myFace minute

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A Conga Line, Capes and a Community That Showed Up



The winners of the Most Spirited Team Award, Molly's Marvels—looking marvelous!

Not even a nor'easter could dampen the enthusiasm of the nearly 250 people who gathered on September 27 in the Riverside Church Assembly Hall to celebrate Races for Faces. The stormy weather necessitated relocating the 5K from Pier 62, but our annual fundraiser was still a huge success, raising $165,000 to date in support of myFace programming and community-building events.

For myFace Executive Director Bill Villafranco, the event reflects something central to the organization's work.

> "People with facial differences are often judged by appearance before anyone gets to know them. At myFace, our responsibility is to challenge those assumptions and listen to people with facial differences about what matters to them."

The atmosphere was joyfully chaotic. Host Paige Billiot brought everyone into the celebration, leading a conga line and taking photos with families throughout the day. Six-year-old Harlyn Mauriello stepped in to sing the national anthem when the scheduled performer was unable to travel, while DJ Shak kept the party going alongside carnival games, spin art, and some very popular puppies from the Cleft Rescue Unit.

And the 2026 Grand Marshals showed just how determined the myFace community can be. Twins Ariana and Anaira traveled from Texas after their parents rescheduled their flight to beat the storm. Molly and her "Molly's Marvels" arrived in homemade capes and shirts, and Max Singer and his daughter Lily joined the celebration from Chappaqua.

For Ariana and Anaira, the day was about much more than a race.

> "Being a part of myFace gives us a community where we don't have to fear judgment," Ariana shared. "We can express ourselves and grow into confident young women."
>
> Anaira said, "When times are rough, and those wings of hope won't let you fly, you can find warmth under the wing of another because nobody has to be alone."

That spirit is what has kept Races for Faces going for 14 years.

Races for Faces brings people with facial differences, their families, and friends together to walk, catch up, meet someone new, and enjoy being together. We want everyone who joins us to feel comfortable showing up as themselves—and to carry that spirit of acceptance with them beyond the day.

Artist Samantha Bennett felt that same sense of connection.

> "The rain moved us indoors, but nothing could dampen the love in that room," she shared. "What my family would have given to have a community like this when I was growing up."

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Paige Billiot is getting into the spirit.



Artist, Samantha Bennett and her husband Jason Bennett holding CRU pup, Lily.



Grand Marshals Anaira and Ariana delivering their moving speeches.



Dina Zuckerberg with our dedicated volunteers.

Camp Chi: Fun in the Wisconsin Dells

In late August, eleven families joined myFace at JCC Chicago's Camp Chi in Lake Delton, Wisconsin, for a very special family camp weekend. The weekend was supported by myFace staff Jackie Smith, Rena Rosen, and Bill Villafranco with help from two community volunteers who themselves have a facial difference.

Nerves almost got the better of some families, but by Sunday, those same families didn't want to leave.

> "My heart is so full and I'm so grateful for all the new friendships we have made,"

shared Edna Guerrero, mother of two-year-old Xiomara.

Three children had undergone medical procedures or surgery shortly before arriving at camp, but for a few days, all that mattered was that they got to be kids: swimming, water-skiing, riding horses, and making new friends.

Parents found their own connections, too. After spending the day trading stories about their children's journeys, they cheered one another up the rock wall that evening like old friends. Over dinner, families discovered unexpected connections— neighbors who were best friends, coworkers who turned out to share a cousin.

Camp Chi offered families more than a weekend away. It gave them a place to belong—and a community to carry home with them.



Emiliano, Cassidy, Bella and Xiomara snuggled up on a bench.



Camper Zach enjoying archery.

myFace Returns to Boggy Creek

In September, 33 families joined myFace staff members Naomi Levinshtein, Justin Stewart, Jackie Smith, and Bill Villafranco, at Camp Boggy Creek in Eustis, Florida, for a weekend of fun, excitement, and connection.

The weekend provided plentiful opportunities for attendees to both form new bonds and to reconnect with old friends.

