



Highlights

2023 Impact Report

Celebrating the Heart of The Help Group Community

The Help Group Leadership Team

Board of Directors

Gary H. Carmona, Chairman
Dr. Susan Berman, President and CEO
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Susan Berk, Co-Secretary
Jae Hyun, Treasurer
Robert Dorman, Director
Yolanda Pina, Director
Danny Raffle, Director
Valerie Seymour, Director
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*Executive Vice President of
Clinical Programs*

Steve Dorfman
Vice President of Strategy Initiative

Marc Harrington Brent
Vice President of Development

Shayne Horan, Ed.D.
Vice President of Schools

About The Help Group:

The Help Group believes that "Dignity, Hope, Opportunity and Love" are the birthrights of all children. Our mission is to recognize, cultivate, and celebrate the individual gifts of young people with special needs related to autism, learning differences, ADHD, developmental delays, and emotional challenges. We offer innovative educational, therapeutic, residential, community mental health, and vocational programs, and we engage in cutting-edge research, professional training, outreach, and public policy advocacy. The Help Group's nine nonpublic special education day schools and programs serve children, youth, and young adults from two-and-a-half years old to 22 years old. Our programs are spread across five locations in Culver City, Sherman Oaks, Valley Glen, Van Nuys and Inglewood and serve young people with a wide range of cognitive, social, emotional, and learning issues.

Core Values

We are innovative
We are compassionate
We are transformative
We see ability where others see disability
We are community
We are The Help Group

Letter From Gary H. Carmona, Board Chair & Dr. Susan Berman, President & CEO



Gary H. Carmona, Board Chair: This was a milestone year for The Help Group. Our Founder and CEO Emerita, Dr. Barbara Firestone, retired after 48 years of dedicating her career to ensuring that children with special needs and their families would thrive. Dr. Susan Berman, Co-Founder and former Executive Director of The Help Group, assumed the role of President/CEO in October after 40 years of building innovative programs for the young people of The Help Group. At the same time, longstanding board members

Barry Nagoshiner, David Firestone and Perry Katz cycled off The Help Group Board, and we welcomed four new members, Danny Raffle, Jae Hyun, Yolanda Pina and Valerie Seymour, each coming to us with varied and diverse talents and experience. We are grateful for those that have been integral to our history and look forward to building on their legacy in the years to come.

Susan Berman, PhD, President & CEO: I am honored to be leading this organization that is so near and dear to my heart. Together with the Board, senior leadership, more than 750 caring and talented staff, our community partners, families and young people, I am confident that we will positively and compassionately impact the trajectory for those in our community who face challenges. We view their differences as strengths and strive to provide them with every opportunity imaginable to live full and meaningful lives.



Gary & Susan: We are thrilled to be sharing our 2023 highlights with you, capturing but a few of the many magical moments experienced this past year at The Help Group. We invite you to join our community of caring and help us make a difference. "To the world you may be one person, to one person you may be the world."

Warmly,

Gary H. Carmona, Chairman

Dr. Susan Berman, President & CEO

Help Group Humanitarians

The Help Group's Teddy Bear Golf Classic, Presented by Eastdil Secured, Honors Steve R. Silk



Help Fore Children Humanitarian Award recipient, Steve Silk

It was a day of fun and philanthropy at The Help Group's Teddy Bear Golf Classic honoring Steve R. Silk, Managing Director of the Real Estate Investment Banking Firm, Eastdil Secured. The Golf Classic, presented by Eastdil on October 16, 2023 at El Caballero Country Club, is an annual giving tradition that truly scores a hole-in-one for the young people of The Help Group.

This coveted event with a premier status in the commercial real estate finance community, sells out year after year and brings together longstanding friends and new friends in support of the more than 6,000 children and families served annually by The Help Group's schools and programs. Grand Sponsors were Eastdil Secured and the Mindy & Jon Gray Foundation and Platinum Sponsors included Blackstone, Kelvin Davis, Steve & Sue Silk, Craig Solomon - Affinius Capital and Worthe Real Estate Group.

