

LOS GATOS

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An exclusive magazine serving the residents of Los Gatos
The Heart of Los Gatos

Living

The Yu Family:

Love, Support,
and Celebrating
Differences



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Photo by Hyunah Jang

THE MAGICAL BRIDGE FOUNDATION:

"Our journey starts with a mom, two daughters and a playground need."

By Genevieve Laucher, Photos by Magical Bridge Foundation

It was only after the birth of her second daughter that Olenka Villarreal discovered how isolating a playground could be. A place which brought joy and community connections with her older daughter had become a dreaded outing when she realized there were no parks designed for families like her own. A family, who had two children with very different needs.

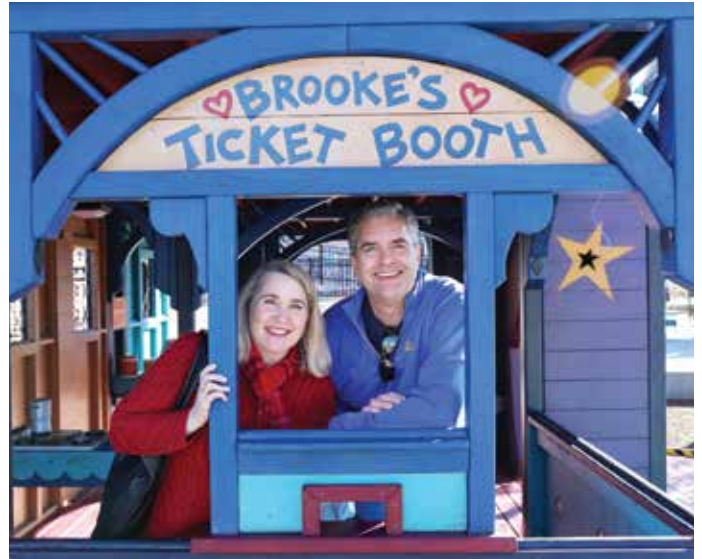
Determined to create the kind of outdoor space that both her disabled and non-disabled daughters (and all their friends!) would love, she mobilized a team of volunteers to fulfill a dream to create such a place. While she found many playgrounds designed for the disabled population, none brought visitors of every age and ability group together in the welcoming way she envisioned.

For seven years, Olenka and her team continued to dream, research and raise funds necessary to create a new kind of playground in Palo Alto, California, called Magical Bridge. The playground opened to great enthusiasm, and today, Kindness Ambassadors roam the park and welcome over 25,000 visitors monthly who come to experience a sense of belonging and fun.

With longtime friend and public relations executive Jill Asher, Olenka created Magical Bridge Foundation as a non-profit organization in 2016. Since then, the success of the playground has inspired an awareness that today's parks leave far too many behind, including our aging population and those living with visible and invisible disabilities.

Magical Bridge Playgrounds in Palo Alto and Redwood City are open to the public. The Foundation is also working to open Magical Bridge Playground in Morgan Hill (opening to the public in Fall 2021), Sunnyvale (opening to the public in early 2022), and plans to begin construction in Mountain View in 2022 with an opening in early 2023.

The need for additional support of Magical Bridge Playground coming to Santa Clara. The playground project urgently in need



of support in the Bay Area is Magical Bridge Playground coming to Santa Clara's Central Park. Announced right before COVID in late 2019, and as you can imagine, fundraising came to halt. A \$4.5M project, the Foundation is looking to raise the remaining raise approximately \$600k to fully fund the playground and begin construction. The majority of the funding has come from the City of Santa Clara (\$1.8M) and Santa Clara County All Inclusive Playground Grant (\$1.7M). Over 500 individual donors have also stepped up and generously given to this community project which will bring joy, happiness, and inclusion to all who will visit. Once opened to the public, it will welcome everyone and every BODY.

What makes a Magical Bridge Playground welcome for absolutely everyone, at every stage of life? The first of its kind, Magical Bridge Playgrounds are intentionally and mindfully designed to meet the needs of everyone, including the 1-in-4 of us living with visible or invisible disabilities. Heralded as the nation's most innovative





and inclusive playground, Magical Bridge thoughtfully considers the needs of those living with cognitive and physical disabilities, autism, sensory challenges, visual and auditory impairments, the medically fragile, and even our aging population. In short, we are NOT a special needs playground – rather, we are a playground for everyone and everybody, at every stage of life. Our intergenerational, fun, and safe playgrounds are:

100% INCLUSIVE

- » Distinct play zones designed to accommodate everyone.
- » Retreat spaces for those needing a break from play.
- » Smooth, seamless pathways and surfacing.
- » Wheelchair access to a two-story playhouse, treehouse and top of a slide mound.