Some of these connections were unexpected. Two attending families had adopted their children from India and had been speaking to each other online for years. Neither had any idea the other would be attending the family camp weekend and were overjoyed to have their virtual friendship come to life in person.

For staff and volunteers with lived experience, it was life-changing to be able to serve as role models for children who are walking the same journey.

Carla, mother to 9-year-old Eva, shared:

> "As Eva's mother, so much of this journey has been spent looking ahead... thinking of the next appointment, the next decision, the next stage, and all the things I wish I could protect her from. This weekend made me look at what was right in front of me instead: Joy. Belonging. Understanding. Community. Hope."



myFace staff members Justin and Naomi with campers Mia, her siblings and Teagan



Frank Coniglio and his camper Maksym enjoying camp tradition of eating spaghetti face first!

A Sweet End to Another School Year

On June 29, nearly 50 members of the myFace community gathered at Café Joyeux in Manhattan for the myFace Brotherhood's annual end-of-school-year Ice Cream Social.

Parents and other community members had time to catch up and build new connections over dessert while children enjoyed board games and coloring activities,

For Steve Samson, secretary of the myFace Brotherhood, events like this have helped him find his voice and become more comfortable as a leader.

"I used to be the guy that never made a fuss, that would sit quietly and be hesitant to speak his mind," he shared.

That growth was evident throughout the evening. Steve helped welcome guests and assisted at the registration table, taking an active role in making sure everyone felt at home.

> "Through the Brotherhood, Steve says, I have found responsibility, purpose, and tremendous pride."

The Ice Cream Social gave him another opportunity to step outside his comfort zone while helping create an evening that others could enjoy.



Taina, Franco, Steve, Pat, Naomi, Didi and Sean at Café Joyeux.

"I'm committed to making sure everyone has a good time and wants to come back," he said.

The evening also offered an opportunity to celebrate three graduates who were in attendance: Taina M., Didi D. , and Sean L. The myFace community is proud to celebrate this important milestone in their members' lives.

From ice cream and games to conversations and congratulations, the evening was a reminder of what the myFace Brotherhood—and the broader myFace community—can create when people come together.



myFace Brotherhood members Joe Dimeo and Steve Samson at the registration table.

Come As You Are—Leave Stronger Together

Twenty-two adults joined myFace in New York's Hudson Valley for a weekend centered on connection, community, and the shared experience of living with a facial difference.

Held at the Overlook Lodge at Bear Mountain Inn, the Adult Retreat offered something increasingly rare: time and space created specifically for adults in the myFace community. Participants explored topics including self-compassion, relationships, and friendship, while also making art, spending time outdoors, dancing, and simply enjoying being together.

For Lazer S., who traveled from Washington State, being surrounded by other adults who understood their experiences was especially meaningful.



Retreat Attendees Dina, Claudia, Ava, Lazer and Isabella

> "It's so important to have an adults-only event tailored to celebrating us and acknowledging some of the common struggles we face," they shared. "I could fully express the depth of my experiences and be surrounded by pure love."

That sense of understanding extended well beyond the retreat itself. As Lazer described returning home, leaving such a supportive environment could feel like "culture shock"—but the connection and empowerment they found there remained.

Wonder Academy: Bringing Community Voices to the Classroom

This August, myFace launched **Wonder Academy**, expanding the reach of the myFace Wonder Project by preparing community members to share its message of kindness, inclusion, empathy, and upstanding.

Fourteen participants, selected from 22 applicants for the inaugural cohort, gathered in New York, Chicago, and via Zoom for two days of learning, storytelling, and practice.

At the heart of Wonder Academy is a simple idea: lived experience can create change. Participants learned to shape their personal stories for the classroom, to engage students across ages and developmental stages, to navigate questions, and to help young people think differently about facial difference, inclusion, and how they treat one another.

Personal storytelling emerged as the most valued part of the training, but the experience also created an unexpected opportunity for authentic connection within the myFace community.

For some participants, Wonder Academy was their first introduction to myFace and their first opportunity to meet others who understand what it means to live with a facial difference.

As one participant shared,

> "It felt good to be in the room with others who understood my journey."