After a great day of golf, Jonathan Firestone, Golf Classic Chair, acknowledged Eastdil's most generous support of this event since 2012 and thanked everyone for lending a hand in support of the children, including honoree, Steve Silk. "Today, we gather to celebrate the incredible achievements of an extraordinary individual, Steve Silk - a remarkable businessman, devoted family man, loyal friend, and a generous soul who always goes above and beyond to help others in need."

In a special tribute to his mother, Dr. Barbara Firestone, Founder & CEO Emerita of The Help Group, Jonathan shared, "As many of you know today's event is special because it coincides with my mom's retirement announcement, marking her nearly five decades at the

helm. I am so proud to take part in honoring her legacy and the commitment, passion and love that she has given, whole-heartedly to making The Help Group a beacon of hope for so many children and their families. Her life's work is truly a cause to celebrate!"

Michael Hackman, Golf Classic Co-Chair and 2019 honoree, led the always fun and lively auction of teddy bears in support of the Dr. Adam Opportunity Fund that provides scholarship support, mentoring, college counseling, vocational training, internships and so much more. Student speaker, Grace, a resilient young woman who will benefit from the Opportunity Fund shared,

"I have my goals in sight...Next year I will be exploring my college choices and developing a clearer picture of my future."

Michael Van Konynenburg, Golf Classic Co-Chair and 2006 honoree, presented the *Help Fore Children Humanitarian Award* to Steve in appreciation of his remarkable spirit of philanthropy and commitment to brightening the lives of The Help Group's young people.

To recognize the Silk Family's friendship and incredibly generous support, Dr. Barbara Firestone announced that The Help Group will be naming a wing at its Culver City campus, The Silk Family Learning Center, a state-of-the-art learning facility designed for students with special needs to achieve their fullest potential.

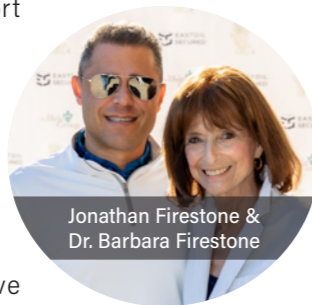
The Help Group extends its heartfelt thanks to Steve and his family, Eastdil Secured, Jonathan Firestone and our Golf Classic Co-Chairs Phil Belling, Jay Borzi, John Brady, Victor Coleman, Michael Hackman, Roy March, Kevin Marchetti, Michael May, Jonathan Pollack, Jesse Sharf, Tim Sloan, Craig Solomon, D. Michael Van Konynenburg, Scott Weiner and Jeff Worthe and our sponsors and donors for making this annual day on the greens such a tremendous success.



Michael Hackman



Jonathan Firestone



Jonathan Firestone & Dr. Barbara Firestone



Michael Van Konynenburg

The Help Group's Teddy Bear Ball Honors Erin Underhill, President of Universal Television

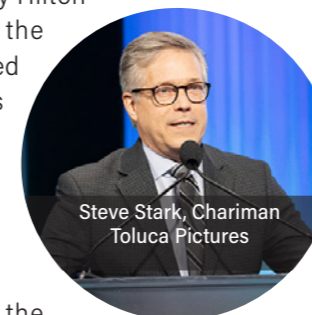


Help Humanitarian Award recipient Erin Underhill, President of Universal Television

The Help Group's 22nd annual gala was a celebration of the beauty and potential of our young people and the power of the humanitarian spirit. On this truly festive evening, The Help Group was pleased to present its *Help Humanitarian Award* to Erin Underhill, President of Universal Television in celebration of her humanitarian spirit and commitment to caring that is brightening the lives of many children.