100% INNOVATIVE

- » Far surpasses the minimum ADA requirements.
- » disabilities, and leading landscape architects.
- » Surprising and innovative features such as an artist-designed 24-string laser harp, whimsical artwork, seamless turf, custom wooden structures for tactile and visual impact, and many others.

100% ENRICHING

- » Outdoor play is the foundation for physical development, as well as social-emotional lessons such as cooperation, sharing, problem solving and kindness. Without inclusive playgrounds, many families do not have a place to bring their children to play.
- » Everyone in a community benefits from the elimination of social stigmas and prejudices, and this naturally happens when people of all abilities have the chance to play together.

INVESTING IN THE HEALTH AND WELL BEING OF YOUR COMMUNITY

Play in the United States over the last century has gone from being almost exclusively an outdoor activity to one that is often situated indoors in front of televisions and computers. Research shows that children who play outdoors regularly are happier, healthier, and stronger — and this leads to happier, healthier, and stronger adults.

Magical Bridge Foundation is dedicated to designing and building inspiring, innovative, and inclusive playgrounds that improve the physical, social, emotional and mental health of everyone in the community, including our youth, our aging population, the most vulnerable, and the disabled.

ALIGNING WITH COMMUNITY HEALTH INITIATIVES

With its message of kindness and inclusion, a Magical Bridge Playground in Santa Clara will be place where everyone can experience the health benefits of outdoor play. It will also be a thriving gathering place for everyone living in, working and visiting Santa Clara.,

Why is it so important that everyone can play together in Santa Clara?

Outdoor play helps maintain physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being for us all. By giving everyone with and without disabilities a chance to play together, inclusive spaces serve as joyful incubator of a more tolerant and kind society, in which everyone can participate equally and enjoy equal opportunities to flourish.

At Magical Bridge Playground, everyone can experience the benefits of outdoor play, which:

- » Increases physical activity
- » Improves cardiovascular and gross motor skills
- » Promotes increased blood flow to the brain, leading to cognitive development
- » Improves concentration
- » Nurtures self-discipline
- » Reduces symptoms of ADHD and ADD
- » Improves and teaches vocabulary
- » Increases the body’s vitamin D levels
- » Enhances negotiation skills
- » Reduces anxiety and improving mood
- » Improves concentration and focus
- » Enhances imaginative and creative play
- » Promotes problem solving
- » Develops stronger immune systems
- » Builds self-esteem and confidence

Not just for children, regular exercise and play for the aging population helps to:

- » Prevent falls and fractures
- » Improve coordination and balance
- » Reduce the risk of strokes, heart disease, and some cancers
- » Lessen cognitive decline
- » Control obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure

Inclusive play develops a true understanding of the world, encourages appreciation of the differences between people, and more importantly, recognizes the similarities that underlie them.



The Yu Family:

Love, Support, and Celebrating Differences



By Genevieve Laucher, Photos by Hyunah Jang

The Yu family has been in Los Gatos since 2013 and enjoy being part of this wonderful community. David and Dorothy have two children, Sophia and Stephen. Since Sophia's autism diagnosis, she has gotten a lot of great support from local organizations.

David is from Cupertino and Dorothy is originally from Stockton. They met while both living and working in the Bay Area and moved to Los Gatos shortly after getting married. David's parents still live in Cupertino, so it's great being close to family. David works in tech and Dorothy works in healthcare. Their daughter Sophia is four years and nine months old, and their son Stephen is two and a half years old.

Sophia was always a happy, quiet baby. She slept through the night and hardly cried. As Sophia got a little bit older, David and Dorothy noticed that she didn't speak as much as other children her age, but they figured that every child is different. However, their friend and neighbor told them that she suspected that Sophia was exhibiting signs of autism. One sign was that Sophia walked on her tippy toes, which was a sensory issue when she didn't like the texture of certain floors. Other signs included avoiding eye contact and having a higher pain tolerance.

David and Dorothy had Sophia evaluated through the San Andreas Regional Center (SARC) and eventually she was diagnosed with autism by the Kaiser Autism Center in May 2019. Autism is diagnosed at three levels, with level 3 being the most severe and level 1 the least. Sophia was diagnosed at level 2, meaning that she would need support but can still do many things on her own. David and Dorothy began their search for the private services to support Sophia's needs, and feel lucky with the ones she has today.

Sophia has a busy schedule, attending a half day inclusive preschool daily, ABA therapy daily (the most common therapy for autism), occupational therapy to help with her sensory needs weekly, and speech therapy weekly. Since Sophia's diagnosis, Dorothy and David have learned a lot about the issues she faces. For example, they learned that there are seven senses, not just five. The vestibular sense deals with movement, space, and balance. Learning to walk and run was hard for Sophia because of this sensory issue. Another lesser-known sense is the proprioceptive sense, which deals with understanding the sensation of muscles and joints.