Another reflected,

> "All of us in this group were similar, yet we all have our own story and our own perspective."

Participants left the Academy with greater confidence in their role as Wonder Presenters—and with a stronger sense that their stories matter and that their voices can make a difference.





100 Cleft Portraits Tour: 12 Cities, Genuine Stories

Artist and mother Katie Manning uses art to create positive representation for people born with cleft. Inspired by her daughter, who was born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate, Katie created the *100 Cleft Portraits* project to celebrate the individuality, strength, and stories of people born with cleft lip and/or palate.

This fall, the portraits visited 12 cities, bringing families, healthcare providers, and community members together through art. myFace was proud to serve as a national sponsor alongside the American Cleft Palate Craniofacial Association (ACPA), Smile Train, Children's Mercy Kansas City, and the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation.

The tour launched in **Philadelphia**, where myFace staff members Justin Stewart, Jackie Smith, and Dina Zuckerberg joined families and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia craniofacial team.

"Being able to kick-start the tour in Philadelphia and meet the families represented in the paintings was truly magical. It was so joyous to watch the light in the faces of the families and children as they saw themselves represented. Watching, in real time, the impact Katie was able to create by sharing these families' stories was priceless," shared Jackie.

In **Winston-Salem**, Justin connected with families, healthcare professionals, and local cleft and craniofacial partners, including Suzanne Santomieri of Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist. In **Atlanta**, he met families and the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta team, including five-year-old Lizzie. The two hit it off immediately and are now officially pen pals.

"It was a sweet reminder of how meaningful these events can be, especially when kids get the chance to connect with someone who shares a similar experience," Justin shared.

In **Orlando**, Dan Elston represented myFace as families, medical students, and Nemours Children's Hospital staff gathered to experience the portraits and hear Katie speak about language, perception, and the experiences of patients, families, and providers.

The tour made two stops in **Chicago**: the Bernard Weinger JCC in Northbrook and Lurie Children's Hospital downtown. Nearly 70 people attended, including the



unveiling of a new portrait of Grayson Reeser and the moment Matteo Avalos discovered his own portrait.

For Mary Kate McGunn, a parent who attended, the experience offered a moment of seeing her daughter exactly as she is:

> "What a privilege it is to look at these faces and hold their stories all while holding my baby and for the first time really looking at her. My baby is beautiful with a cleft, with a scar, with EVERYTHING she is."



Katie agrees. "The biggest part was what happened around those exhibition spaces. It was watching families and their children walking into rooms and finding familiar faces or faces similar to their own displayed proudly. It was seeing parents meeting other parents and having conversations that perhaps they had needed for years. It was listening to adults who had been born with a cleft talk about the experiences they had carried for decades, sometimes finding words for things they had never spoken about before."

The tour showed what can happen when people are given space to see themselves, tell the truth about their experiences, and be witnessed without needing those experiences to be fixed or softened.

To see more of Katie's work, visit: https://www.katiemanning.co.uk/artwork-gallery.

myFace Celebrates Our Community 365 Days a Year!



Mary Avella: A Return to the Stage

I'm happy to announce that I will be playing Mrs. Jones, the Secretary, in the College of Staten Island's production of *Grease*. I'm super excited to be in this show. *Grease* is one of my favorite musicals, and I am obsessed with the movie. Returning to theater and singing feels like a safe haven in the rocky storm called life.



Didi Diallo: Onward & Upward

Hello everyone, my name is Didi Diallo. I graduated from St. John's University this past May with a degree in Marketing. My goal is to attend law school, and I am currently studying for the LSAT in preparation for the next step in my academic and professional journey. At the same time, I am enjoying my gap year by traveling, relaxing, and experiencing new things.



Jaimeson Pleasants: Work on Display

I am beyond honored to have researched historical artifacts and designed an exhibition and accompanying display box for the Textile Museum of Canada's Reflections: Collections and Cultures in Dialogue. My time as a graduate student at Toronto Metropolitan University has been incredibly meaningful, and I am grateful for the opportunities it has brought—as well as those still ahead—both before and after my graduation this spring.