Held on April 19th at the Beverly Hilton Hotel International Ballroom, the Teddy Bear Ball is a time-honored philanthropic tradition in Los Angeles benefiting the many young people with special needs served by The Help Group's schools and programs.

Once again, The Zenith was the underwriting sponsor of the event, under the leadership of CEO & Chair of the Board, Kari Van Gundy, and Senior Vice President, Greg Holly. Gala Chairs for the event included Jenna Bans, Executive Producer 'Good Girls,' Kevin Beggs, Chairman, Lionsgate Television, Channing Dungey, Chair of Warner Bros. Television Group, Mike Hopkins, Senior Vice President, Prime Video and Amazon Studios, Pearlana Igbokwe, Chairman, Universal Television Group, David Stapf, President, CBS Television Studios and Steve Stark, Chairman & Executive Producer for Toluca Pictures. Gala Co-Chairs included Help Group Circle of Friends Board Members, Ann & Dick Costello, Jamie & Chris McGurk, David Salzman and Ken Solomon.

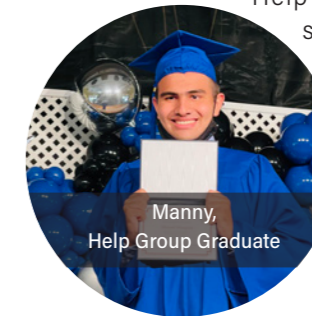


Steve Stark, Chairman Toluca Pictures

The Help Group Children's Choir kicked off the evening followed by a video message from Los Angeles Mayor, Karen Bass, applauding the "incredible work" of The Help Group and congratulating Erin Underhill for her well-deserved honor. Joining the stage to lend their talent were NBC's Mayan Lopez and Mario Lopez.



NBC's Mayan Lopez & Mario Lopez



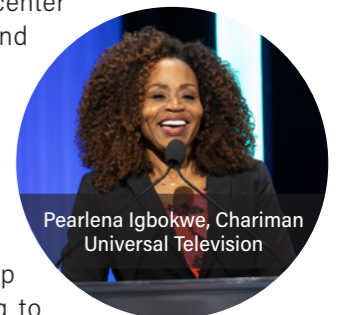
Manny, Help Group Graduate

Help Group parent Deanna and her son Manny, were featured in a video narrative highlighting their family's journey and Manny's remarkable achievements at The Help Group. Since starting in our Early Education program at the age of five, Manny has made great strides and now at age 19, he is learning job skills at our Bridgeport Vocational Program.

Steve Stark, former *Help Humanitarian Award* honoree and Circle of Friends Board Member introduced the evening's honoree retrospective and welcomed Erin Underhill to the family of Help Group honorees. Pearlana Igbokwe introduced her colleague and friend, Erin Underhill - underscoring Erin's significant contributions and her can-do spirit that has been at the center of her successes personally and professionally.

In her incredibly warm acceptance speech, Erin remarked to the audience, "I want to express my sincere gratitude to The Help Group for this honor. It is humbling to be recognized by such an inspirational organization. There is no doubt it takes a village, and this is one phenomenal village I'm honored to be a part of. Thank you!"

The Help Group is most grateful to our honoree, Erin Underhill, and to everyone who joined us in support of our young people.



Pearlana Igbokwe, Chairman Universal Television

Dr. Adam Opportunity Fund Student Ambassadors



Alyse & Grace

Inspiring, affirming and motivational, our 2023 Dr. Adam Opportunity Fund student ambassadors, Grace and Alyse, embody the spirit of resilience. At our Teddy Bear Philanthropic events, each bravely shared their personal journey filled with hardships and challenges that led them to The Help Group. Project Six resident and North Hills Prep student, Grace age 15, and 18-year old Westview student Alyse spoke about the healing and help they experienced as a result of the therapeutic and academic supports they have received. Acknowledging the many dedicated staff and the caring relationships cultivated, these two strong and determined young women are now able to envision a brighter future for themselves.

