



Dawn Oates at home with her daughter Harper, who inspired her to establish The Play Brigade.

Work Hard, Play Harder

DAWN OATES FOUND HER LIFE'S WORK IN HELPING DISABLED CHILDREN HAVE FUN. **BY SCOTT KEARNAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRYCE BAK**

"Every person has a need for fun," says Dawn Oates, founder of the year-old nonprofit group The Play Brigade, sitting in her cozy office building tucked behind her Brookline home. Oates is a dynamo who rifles through paperwork with the speed of a Vegas card dealer, so it's no surprise that, once upon a time, she was a PR powerhouse for marquee names like Goodwin Procter. (She eventually launched her own agency, and was even a contestant on NBC's *The Apprentice*.) But Oates felt that her work lacked purpose.

Then her daughter Harper was born, less than two years after Oates gave birth to healthy twins. Harper has incomplete quadriplegia: Her legs are paralyzed, as are portions of her arms and hands. Oates and her husband, Justin, found their world shattered. She quickly realized that her greatest task lay ahead: ensuring that her daughter, and other children and adults with disabilities, had a life worth living. Harper can't walk, she can't feed herself—but she can smile, laugh, and know joy. Oates wondered,

Would she ever experience playgrounds or birthday parties, family hikes or school field trips? Harper works hard every day, and her mother's purpose became to help her play.

Thus was born The Play Brigade, which builds inclusive common spaces and resource networks that allow people of all physical abilities to play together. "To have our child be born with limitations was heartbreaking, but I'm not angry," Oates says. "If a gift came from this, it's that every day I dig into work that I feel passionate about and that helps other people."

She started with playgrounds. Harper's local Brookline playground already had a special "bucket swing" for children with disabilities, but Oates wanted more. The Play Brigade is fighting to get all parks to provide swings, slides, and other equipment designed to accommodate kids of all abilities. She joined the Design Review Committee of the town's Parks and Open Space Division, offering advice on how inclusive design can be integrated into public spaces

BELOW: Oates running the Boston Marathon with a team from The Play Brigade. RIGHT: Oates and Harper at their local playground.



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at the earliest stages of planning. Now The Play Brigade is campaigning to raise \$1 million for inclusive playground design in Greater Boston. It recently donated \$45,000 to Boston’s Parks & Recreation Department, allowing the city to purchase additional equipment for an accessible picnic grove in Franklin Park—with specially designed swings, game tables, and other playground amenities that are suitable for kids of all physical abilities.

The word “inclusion” is important to Oates, who believes that compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act is not enough. “Inclusion isn’t just curb cuts and wheelchair-accessible bathroom stalls,” she says. “It has to do with engaging a person in a space in a way that’s fulfilling. You might have access to the party, but just because you’re in the room doesn’t mean you can participate.”

Oates’s endeavor is largely self-funded, supported by a network of volunteers (she has one salaried employee) who raise funds through road races and other special events. (On November 4, she’ll boogie on behalf of The Play Brigade at Dancing with the Brookline Stars, an annual fundraiser for various nonprofits, where she hints that her choice of dance partner will “spotlight inclusion.”) Oates’s passion and initiative caught the attention of the insurance giant John Hancock, which has sponsored a series of planning summits where The Play Brigade, in partnership with orga-

nizations such as the National Inclusion Project, brings together city reps, community stakeholders, and disability activists, like Boston Marathon legend Dick Hoyt and former Boston University hockey player Travis Roy. Among the summits’ accomplishments is the Boston Compact for Community Inclusion, an agreement by organizations in a variety of disciplines to perform a self-assessment of their inclusion practices.

Oates also drew the notice of Mark Perrone, CEO of the Grand Prix of Boston, who hammered out the high-profile multiyear deal to bring IndyCar, the prestigious auto-racing league behind the Indianapolis 500, to the Hub starting in 2016. Now IndyCar Boston is in discussions with The Play Brigade to create a competitive, professionally managed five-kilometer running race in which athletes of all abilities would compete side by side. Its track? The local IndyCar racetrack, of course. It’s an opportunity that thrills Oates, as it would demonstrate for people all over the world that “Boston is a leader” in inclusion, she says, and give the issue a “national platform.”

High-performance auto racing is an apt metaphor for the speed with which Oates’s nonprofit has roared into action. But “I don’t consider what I do work,” she says. “Every single day, I have an exciting opportunity to make positive change in the world—and for my family.” playbrigade.com **BC**

CHARITY REGISTER

Opportunities to Give.

DANA-FARBER CANCER INSTITUTE

What: An Evening with Champions, now in its 45th year of presenting performances by world-class figure skaters, benefits the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Run entirely by Harvard University students, the event has raised more than \$2.7 million and hopes to collect \$60,000 this year to support adult and pediatric cancer care and research. In the past, the show has featured five-time world champion and nine-time US champion Michelle Kwan and Olympic gold medalist Yuna Kim. aneveningwithchampions.org

When: September 18 and 19, 7 PM

Where: Bright-Landry Hockey Arena, 79 N. Harvard St.

BOSTON CHILDREN’S HOSPITAL

What: Join Milagros para Niños and host John Quiñones for a night of dinner and dancing to benefit Boston Children’s Hospital. The gala, chaired this year by Carolina Alarco and Monica Neuman, celebrates the Latino community, its culture, and its compassionate leaders in raising money for a number of BCH programs that help Latino children and their families, among others. Over the past five years, the gala has raised more than \$2.7 million. giving.childrenshospital.org

When: September 18, 6 PM

Where: Westin Waterfront Hotel, 425 Summer St.

ESPLANADE ASSOCIATION

What: Sip seasonal cocktails, enjoy a live auction and a farm-to-table dinner, and dance under the stars on the Charles River Esplanade at the black-tie Moondance Gala. Last year’s event raised more than \$950,000 to fund the restoration of the Hatch Shell. This year’s committee, cochaired by Cynthia Croatti, Allison Hirsch, and Sandra Steele, hopes to surpass that figure to help protect the park’s natural environment and to continue community programs such as Healthy Fit and Fun. esplanadeassociation.org

When: September 26, 6:30 PM

Where: Charles River Esplanade, Fiedler Field

RODMAN RIDE FOR KIDS

What: Celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Rodman Ride for Kids by cheering on participants in 25-, 50-, and 100-mile bike rides to support at-risk children in the United States. Started by Don Rodman, the event raises funds for nearly 50 affiliated youth-focused social-service charities in Greater Boston, such as the Boston Police Athletic League, Boys & Girls Clubs of Dorchester, and The Red Sox Foundation. rodmanforkids.org

When: September 26, various starting times

Where: 10 Lincoln Road, Foxboro