Giving Their Time, Making a Difference: Thank you, King Alfred!

At myFace, we know the value of teamwork and community and would be nothing without the incredible volunteers who give their time, passion, and energy to bring our programs to life.

One shining example is NYU Dentistry student King Alfred, who has volunteered at Races for Faces for the past four years. He's hard to miss on race day. You can find him cheering loudly at the finish line, waving pom-poms, and making everyone feel seen and celebrated.

For King Alfred, volunteering is about showing up and making a difference in meaningful ways.

> "Races for Faces reminds me that making a difference doesn't always require grand gestures. Sometimes it's simply showing up, lending a helping hand, and contributing to a cause that creates lasting impact."

We're grateful to King Alfred for years of enthusiasm, energy, and dedication—and for helping make Races for Faces a celebration of community.



King Alfred leading the way.

Finding Community at myFace Is Beautiful, Chicago

Nearly 60 members of the Chicago myFace community gathered at You Are Beautiful headquarters on July 11 for the second annual myFace Is Beautiful event, created in partnership with myFace, You Are Beautiful, JCC Chicago, and local hospital and community partners.

Over the past two years, participants have created 120 custom “myFace Is Beautiful” boards. This year, artist Celena Leroy added a new self-portrait workshop, inviting participants to celebrate themselves through art.

But some of the most meaningful moments happened simply by meeting someone who understood.

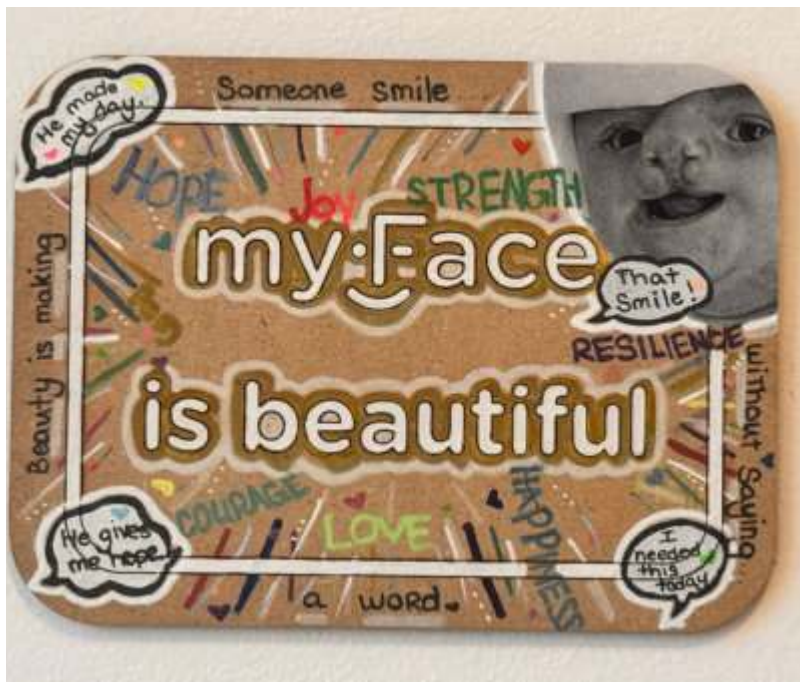
Four-year-old Noa arrived just one week after cleft surgery, still wearing nasal stents. There, she met Patrick, a one-year-old who had also recently undergone cleft surgery. Spotting the arm splints he was wearing, Noa immediately recognized them: “I had that too!”

The day also reunited friends Ava Beeler and Halle, who met at the 2025 myFace Adult Retreat. The two share the same syndrome, became roommates at the retreat, and have remained close ever since. Ava traveled from Connecticut for the event—her first trip on her own.

As one attendee, who was born with a cleft, shared, it was a chance to finally be somewhere with people she could relate to—and feel that she belonged.



Enzo enjoying Celina's self-portrait workshop.



Joni and Leo’s masterpiece!



Noa, her mom Kate and their new friends Emily, Patrick and their one-year-old son.