The Help Group is so pleased to be part of supporting the goals and dreams of our young people through the Dr. Adam Fund. Established in 2003, The Dr. Adam Opportunity Fund, named in memory of Dr. Adam Grudberg, a beloved member of The Help Group faculty, provides scholarship support, mentoring, college counseling, vocational training, internships and so much more.



Scan QR code to Donate to
The Dr. Adam Opportunity Fund

Holiday Carnival

Bringing Joy to At-Risk Children and their Families Since 1984



The Help Group was delighted to host its annual Holiday Carnival on December 9th for the more than 800 at-risk children and their families served by The Help Group's Family-Centered Support Programs, Mental Health & Clinical Programs and Residential Services.

This year's guests enjoyed a fun-filled afternoon of carnival games, rides, food, arts and crafts, a petting zoo, face painting and a visit with Santa Claus. Through the tremendous efforts of Bradley Shahine, Director of Community Partnerships, and his special events team, The Help Group's Sherman Oaks Campus became a magical winter wonderland.



The day was made possible thanks to the following generous sponsors: Alimart, Inc., ELB US, Inc., HopSkipDrive, Inc., Mission School Transportation, Partnerships for Families, Pawar Transportation LLC, Peet's Coffee, Protection Plus, Ruggieri Construction, Inc., Rusher Air Conditioning, Student



Transportation of America, and Yellow Cab, and the more than 200 volunteers and staff whose contributions helped to make this year's event such a wonderful experience for the children and families we serve.

Longtime Help Group supporter Hasbro continued its tradition of donating toys so that every child could take home a present, and this year, Mark Kane generously donated 800 holiday plushies made by Moosh-Moosh. Families received free clothing from The Help Group's Silverlining Designer Resale Boutique & Vocational Training Center at the "Silverlining Clothing Corner." The smiles on the faces of our young people as they received their gifts were priceless.

This event of the heart is a cherished tradition at The Help Group. We invite you to join us next year by becoming a sponsor, donating new toys or gently-used clothing, or by simply volunteering your time and care.

More About Community-Based Mental Health & Clinical Programs

The Help Group Child and Family Center, since 1985, is one of the largest providers of mental health services for children in Los Angeles County. Funded through the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Children and Family Services, these at risk, under resourced youth, ages birth through adolescence, have experienced family or community-based trauma.

With a multi-disciplinary team consisting of therapists, care managers, psychiatrists and community based mental health workers, family focused, child centered services are delivered to more than 600 youth in our clinics or in family homes each week, providing help and hope to those who need us most.

Transformative Good: Philanthropy in Action

Through the generosity of major foundations, charitable nonprofit organizations and dedicated donors, The Help Group's five campuses continue to evolve and offer new and specialized enrichment opportunities. Here are some of the most recent gifts that have helped foster an environment where the lives of our young people and their unique abilities are celebrated and supported, ultimately empowering them to reach their fullest potential.



Enhancing Outdoor Play

Thanks to the **Ahmanson Foundation's** most generous gift of a state-of-the-art playground on our Van Nuys Campus, our students whose social and emotional needs are best served in a small, therapeutic learning community, are benefiting immeasurably from the social, sensory and recreational opportunities the playground provides.

"What a difference a playground makes. Working with children that experience emotional issues can be tricky when promoting outdoor play. Many of our students don't know 'how' to play with others. As a teacher of children with special needs, there isn't a more important lesson to learn than how to be and make a friend." -- Jason Winburn, Elementary Teacher.

