

# Hoping Forward

Whitney opens opportunities for disabled adult community

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Approximately one out of every 10 people in Coweta county live with a physical or intellectual disability. But most days, you won't see them downtown or grocery shopping. And there's a reason why.

Lori Whitney, founder of Hoping Forward and mother to a disabled adult, knows why. Limited support, funding, opportunity and transportation ushers in a life of isolation.

Most 22-year-olds see the world as their oyster—a stark contrast to their disabled peers. Disabled students can legally stay in the public school system until they are 22. Public schools provide more than education for the disabled population. Many receive speech, occupational or physical therapy, and social interaction. After graduation, they're on their own.

Limited federal and state funding for therapy and day programs can be yanked at a moment's notice. That's what happened to many families in Georgia who lost state funding during COVID-19 shutdowns.

"A friend at church shared with me that her sister, for whom she's a caregiver and guardian, had all her funding cut," Whitney said. "She went from (a) five days a week day program to nothing. During COVID-19, so much was given to so many, but for those with disabilities, it was taken away. It's very common and they don't have a whole lot of power."

## How Hoping Forward started

Lori met her future daughter, Sarah, while teaching in China. In 2010, Lori adopted Sarah and brought her home to Newnan. Together, they learned how to navigate life in the U.S. as a disabled person.

In 2019, the course of Lori's life began moving away from a longstanding career and into serving the adult disabled community of Coweta county. After a year of unemployment, compounded by the pandemic in 2020, she slowly started Hoping Forward Hangouts after seeing her daughter's mental health decline due to isolation from COVID-19.

"Sarah was a 2020 grad, and her mental health suffered because all of a sudden, she was so isolated," said Whitney.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of adults in Georgia with disabilities who experience depression is 43 percent. For adults without disabilities, it's around 10 percent. Many people, disabled or not, experienced mental health challenges due to isolation during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Some bounced back, but for others, it's been a long road to recovery.

However, for the disabled community, there's often no light at the end of the tunnel.

"I think it's really important for people to realize that the isolation they experienced in COVID-19 is the entire life of an adult with disabilities," Whitney said. "We knew in COVID-19 it wouldn't last forever. But for a disabled adult, there's no indication isolation will end unless they have somebody in their life willing to provide opportunities to socialize."

After exploring a few ideas and seeing the direct impact of isolation on her own daughter's mental health, Hoping Forward Hangouts emerged.

It's a gathering place to hang out, eat pizza and have fun.

The Hangouts quickly caught on. For some who joined, Hoping Forward was a lifeline. For one young man, it was his first venture outside his home in a year and a half. Another woman hadn't left her house in three years.

Today, Hoping Forward has grown into a three-day-per-week adult day program, weekly hangouts and an adaptive sports program in partnership with the City of Newnan's Department of Leisure Services.

The goal of Hoping Forward is to provide social opportunities to adults with physical and intellectual disabilities to help improve mental, physical and emotional health. It's open to anyone disabled 18 and over.

## Value in the community

The Hoping Forward day program provides opportunities for participants to serve in Coweta County, giving them purpose and serving simultaneously.

Jenny Simmonds, member experience director of the Summit Family YMCA, said she is grateful for the service Hoping Forward adults provide.

"Their volunteerism at the YMCA has saved us several hours of preparation work for our Veterans' Expo and grand opening of Lynch Park Pool," she said. "They are an incredible group that continues to make an impact on Coweta through volunteerism. Our community is better because of them."

In addition to serving at the YMCA, Hoping Forward participants help fill food pantries in Newnan, set up for Wednesday service at SonRise Church and lend a hand at Sisters for Society. Each week, they serve eight to 10 hours a week in the Coweta community.

Kavian Baker, the founder of Sisters for Society, said he has enjoyed having the Hoping Forward community serve in her organization for nearly two years.

“Hoping Forward is absolutely amazing,” Baker said. “I’m so excited to see them when they come to volunteer. I enjoy them all. They all have their own unique personality and know how to complete the tasks assigned. I love what they stand for, as they truly are able to serve. It may look a little different but they get it done. Their disabilities do not define them. I believe what Lori is doing with this group is amazing and gives them hope and dignity through their acts of service.”

“God created each and every one of us and we’re all different. They’re not less valuable than anybody else. They give so much joy to everybody who volunteers with them. And it fulfills them with purpose and value,” Whitney said.

## Opportunities with Hoping Forward

Thanks to a grant from ARPA, Hoping Forward has scholarships available for day program.

“Don’t let money be a barrier to reaching out,” said Whitney, who said she is always looking for a way to help those in need.

If you’d like to support Hoping Forward, there are numerous ways.

“We are always looking for volunteers to lead an event during our Hoping Forward Hangouts,” Whitney said.

Past events have included art classes, manicure nights, karaoke, bingo and magic shows.

Tuesday evenings always include a pizza dinner, a favorite among the adults who come. Hangouts are free, including the pizza. Hoping Forward welcomes anyone who’d like to sponsor a pizza dinner. The organization accepts donations of items like Gatorade for sports and art supplies for projects as well.

For information on volunteering, attending or donating to Hoping Forward, email at [lori.r.whitney@gmail.com](mailto:lori.r.whitney@gmail.com).