Dina, Celina, Rena, Halle, Emily and Ava sharing an embrace in front of the myFace is Beautiful wall of art.

Play for All: Lurie Children's Family Picnic



On July 15, myFace's Rena Rosen joined nearly 46 children, families, and members of the Lurie Children's Cleft and Craniofacial Team for their annual Family Picnic.

Games, crafts, treats, and plenty of laughter gave families an opportunity to connect with one another—and with members of their care team—outside the hospital setting.

myFace's Rena Rosen on Lurie Skylight TV



As part of Cleft and Craniofacial Awareness Month, Rena joined Lurie's Skylight TV as a guest cohost for the hospital's interactive pediatric television station. During the hour-long broadcast, she introduced young patients and families to myFace, shared information about craniofacial differences, and highlighted myFace/Lurie Family partnership.

Moving Beyond the Medical Lens

On July 14, myFace's Rena Rosen joined Zimmer Biomet's Empower Resource Groups for a conversation recognizing Disability Pride and Cleft and Craniofacial Awareness.

Nearly 25 employees participated in the live webinar, which explored common misconceptions about facial differences and the importance of seeing members of the craniofacial community beyond a medical lens.

Rena was joined for a fireside chat by Zimmer Biomet Government Affairs Manager Gabriella Ippolito, whose young daughter has Apert syndrome. Their conversation brought both professional and parent perspectives to the discussion and introduced employees to the broader work of myFace.

The program will reach approximately 100 additional employees through a recording, and Zimmer Biomet contributed $2,000 to support myFace programs. Gabriella also plans to remain involved with myFace, including through Family Camp.



A Place to Land When You Need It Most

When Cameron's surgery was scheduled as a same-day procedure, his family faced a difficult decision: how to get home when they lived so far from the hospital, in upstate New York. "We didn't feel comfortable heading straight home," Cameron's mom shared. "Thankfully, friends told us about myFace."

For the family, the apartment offered more than a place to recover. It allowed them to stay close by while monitoring Cameron's healing. "They provided us with a beautiful, fully stocked apartment just a five-minute walk from the hospital."

"They have gone above and beyond to take care of our family—not just Cameron, but our girls too,"Kelly said.

That included a bag with myFace swag and activity books for the girls, which she described as "the sweetest goodie bags for Olivia and Amelia." Those thoughtful touches made a difference.

"We are so incredibly grateful for their kindness and generosity during such a stressful time," she shared.

The family was also able to visit the myFace offices, where they had the opportunity to meet some of the people who had supported them.

"Today we were lucky enough to meet some of the incredible people at myFace and finally say thank you in person."

For families traveling long distances for treatment, having a nearby place to stay can ease an enormous burden. For Cameron's family, myFace provided not only a place to land, but a community that cared for the whole family.



Cameron and his sisters.



The People Shaping myFace's Future



Justin Stewart, Program Officer

My relationship with myFace began as an advocate and volunteer before I joined the staff as Program Officer. As someone born with a craniofacial difference, I bring my personal experience and passion for community-building to my work. I lead the myFace Brotherhood and support programs including Fireside Chats, family camps, Story Hour, and community events. My goal is to create spaces where people can build confidence, friendships, and lasting connections. Most of all, I hope to inspire the next generation of leaders and advocates.



Anderson Pleasants, Social Media Specialist/ Outreach Manager

Born with Goldenhar syndrome, I'm Deaf and nonverbal, with ASL as my primary language. I use advocacy, storytelling, and comedy to help bridge gaps around facial differences, Deaf culture, and disability. My connection to myFace began as a child through my family's care at NYU and continued through surgeries, family support, and community events. As I became more involved, I discovered the power of being surrounded by people who understood my experiences. I hope to amplify diverse voices, connect people to resources, and help everyone feel proud that their stories deserve to be celebrated.



Naomi Levinshtein, Program Officer

My journey with myFace began as a child receiving support after being born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate, and I joined the staff as Programs Assistant in 2025. Today, I'm excited to step into my new role as Program Officer and give back to the community that shaped me. Through myFace, I found my voice, lifelong friendships, and a passion for advocacy. I'm passionate about creating safe spaces where people feel seen, supported, and confident. I look forward to helping myFace reach more families and ensuring no one in our community has to navigate this journey alone.