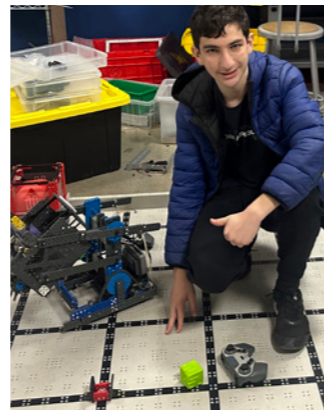
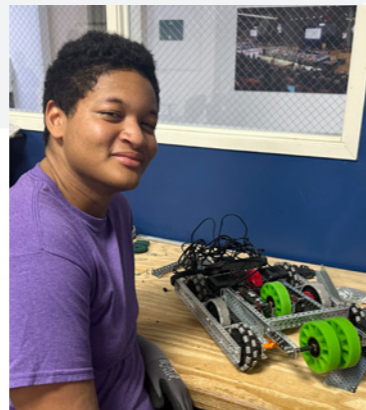
We thank the Ahmanson Foundation for helping to promote the health and well-being of our students and for creating a more positive school life through outdoor play for some of our youngest learners.

Innovating with STEM Technology

With initial grant funding from the **W.M. Keck Foundation**, The Help Group launched its STEM³ Academy in 2014. Now, with newer technologies and a strengthened STEM educational platform thanks to a generous grant from the **Rose Hills Foundation**, The Help Group's Summit View, Village Glen and Westview Schools, were able to launch the new 2023-24 academic year with more robust STEM program offerings.

These WASC accredited, college preparatory program students are benefiting from access to educational technologies designed to boost engagement and motivation. Microrobotics is promoting coding and Minecraft Education is supporting immersive STEM learning through play. A fully-equipped, all new Gaming Lab designed for E-sports, is giving students the chance to participate in California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) E-Sports competitions with other students from across the country. The addition of VEX robotics has been a gateway for our students to enter, compete and win regional competitions. Drone technology is encouraging teamwork and collaboration to problem-solve drone navigation, flight and automation.

We are most grateful to Rose Hills for supporting our efforts to foster the strengths of our bright, STEM-focused students.



Creating Camp Experiences

Summer camp is such an important and enriching experience for typical youth, let alone young people with special needs who are often not able to participate in a classic camp environment. Through a generous gift from **Caroline Bruder** and **Mark Santarsiero**, Kids Like Me Camp Scholarships were made available to many of our young people who might not otherwise have had the financial means to attend. By providing a welcome place for them to meet new friends, campers were able to learn new skills and create new memories. We are so very appreciative of the scholarship support which enabled these children to benefit from the camp environment, regardless of their ability or economic background.



Building a Hub of Enrichment Opportunities

The Help Group is pleased to announce that a new Enrichment Center is under development on its Sherman Oaks Campus. This

re-designed and re-purposed enrichment space is set to open this spring and will include a large motor-sensory room, music and dance space, a fitness room as well as an adjacent outdoor track and field with exercise and gym equipment, a daily living skills lab, a vocational lab and an art studio. With the support of our families to date, including the **Nachenberg Family**, the **Sampson Family**, and **Shelley Harrison and Family**, along with generous grant funding from **Looking Beyond** and **Connecting A Caring Community**, this newly designed space will offer a range of specialized activities tailored to support the individual learner and to foster overall growth and well-being.

Expanding Arts Programming

For children with special needs, art can be a transformative medium, allowing them to communicate, learn, and discover the world in a unique and personal way. With heartfelt thanks to Lisa Kodimer, Co-Founder & Executive Director, **Connecting A Caring Community** and its Board, whose mission is to mobilize the community to live a life of giving, The Help Group is developing an art studio on its Sherman Oaks Campus. Set to open doors to boundless creativity and personal growth for students, we are truly grateful for the magic this gift will be creating.



Securing Brighter Futures

For more than 14 years, **Looking Beyond** has supported The Help Group's Sunrise School, dedicated to serving young people with autism and other developmental disorders on its Sherman Oaks and Culver City Campuses. Their generous funding has expanded the vocational training program at Sunrise School on both campuses, as well as enhance our sensory programs. With prior gifts, **Looking Beyond** has enabled us to create Beyond the Farm where students cultivate their school garden, The **Looking Beyond Vocational Lab**, providing students with practical experiences to prepare them for greater levels of independence as young adults, and The **Looking Beyond Daily Living Skills Center**, a space where students can learn and practice the essentials of self-care, in order to live more independently, in addition to supporting the expansion of our music program and enhancements to our school playgrounds.



