



**GALWAY AUTISM PARTNERSHIP
CREATES A NEW SPACE FOR
FAMILIES LIVING WITH AUTISM.**

A PLACE TO GO

“WHEN WE LEFT WITH OUR DIAGNOSIS, WE GOT A FEW LEAFLETS AND WE WENT HOME,” REMEMBERS MIRIAM JENNINGS, CHAIRPERSON OF GALWAY AUTISM PARTNERSHIP. “NOBODY CALLED, NOBODY ASKED, ‘ARE YOU OKAY? HOW ARE YOU MANAGING WITH THIS?’ WE’VE HAD VERY DARK YEARS WITH ELLIOTT’S AUTISM. BUT NOW, THANKS TO GALWAY AUTISM PARTNERSHIP, IT’S DIFFERENT IN GALWAY.”



Thanks to a grassroots effort by parents in the Galway area, Galway Autism Partnership is providing support and information to families and individuals affected by autism spectrum disorders. Galway Autism Partnership (GAP) was formed in 2011 by parental volunteers and since then has increased access to services and provided a roadmap to families who once felt isolated and alone in their struggle to navigate the journey of the autism spectrum.

GAP now runs afterschool clubs, youth cafes for ages 11-14 and 14-18, summer camps, information workshops, and a monthly sensory-friendly cinema club where families can enjoy films in a sensitive environment. Assistance dogs are welcome and children are free to move around.

The Youth Cafes have been successful in creating safe and nurturing spaces where young people on the autism spectrum can find camaraderie and explore different interests. It is the members of the cafes who drive the agenda with opportunities for participants to share their interests whether they be film, computers, music or animation. Many people on the autistic spectrum have a particular hobby or interest that they are passionate about. So at a time when all teenagers struggle with acceptance and identity, the chance to shine and share has been a game-changing experience for the teenagers with autism that attend.

"It was difficult at first socializing. And then when I entered here it just all changed completely," explains Liam Weldon, one of the teens that attends the GAP Youth Cafes. "Now, it's just a new me." Liam's mom Sylvia confirms the changes that GAP has brought to Liam and her family. "It used to be he would walk around after school and come home. Now he's got a better social life than any of us. He has loads of friends now, absolutely loads. He's transformed." Liam now works with younger children who attend GAP and has become a mentor for many who see his progress.

A hallmark of GAP is that they acknowledge and support families and individuals on all parts of the autism spectrum. They are clear that they are not offering therapy services, but family support. "It's extremely challenging trying to facilitate everybody on the spectrum," says Miriam. "But we make a really good go of that. It's not about one type of autism. It's not about my children's autism, it's about recognizing all of the aspects and so we have learned so much about each other's autism."

Galway Autism Partnership receives no funding from the state and relies entirely on fundraising and donations. Support from The Ireland Funds sustained the Youth Cafes program for a portion of 2013. With 3 part-time staff and a team of 45 volunteers, GAP continues to create awareness in local schools, support families with resources and local information, and most importantly, create a space for young people where they can simply be themselves and be affirmed. "I had no friends in primary school, except for one," remembers Disen Coughlin, GAP Youth Cafés Participant. "When I first came here it reinforced my understanding that I like to be by myself. I was always just trying not to be myself most of the time, because it mostly got me bullied in school. Here, I can be me."

And so today, families in Galway such as Miriam's never have to leave a diagnosis with nothing but pamphlets and unanswered questions. "The minute you leave with your diagnosis, Galway Autism Partnership has established the networks," says Miriam. "It's not the end of the world."

I'M STILL HERE. I'M STILL ALIVE. I CAN STILL GET UP IN THE MORNING. IT'S A NEW COMMUNITY."