Sensory issues are not always tied to autism, but in Sophia’s case, all of the senses have had challenges in one way or another. She is picky with the taste and texture of her food, and even with touch, she prefers a quick bear hug to a light, gentle hug from her dad and only tolerates some affection from her mom. She hasn’t been able to go to the local parks because of her issues with balance, the rough tanbark, and safety (elopement concerns). However, her occupational therapist has different equipment that is safe for Sophia and helps her work on her physical movement. Dorothy and David have also converted their living room into a playground for sensory needs with an indoor slide, crash pad, trampoline, and sensory swing.

Stephen’s development has been ahead of the curve, and he’s already running and tumbling around and can sing and mimic songs and videos. He can already throw and catch a ball, which Sophia is learning to do, and she also copies the way he crawls around. While Sophia and Stephen are night and day in terms of development, Sophia is making a lot of progress and Dorothy and David are glad that she started getting support at a very young age.

Despite her challenges, Sophia has a lot of strengths. She is very friendly and happy, always waving to people and saying hi. Sophia is also really good at puzzles and has a great memory. She can count to ten in Mandarin, Spanish, French, and Japanese. She likes routines, so David and Dorothy have to be sure to introduce any new things to her in a fun way. Sophia also loves music. She falls asleep to classical music and can identify different composers. She likes listening to pop music like BTS on her way to preschool. She is taking a summer music class at Cultivate Music Studio in San Jose to help build attention and self-expression through exploration of musical instruments, singing, and creative movement and might be interested in playing piano when she gets a little older. Music helps stimulate both hemispheres of the brain and encourages communication and social skills through interactions with others, which is something that autistic children have difficulty with. Music also helps with sensory needs, behavior, motor skills and self-determination.

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Some of the things that bother Sophia include flashing lights and sounds with higher frequencies (e.g., vacuum, blender, drill, leaf blower, etc.). In occupational therapy, she is currently working on a program to help her through the sounds that upset her. She attends occupational therapy at Sensory Solutions in Los Gatos, where director Teri Jetter offers a sound therapy program where Sophia listens to different types of music, gets used to different sounds, and it also helps lengthen her attention span. Listening through sound-based interventions plays a vital role in the sensory integration process for those with sensory processing difficulties. Recently, Sophia was able to stay calm through an unexpected fire drill at her preschool, something that would have upset her in the past.

David and Dorothy discovered the Magical Bridge Foundation through one of Sophia's classmates, who was doing a fundraiser for the park. When they looked into it, they became very interested and are now fundraising as well and have received donations from many generous friends and family. The Magical Bridge Foundation builds playgrounds that are inclusive for all children. There are already playgrounds in Palo Alto and Redwood City with several others currently being built around the Bay Area, including one in Santa Clara. The Santa Clara playground is not yet fully funded, and

the Yu family wants to help make it possible for Sophia and so many other children.

Magical Bridge playgrounds are so special because of their safety and sensitivity to sensory needs. The ground is a rubber material that kids can slide and tumble on without getting hurt. The park is enclosed to make sure kids stay safe and prevent kids from eloping. The creators have been very thoughtful about every feature and how to make it inclusive. For example, the bottom of the slide has a seating position for a child who needs to be helped into a wheelchair. Neurotypical kids can play there too; it's fun for everyone. The Palo Alto location even has summer concerts and a big playhouse in the middle.

While Sophia is busy with her services, it's also important that the things she does are fun. Her preschool has provided a lot of great social interaction, which Sophia enjoys, and she's been enjoying her music class and occupational therapy as well. Dorothy and David are grateful to have these supports right here in the community!

To learn more about the Magical Bridge Foundation, visit www.magicalbridge.org and the Yu family's fundraising page at <https://bit.ly/MagicalBridge4Sophia>.

COMMUNITY INTEREST

Los Gatos Fall Wine Walk

By Randi Chen

The Los Gatos Spring Wine Walk is being held on Saturday, October 2 in downtown Los Gatos from 1:00-4:00pm. Close to 30 wineries will be pouring tastes in the Los Gatos boutiques and restaurants. You will taste wines from Santa Clara Valley, Santa Cruz, Morgan Hill and Livermore. Restaurants will offer small bites, as you taste and shop your way down Main Street, N. Santa Cruz Avenue and Old Town. Some of the wineries in attendance are Testarossa, Left Bend, Fortino, Gali Vineyards, Bargetto, Roudon-Smith and many more! Boutiques and wineries are offering specials for the day. Great music up and down the street. Enjoy a unique downtown, great wine and fabulous shopping!

Tickets - \$50 at losgatoschamber.com, \$55 day of tickets if available.

Must be 21 or older to participate. Event will be held rain or shine

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