We are most grateful to **Looking Beyond** for their philanthropic leadership and heartfelt endeavors that have had a tremendous impact on the lives of many young people in our community.

We extend our gratitude to each of our donors for choosing to support and enrich the learning experiences of our young people.

Marking Milestone Moments Together

Graduation celebrations are a special time of year at The Help Group as we recognize the tremendous achievements of our students. In 2023, 120 graduates from The Help Group's nine specialized day schools in Sherman Oaks, Valley Glen, Van Nuys, and Culver City, proudly donned caps and gowns as they looked forward to matriculating to a wide range of colleges and vocational programs based on their individual needs. Warmest congratulations to our graduates and their families!

Scan the QR code to view a recap of ceremonies with narration by one of our graduates' moving culmination remarks.



Fostering a Sense of Belonging at Camp

This past summer, more than 100 neurodiverse six to seventeen-year-olds with autism spectrum disorder and other special needs attended our **Kids Like Me** Summer Camp. Each day was filled with fun and engaging recreational activities designed to encourage skill development, social interaction and to foster a sense of belonging. Campers were matched with like peers, allowing them to participate in activities tailored to meet their unique needs.

Navigating camp can be a struggle for individuals facing communication challenges, especially those with autism and ADHD. This was the case for nine-year old Alison, prior to attending Kids Like Me. From day one, our highly trained staff worked with Alison to form lunchtime groups with peers, initiate imaginative play and facilitate conversations of interest between her and other campers. According to her father, "Alison was eagerly looking forward to camp each day and making plans for playdates - the change was remarkable." Our campers, including Alison, ended the summer counting the days until Spring Camp 2024!

kidslikemela.org/

Building Friendships Through Best Buddies

The Help Group is proud to partner with **Best Buddies** International, Los Angeles Chapter, dedicated to creating opportunities for meaningful one-to-one friendships for youth with and without special needs.

Launched during the pandemic, classrooms at **Bridgeport High School** began participating in virtual visits with students at The Buckley School and established a new Best Buddies chapter together, with the goal of creating an inclusive, encouraging and friendly space.

We are so grateful to have established this connection for our students and to continue to foster these budding friendships, we thank Best Buddies and the students of **Buckley School** for so warmly welcoming our young people.



Ensuring Gains for All Young Learners

Our **Young Learners Early Education** program for preschool students with autism is expanding. Its comprehensive whole child approach to early education is centered around the belief that every child has the potential to learn, grow, and connect, and offers an intensive six-hour per day program five days a week with supportive services incorporated into the school day. One of the cornerstones of our program is the use of Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention and Speech and Language therapy, provided in a collaborative model within the classroom setting, as well as tailored play-based activities to suit each child's specific needs, ensuring that they thrive at their own pace.

One of the students who is thriving at Young Learners is Jason. "He's excited to go to school now," says his mother Michelin. Each morning, Jason says goodbye to her with a kiss and heads to class, where he enjoys spending time with classmates and teachers. Jason is actively engaged riding bikes with his peers, completing puzzle sets, and making handprints in art. With a visual schedule, daily classroom routines and integrated therapeutic care, Jason is transitioning well into our Young Learners program and making great progress on his speech, communication and comprehension. Jason's successes underscore the importance of building foundational skill sets to make those pivotal early leaps.



thehelpgroup.org/school/young-learners/

A Winning Day for Bridgeport School Special Olympics Athletes

In partnership with **Special Olympics Southern California** and local Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools, The Help Group has expanded its foundational sports skills training for athletes of all abilities. In participation with **Harvard Westlake**, Help Group athletes take part in annual Unified Sports events that promote respect, acceptance and dignity all while practicing physical fitness and gaining greater self-confidence.

