



JESSA GAGNE WAS BECOMING CONCERNED.

At 18 months old, her son, Maverick, had hardly made a sound. He could understand what his mom, dad and older sister, Lily, were saying, but he wasn't babbling and only made noise through his nose.

Often children with speech delays will get frustrated or upset. Maverick never did. An easygoing child by nature, he was content playing with his dinosaurs, trucks and trains and was curious about the world around him.

After qualifying for an early intervention program, Maverick began speech therapy. By the time he turned 3, when he was ready to start a public preschool program, he was still 99 percent dependent on body and sign language and only saying some beginning letter sounds. "It was much more of a concern at this point because the gap kept growing instead of closing. At 18 months, he was only a little behind, but at 3, he was significantly behind," says Gagne, who works as the energy manager at Stonehill.

From initial testing, Gagne learned that Maverick's receptive language—how he understood language—was above normal, but his expressive language—how he used words to express himself—was in the first percentile. She didn't know if her young son would learn to talk.

During the height of COVID-19, when many schools were following remote schedules, Maverick, who was considered high needs, began daily, in-person preschool at Palmer River Elementary School in Rehoboth. At the same time, Gagne was researching a speech program to supplement Maverick's in-school therapy and found Prestige Therapy in East Providence, Rhode Island.

Little did Gagne know that the two people she would meet at Palmer and Prestige would have a profound impact on Maverick and have a meaningful connection to Stonehill.

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Tayla Zammarelli '14, a speech-language pathologist at Prestige, works with children ages 2-12 with a variety of needs such as articulation, phonology, language, fluency, apraxia of speech and autism. "When I first started seeing Maverick, he presented with a phonological disorder, which is a speech-sound disorder that can greatly impact overall speech intelligibility," Zammarelli explains.

As she and Gagne shared early registration forms, Zammarelli noticed Gagne's Stonehill email address and asked about her connection. "Tayla told me that she went to Stonehill," recalls Gagne, who has worked at Stonehill for 10 years. "I appreciated that we had something in common. It automatically gave me a comfort level."

Due to COVID restrictions at Palmer River Elementary, Gagne hadn't often seen Maverick's teacher, Cirissa (Woods) Scott '03, in person. One afternoon during pickup, Gagne was able to say a quick thank you for her work. Scott also asked Gagne about her Stonehill email.



SHARED PURPOSE Through speech therapy and an early intervention program, Tayla Zammarelli '14 [left] and Cirissa (Woods) Scott '03 helped Maverick develop his speech.

This is when Gagne learned that Scott, too, was a Stonehill alumna. She was struck by the coincidence that both people who were helping her young son were graduates of the College. But it wasn't until Maverick started to progress in his speech that she felt a deeper appreciation for both alumni and to her employer.

Candy and the Playground

Every Friday afternoon, Zammarelli would meet with Maverick and play games as part of his speech therapy. "He was extremely polite, cooperative and hardworking. He would always get excited when I'd introduce a new game or toy," says Zammarelli.

At school, Scott, a special education teacher, worked with Maverick on developing social skills affected by his speech delay, such as greeting people and participating during circle time. "As he would practice his articulation skills and we could understand him at an increasing rate, Maverick was able to see the fruits of his labor. This made him want to contribute more to classroom discussions and engage with his peers," says Scott.

Within a few months of working with Zammarelli and Scott, Maverick was saying short sentences. "He sounded like a 3-year-old, singing songs and reciting the alphabet," says Gagne. "I would never have guessed he could have gone that far in such a short period of time. Tayla and Cirissa adapted to him, and he adapted to them."

Gagne recalls a particularly poignant moment during a family vacation that spring. “We asked the kids what they wanted to do one day. For the first time, Maverick was able to share an opinion,” Gagne recalls. “He wanted to get candy and go to a playground. Up until that point, he hadn’t been able to articulate an opinion. It was definitely an ‘I’m not crying, you’re crying’ moment.”

Paths to Maverick

While their starting point was at Stonehill, different paths brought Zammarelli and Scott to Maverick.

As an undergraduate, Zammarelli knew she wanted to pursue a career in speech pathology, but at the time, the College didn’t have a major or minor in the area. [Stonehill introduced a speech-language minor in 2017.] So Zammarelli created her own path, majoring in interdisciplinary studies and minoring in healthcare administration. Working closely with Assistant Professor of Biology Sheila Barry, she chose classes that focused on speech-language pathology and completed two internships in the field.

“Through these internships, I gained the necessary experience and skills that gave me an edge before beginning graduate school. They also confirmed my desire to become a speech-language pathologist,” recalls Zammarelli, who cofounded the speech and language club on campus, which continues to thrive.

After graduation, Zammarelli earned a master of science degree at Sacred Heart University and then an advanced graduate certificate in pediatric dysphagia from New York Medical College.

Scott was an early childhood education major and sociology minor. With master’s degrees from Lesley University and Bridgewater State University and a license in special education, Scott has been working in the Dighton-Rehoboth Regional School District for 10 years.

She continues to call on an early lesson learned in one of her education courses at Stonehill. “The professor explained how ‘fair is not equal’ in education, meaning that different students need different levels of support in order to succeed,” she recalls. “These discussions have stuck with me throughout my career when I’ve had to advocate for my students’ needs.”

Kind, Loud and Sticky

Maverick is now 4 and in preschool. He tells people that he lives in a house that is “kind, loud and sticky.”

While no longer in Scott’s class, he still sees Zammarelli each week. “I would have never guessed Maverick could go this far,” says Gagne. “He talks to other kids and has a different life ahead of him because of his work with Tayla and Cirissa and the way they connected with him. I hope they can see what they’ve brought my family.”

In Gagne’s role as an energy manager at the College, she doesn’t have a lot of interaction with faculty and students, so

she admits that she doesn’t always get to see the “outcome of what happens in the classroom here.”

“I have a job I love at a place I love, but I could never have imagined in a million years that the biggest gift I would receive from Stonehill would be that Stonehill alumni would help my son find his voice,” Gagne reflects. “The purpose of this college is to change lives. And it changed our life.”

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What is an energy manager?

HIRED AS THE COLLEGE’S FIRST ENERGY MANAGER in 2012, Jessa Gagne [above with Maverick] is responsible for the implementation and operation of Stonehill’s energy management system, identifying and evaluating energy conservation measures, monitoring utility consumption and troubleshooting problems.

A member of the Environmental Stewardship Council, Gagne manages both the Green Fund, which is used for student-led sustainability initiatives, and the distribution of Green Kits for first-year students.

“I might be one of the only people on campus who is happy when their budget is reduced,” says Gagne of her work. “Every dollar I save is much better spent on the mission of the College.”