

# Howard Center's Zoe's Race

HOW A FAMILY USED THEIR TRAGEDY TO HELP OTHERS



**I**n 2004, Erika Nestor's life changed forever. Today, she's using the incident all parents fear as the impetus to help others.

Her daughter Zoe, just a baby at the time, nearly drowned in a backyard pond. The incident reduced oxygen to her brain for so long that although she survived, she was left severely disabled. She needed a wheelchair, a tracheotomy, and a feeding tube. Nestor says she likely wouldn't have survived were it not for modern medicine.

The one-and-a-half-year-old and her family lived in a hospital in Vermont for two weeks, then were transferred to a facility in Boston for nearly a year. When they were able to return home, they knew they'd need help in their own community.

## IMPROVING ACCESS

They turned to Howard Center, a community-based mental health, substance use, and developmental services provider funded mostly

by the state of Vermont. It has served Vermont since 1865 and is the largest center in the state. When it first started, its mission was to help women and children after the Civil War and since then has grown and changed to meet community needs. Its substance use services have grown enormously in the past few years as the opioid epidemic rages on. But what led the Nestor family to Howard Center is its work providing support for children and adults with developmental disabilities.







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“Everything that we needed for Zoe was provided for, except for making the house accessible for the wheelchair,” says Erika. “We had a house where the front door was three steps to get into the house. If you came in through the garage, there were steps to come in. There was really no easy access.”

### UNEXPECTED BARRIERS

Erika explains that everyday things that people wouldn't normally think of became enormous problems. For instance, there are bumps in the flooring between rooms that impede wheelchairs; bathrooms often don't have space for a person in a wheelchair to comfortably turn around; showers with tubs have to be replaced.

At first, Zoe was small enough so they could carry her, but of course, they knew that wouldn't be the case forever. They started remodeling the house around 2006. They needed ramps, door frame adjustments, bathroom renovations, and so on. Once it was done, the quality of life for the family improved significantly. But it was expensive, something many families wouldn't be able to afford. Erika wanted to change that.

At first, she hoped to be on the show Survivor so she could win enough money to start a non-profit helping others pay for ADA-friendly home renovations needed for children with disabilities. But unfortunately, that didn't work out.

One day, she was running with a friend and brainstorming how to make their goals come to fruition, and the idea of a 5K came up. So, Erika reached out to Cathie Buscaglia, now Howard Center's director of innovation, and pitched the idea for a race. Cathie recognized



the need and how this idea could benefit many Howard Center families. Zoe's Race was born.

**ZOE'S RACE**

The results have been incredible.

The first race was in 2009. This year's was supposed to be the 14th, but they had to pause during the pandemic, so it'll be the 12th.

"There was a focus right from the get-go that I wanted the day to be very happy and very upbeat," says Erika. "The race has kind of a festival atmosphere to it. We have a band that plays, lots of food there. It's a really happy day!"

Today, Zoe is 19 years old, and the race has grown dramatically. So far, it's raised \$250,000 over 11 years. That money has been used to complete 32 projects for local families.

Zoe's Race starts with a children's 1K fun run around the park. "The little kids are so fun to watch. Some of them are in strollers, some have walkers—but anyone can do the 1k. Mom or Dad can hold their hand."

Next, the longer races start. There's a 5K walk/run for anyone who wants to participate. Recently, they also added a scenic 10K race along Lake Champlain. The 1K is free, and the other two include a sign-up fee. Howard Center combines the money earned from the participants with fundraising, donations, and sponsorships to help make homes accessible.

"It's been really rewarding," says Erika. "The families that apply, most of them are Howard Center clients. The other interesting thing is, if they're not Howard Center clients and they're applying, they are likely eligible, and they just weren't aware that Howard Center was available to them. So it's been nice in that way, too, providing that connection for people in the community with Howard Center. And then, just improving the quality of life for these families—it's huge."

Zoe's Race is August 28 this year at Oakledge Park in Burlington.

**Howard Center**

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howardcenter.org

howardcenter.org/zoes-race-2022

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