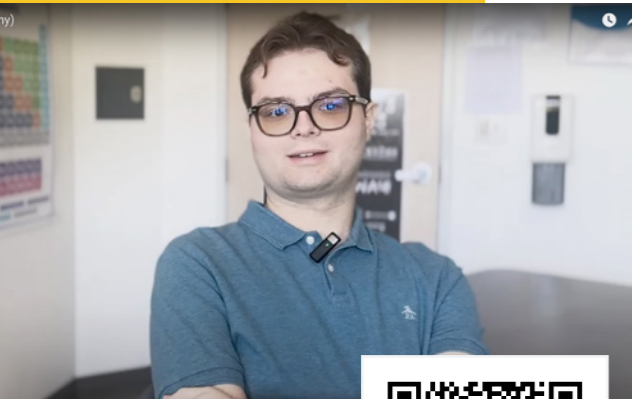
This past April, more than 60 students from The Help Group's **Bridgeport School** participated in the 6th Annual Special Olympics Unified Sports Game Day hosted by Harvard-Westlake Upper School. For Harvard-Westlake students, Special Olympics Game

Day has become part of a cherished annual tradition. Sports is a great catalyst for promoting social inclusion and fostering a greater understanding of The Help Group student community.



Our Bridgeport students came out for this event with enthusiastic spirit to showcase all the skills they have been learning. Once again, they truly shined. We thank the young people at Harvard-Westlake for their open hearted support of our students.

Help Group Highlights



Scan QR code to view Breaking Barriers video of Zach

STEM³ Academy Alum Breaking Barriers

In the first episode of our series "Breaking Barriers," Zach, a **STEM³ Academy** alum, credits his exposure to STEM academics and the specialized approach to instruction he received as key to his success. After graduating from The Help Group's STEM³ Academy in 2019, Zach attended the University of California at Davis, where he earned his BS in Environmental Science & Management, and is now a first year student at USC's Gould School of Law.

"At STEM, the biggest things I learned were how to study, how to do well and how to persevere," says Zach. "My teachers all pushed me, and told me, you can do more!"

Zach's academic accomplishments and his commitment to personal growth are an example of what can be achieved when determination meets opportunity.

Building Life Skills Through Coaching

Many of our Life Skills coaching clients at **Advance LA** are successfully attending college, earning top grades and improving their executive functioning skills with the assistance of trained and compassionate coaches. Others are reaching their goal of independent adulthood by obtaining and maintaining employment, learning how to drive or access public transportation, as well as increasing their social circles. Our **club i.a.** offers monthly social events for young adults enjoying a wide array of activities. And our parent support group, which meets twice monthly, is a wonderful way for parents to exchange resources and share experiences.

Helping to pave the way, Coach Don, one of our life skill coaches, has been guiding and supporting a young man named Robert for several years. After graduating college at 22, Robert remained unemployed and filled his days playing video games in his room. At the outset, Don assisted Robert in initiating a workout regimen and they started meeting regularly at the gym. Additionally, Don aided Robert in crafting a resume and honing his interview skills. After Robert landed a full time job at a law firm where he now works as a file clerk, he was incredibly proud of his achievements and his parents were amazed by his progress. Robert has held his job for over a year and continues to work with Coach Don on health and wellness as well as essential life skills. Failure to launch, for Robert and other young people like him can be transformed into learning to thrive.

advancela.org/



Summit View Alum Spearheads E-sports Gaming Initiative

With her unique blend of talent and warmth, we're thrilled to have Summit View alum, Caroline O'Neill return as part of The Help Group staff as she spearheads our E-sports gaming program.

Caroline is grateful to pay it forward. As a teen, she found it difficult to connect with others. However, in the supportive community Caroline discovered at **Summit View**, coupled with the small class environment, she was able to focus and thrive academically and socially. Now, as a teacher's aide at **Westview**, her commitment revolves around instilling new skills in students and uncovering their hidden talents, making her a vital asset to our educational programs.

