water polo at Palo Alto High School.

"I felt that I didn't get a proper goodbye to the sport," she says. "Coaching is a way that I can stay active with that and give back even when I'm not able to play. It's my way of showing my love and appreciation to the game."

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Photo by Derek Heath.

Family and Atherton

Sophia describes herself as part of a "big beautiful family" and says she is very close with her siblings. "I am very close with all my siblings and very proud of them," she shares.

She also has plenty of dogs to love: Henry, Archie, and Charlie at her mom and stepfather's house, and Cece at her dad's.

Her own service dog, Sadie, accompanied Sophia to college in Eugene and was a constant companion on days when pain made it difficult to do everything she wanted to do. "Having Sadie makes my days feel less lonely, especially on days when my pain takes over," she says. "She was the ultimate college pup! Living with me in Eugene, she loved the attention of college guys and was an unofficial fraternity house dog." Sophia describes her as spunky, full of love, and an absolute snuggle bug.

"Other than spending time with family, I love to listen to audiobooks and do art as well as working out and hanging out with my super awesome siblings and boyfriend," she shares. A recent University of Oregon graduate, she's a big Oregon Ducks fan and sports enthusiast. "I love to watch all different sports. My stepdad jokingly calls me ESPN because of all the sports facts and knowledge I have. I'm also a huge motorsports fan, and I grew up a big car geek because of my dad."

The Power of Playing Together

Her experiences in school, sports and everyday life have given Sophia a broad perspective on what it means to truly be included.

"I know what it is like to enter a space and realize that the people who designed it never considered someone like me," she says. "I also know the difference it can make when someone does." That understanding is central to her work with Magical Bridge.

Sophia believes Magical Bridge parks offer value beyond the people who directly use accessible features.

"I want my brother to grow up with people with diverse abilities and experiences," she says. "It is incredibly valuable to have a community space where truly everyone can go."

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Sophia with her stepfather Chris Caren, mother Melissa Caren, and father Robert Henderson at her college graduation. Photo provided by Sophia Henderson.

She believes that when children with different abilities play together naturally, it changes how communities understand disability. The more people see individuals with disabilities participating in everyday community life, the more those experiences become normalized.

"The more we see different types of people in our communities and using our spaces, the more society starts to realize the importance and value that each individual can bring," she says.

That is what makes Magical Bridge different, in her view. It is not a playground designed for one particular group. "It is a place where grandparents can comfortably play with their grandchildren, where children with and without disabilities naturally play together, where families from different backgrounds gather, and where everyone feels welcome. Accessibility and inclusion do not take anything away from a community—they strengthen it."

Last year, Sophia was part of an effort to bring a Magical Bridge park to Atherton. Although the effort had funding and community support, it ultimately was not successful.

"Atherton residents with disabilities do exist, and they deserve to feel that their community was built with them in mind," she says.

Rather than seeing that setback as the end of the conversation, Sophia sees it as another reason to keep advocating.

Finding Her Voice

Sophia's experiences eventually became both a personal and academic area of study. At the University of Oregon, she studied sociology and minored in Disability Studies, graduating in June 2026 summa cum laude and earning induction into Phi Beta Kappa.

"I became fascinated with disability, education, accessibility, and the ways that environments and systems can either create barriers or remove them," she says.

She now hopes to build a career that combines her education, professional experience, and lived experience to help organizations think differently about accessibility and the people they are designing for.

Her work with Best Buddies also reinforced that belief. As president of a local chapter her senior year, she helped a student with disabilities join the swim team.

Sophia counts disability rights pioneer Judy Heumann among the people who inspire her most, admiring her willingness to be bold while also listening to people whose experiences differ from her own.

"Part of being a disability advocate is not only advocating for your own disability and for yourself, but knowing when to take a step back and listen," Sophia says. "Amplifying other people's voices and experiences is just as important."

For Sophia, inclusion is ultimately about being able to participate in ordinary life without wondering whether there is a place for you. She loves walking, or "rolling," through her Atherton neighborhood, seeing people out and about and striking up conversations at block parties. She hopes to keep finding ways to connect with people and make sure others have those same opportunities.

"Everyone deserves and has the right to be included and participate in communities in their own way," she says.

Magical Bridge parks have been built in Palo Alto, Sunnyvale, Santa Clara, Redwood City, and other Bay Area and worldwide locations, with a current proposal to bring one to the Foothill College campus. To find a map of locations visit www.magicalbridge.org.



