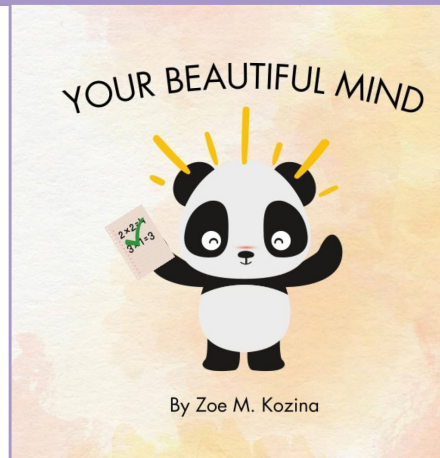




Book Nook



Your Beautiful Mind

by Zoe Kozina

New Trier High School senior, Zoe Kozina, has lived with a learning disability. She wrote a children's book to highlight the struggles and triumphs of those with invisible disabilities. The story reflects her personal experience as a third grader diagnosed with a learning disability. Zoe couldn't understand why she was asked to leave her classroom to receive extra help. Her story follows Penelope the Panda, who like Zoe has been diagnosed with a learning disability. She too is pulled out for special instruction. Penelope meets a new friend, Emily the Elephant, who Penelope thinks is very smart and capable. One day, Penelope sees Emily in the resource room and realizes if Emily can be smart and capable, so can she.

The author created the story to help children understand what it means to have a learning disability. And she wanted to share her message not to define yourself by it. "Always remember that you can be whatever you want. That's your choice, not your disabilities' choice."



A Special Bond – Braves Super Star, Matt Olson, and Reece

When Reece Blankenship sees his friend Matt Olson, he'll hold his hand for a long while, rubbing his finger along the calluses that have formed from years of gripping a baseball bat. Matt's hands have long been a source of fascination for Reece, ever since the two became buddies in high school. "When I was growing up, I always had some sort of ball in my hand, always flipping it around," Olson says. "Reece was always amazed by my hand dexterity ... To him, my motor skills were amazing."

Reece has autism and is nonverbal. That didn't stop Matt from befriending Reece, his fellow classmate at Parkview High School in Lilburn, GA. The friendship continued after high school. When Matt was a Minor League player, his season was wrapping up just as Reece's siblings were venturing off to college. Matt, also a friend of Reece's sister Daron, was happy to step in to keep Reece company.

Soon thereafter, as Matt was becoming an MVP-caliber professional baseball player, Reece had a quantum leap in communication that caught everyone -- including Matt -- by surprise. Reece's parents took him to a communication workshop where individuals with autism are taught to point to letters on a board to spell words. He was able to express thoughts locked inside for nearly 20 years. What he had to say was nothing short of extraordinary.

Now, these pals are both using their hands to make an impact -- the 29-year-old Matt hitting homeruns, and the 28-year-old Reece with the letterboard he points to when spelling out his ideas to empower, accept and advocate for individuals with autism. This led Reece's family to create ReClif, a fitness-based therapy center and nonprofit to help individuals with autism and their families. With a trade that brought Olson to his hometown team last year, he has been able to increase his support of ReClif by organizing Diamond Casino Night, a major fundraiser, as well as The Matt Pack that provides Braves tickets to families.

When asked what his friendship with Matt means to him Reece used his letterboard to respond. "Realistically, friendships for those like me are unique and difficult. Matt and I forged our friendship during many hours shared together as he helped me work on developing motor skills. But my favorite times were spent walking for miles in companionable silence. Matt and I cannot chat on the phone easily, text, or share a beer in a loud sports bar like most guys. But Matt and I have connected on a different plane. I have said many times that our friendship transcends typical speech. We have an unspoken bond."

Edited with permission from MLB.com and reporter, Anthony Castrovince

Fall Events and Community Partners



The word, Lekotek, is a made-up Swedish word that means “play library”. Lekotek was created in the 1960s by two Scandinavian parents whose children had disabilities. They wanted their children to live at home and not in residential facilities. They believed all children should be included in their families and communities. And so, they started Lekotek – a family-based program equipped with adapted toys to promote play, learning and inclusion. Today, Lekotek of Georgia’s innovative inventory consists of educational materials and “state of the art” computer and iPad technology.

In addition to **“including the child with disabilities into their family”**, part two of Lekotek’s mission statement is **“to include the family into the community”**. That’s why our events in the community are so important. Parents are often hesitant to participate in community activities afraid their family will not have a positive experience.



Save the Date

LEKOTEK Brewfest 2024



SAT, FEB 10TH

7-10 PM

WWW.LEKOTEKGA.ORG

Limited Capacity - Sign Up Early!

Lekotek is a regular publication of Lekotek of Georgia, Inc. | 1901 Montreal Road, Suite 126

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But our staff's adaptations and expertise make it possible for every child to experience success. Our community events make it possible for our families to enjoy all that Atlanta has to offer (just like any other family). Family activities include annual Halloween and Holiday parties, Zoo day, Pumpkin Patch Outing, attending professional sporting events, and rafting and fishing trips with the National Park Service. We thank these companies for supporting these events and making a difference for our families. These photos were taken at the Atlanta Zoo, Halloween Party, Pumpkin Patch hayride at Berry Patch Farms and rafting down the Chattahoochee.



Lekotek Welcomes New Leaders



In this photo, Brittany and Ben have their hands on a round purple button connected to a bubble blower. This battery-operated toy was adapted by our staff to help children with physical and fine motor delays. The bubble blower is not seen in the photo, but the bubbles are! Brittany and Ben are having fun blowing bubbles as they wait for the tractor to take them to the pumpkin patch to pick pumpkins.

Lekotek is delighted to welcome Brittany as a leader at both the Duluth and Atlanta sites. Brittany has a degree in recreation therapy and experience teaching children with disabilities. Her husband, Daniel, is a pediatric cardiology fellow at Emory and they have a little girl, Abby, who is two. We are also delighted to welcome Faydra Washington as a leader at both the Kennesaw and Alpharetta Lekotek centers. Faydra has a master's degree in special education and seventeen years of experience in the field. She is originally from Utica, NY and has three children.

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