Kids' Corner

The Pier Trail

Start at the sneaker and find your way to the finish line at Pier 62. Can you do it? Once you finish, design your own Race Sneaker!



Can you find it?

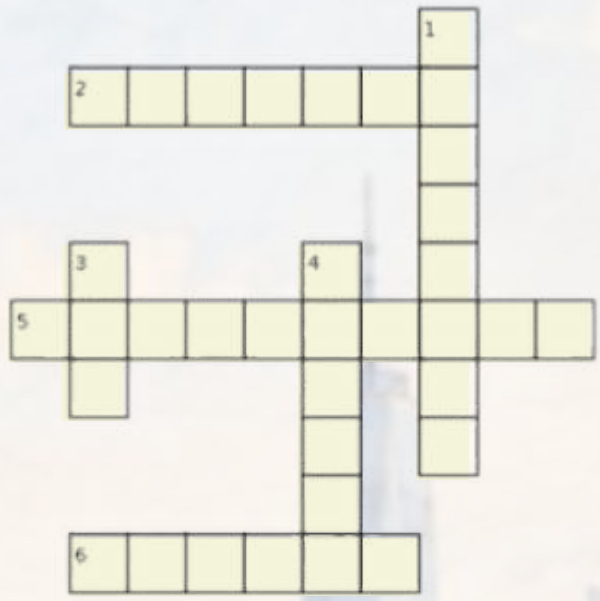
Search over this page for the following items!

1 heart
3 sneakers (not a pair)
1 microphone
1 water bottle
2 pigeons
1 camera



And 1 finish line flag (not the one in the maze)!

Crossword Puzzle!



1. The one thing your feet may have opinions about after a long walk.
2. Fall's round, orange celebrity.
3. You pin it to your shirt and wear it to a race, although eating it would be a terrible idea.
4. Fall's way of turning the sidewalk into confetti.
5. Five of these make a 5k!
6. The line everyone is suddenly very interested in after a 5k.

Hi! We're Anaira & Ariana!

Hi! We're Anaira and Ariana, 11-year-old twins. myFace is really special to our family. Ariana was born with craniosynostosis, and when we first found myFace, we just wanted to find a way to help. We didn't expect to make so many friends or feel so much a part of it.

One of the things we love most about myFace is that we can be ourselves here. We've met people who understand experiences like ours, and people who have completely different stories too. Being a part of the community really matters to us.

That's how Kids' Corner became something we really care about. We wanted kids to open the newsletter and find something that makes them want to grab a pencil and stay on the page for a while. We have a lot of fun making it, although agreeing on the ideas is sometimes another story.

When we're not doing that, we play piano and we are big Harry Potter fans. Anaira loves swimming. Ariana swims too, but loves to find excuses to miss practice. And we both love musical theater!

Ariana loves making paper squishies and slime, while Anaira loves clay art. And we both really, really want a golden retriever. We've researched the breed. We've chosen the name. Dad is yet to approve the plan. But anyways (if we get started on the topic of getting a dog, we will never stop talking) ...

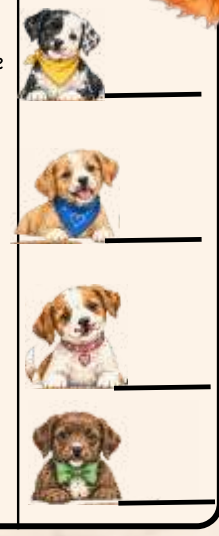
The Great Puppy Picnic Mix-up

Four cleft-lip puppies are ready for a post-race picnic at Pier 62- but their baskets get mixed up! Study what's inside each basket, then use the clues to match each dog to the correct basket.



The Clues

1. The green-bow puppy's basket is somewhere to the right of the basket with the tennis ball.
2. The yellow-neckerchief puppy's basket doesn't contain either ball.
3. The blue-bandana puppy's basket sits somewhere to the left of the pink-collar puppy's basket.
4. The green-bow puppy didn't get the checked or leaf-printed basket.
5. The yellow-neckerchief puppy didn't get either of the blue-patterned napkins.



Upcoming Events:

Creating Community Through Shared Moments

Join us in creating memories, making connections, and celebrating what makes our community unique.

Make sure to follow us on social media and keep an eye on your inbox for registration details and updates!

October 8th
New York Waterway | Pier 79
6:00 pm - 8:00 pm
New York, NY

October 16th - 18th
Family Camp Weekend at Victory Junction
Randleman, NC

October 25th
Sweet Connections: A Fall Donut Meetup
Stans Donuts | 9433 W Higgins Rd
2:30 pm
Rosemont, IL

October 29th
Halloween Spooktacular Zoom Event
7:00 pm EST
Virtual

November 6th - 8th
Family Camp Weekend at the Painted Turtle
Lake Hughes, CA

November 7th
Kids STEAM Event
Gilda's Club | 537 N Wells St
12:00 pm - 4:00 pm
Chicago, IL

November 15th
Lurie's Family Event
1:00 pm - 3:00 pm
Chicago, IL

November 20th
Fireside Chat and Lunch with Jessica Cox
Centurion New York | 327 Madison Ave.
12:30 pm - 2:30 pm
New York, NY

November 22nd
Bounce Party for Kids and Teens
Urban Air Trampoline Park | 4422 2nd Ave
12:00 pm - 2:00 pm
Brooklyn, NY

December 5th

Family Holiday Party
The Riverside Church | 490 Riverside Dr.
1:00 pm - 4:00 pm
New York, NY

December 14th
Fireside Chat with R.J. Palacio
Centurion New York | 327 Madison Ave.
5:30 pm - 7:30 pm
New York, NY



Kids' Corner Answer Key



The Great Puppy Picnic Mix-Up Answer Key:

1. C 2. A 3. B 4. D

Crossword Answer Key





Ask Pat!

Question:

How important are the psychosocial aspects of the team – nutritionist, speech therapists, psychologist?

The journey for an individual born with or acquiring a facial difference, and their family, can be both physically and emotionally challenging. Your craniofacial team, including surgeons, nurses, coordinators, speech pathologists, nutritionists, and orthodontists, is there to support you alongside providing clinical care.

Depending on your team, psychosocial support may include a social worker and/or psychologist. These specialists are available throughout your journey, from diagnosis and beyond, to help navigate challenges, provide counseling and psychological resources, offer pre- and post-operative emotional support, and connect families with practical resources such as transportation, financial assistance, and community services.

Every family has unique needs, and there is no judgment. The psychosocial team is there whenever you or a family member needs support.

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Have Questions? Need to talk?

Patricia Chibbaro, MSN CPNP (Retired)
Senior Program Officer –
Outreach and Hospital Liaison

patricia@myface.org
917.720.4712

Scan Here to Catch up on Ask Pat Videos

myFace

Support Groups

Created for craniofacially affected individuals and their families, our myFace virtual support groups offer a safe, welcoming space to connect with people who truly understand your experiences.

Please note: These are peer support groups, not clinical therapy sessions.

TEEN & ADOLESCENT SUPPORT GROUPS

PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS

ADULT SUPPORT GROUPS

SPANISH-SPEAKING PARENT SUPPORT GROUP/ *GRUPO DE APOYO PARA PADRES*

SCAN HERE TO LEARN MORE!

myFace

BROTHERHOOD

ESTD 2026

Men in the myFace community who are interested in building meaningful connections, finding support, and being part of the myFace Brotherhood are encouraged to reach out to Dan Elston at info@myface.org

MOMS OF myFace

Moms of myFace is a safe, supportive sisterhood for mothers of children with craniofacial differences and complex medical needs—an essential lifeline when the journey feels isolating, overwhelming, and hard to navigate alone.

More than a network—it's a movement. Join us, experience the sisterhood, and help build something that grows with you—and because of you.

SCAN TO LEARN MORE!

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myFace

You can make a difference with a gift today.