Bringing her knowledge and love of E-sports back to The Help Group, Caroline has been integral in helping to develop a CIF E-sports program housed within the new, state-of-the-art gaming center at the Culver City campus. Caroline's involvement in E-Sports, a passion she grew up with, took center stage during her college years at Marymount California University, where she earned a scholarship as captain of the E-Sports team. She believes that participating in competitive video gaming provides young people with valuable team-based skill sets that foster collaboration and communication. One of her students shared, "I get to participate in my school's E-sports CIF games, meet with students from across the US and play at the same level of legitimacy as all the other organized sports."

We are confident Caroline will have a meaningful impact on the growth and success of students in our school community.

STEM Robotics Team Places top 10 in California

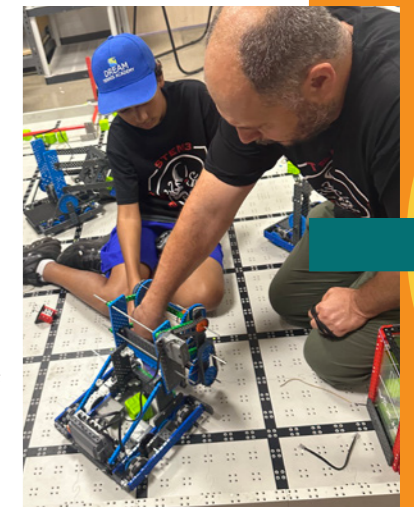
The STEM³ Academy robotics team placed top 10 in California and top 115 in the World at the **Vex IQ Robotics Challenge**. The team, Octop proudly won 1st and 2nd place in the first two challenge matches and won all possible categories, including Skills, Team Work and Judges Awards in their most recent match. After taking home consecutive wins in the regional North Los Angeles League, they will be advancing to the California State Championships this coming March.

Presented by the Robotics Education & Competition Foundation, The Help Group's team, were competing against neurotypical young people from schools across Los Angeles. It was a victory very well deserved and an opportunity to foster greater understanding and acceptance among neurotypical students and the broader community about the capabilities of neurodiverse students. A win all around – a boost in the confidence of our students showcasing that when given the right supports, everyone can excel.

Beyond the competition, involvement in robotics among our students encourages personal and inter-personal skills including communication, creativity and empathy. Our students are learning that key life skills, such as developing friendships, defending reasoned beliefs, and working with peers and team mates, are just as important to success as knowledge and facts. At The Help Group, STEM students enthusiastically use their natural abilities to learn coding, 3D modeling and builder and maker skills, and explore and test solutions through exciting, hands-on projects. Our STEM curriculum is designed to cultivate collaboration, social and emotional skills, thinking skills and creativity in special learners. The STEM program prides itself on its development of its state of the art innovation lab filled with opportunities to explore and create, preparing students for 21st century careers.

Congratulations to our STEM robotics team on three impressive wins. We are so proud of your determination and hard work.

stem3academy.org/



Help Group Highlights

Celebrating Our Employees of the Year

Having heart-forward, dedicated staff brings immeasurable value to the many ways we support our young people and their families. We recognize our incredible 'village' and appreciate the multitude of ways they provide care. These Employees of the Year distinguished themselves – consistently demonstrating exceptional commitment. They are contributing in innovative ways and positively touching the lives of those we serve.

"The passion, kindness, and tireless efforts of our Employees of the Year embody the true and enduring spirit of service. We express our deepest gratitude for their heartfelt dedication to the young people of The Help Group."

- Dr. Susan Berman



Marisol Ramos, a therapist and school based coordinator in the Outpatient Department, has worked with The Help Group for four years. She is described as dedicated and diligent in her efforts to ensure positive outcomes for families. She is valued for her consistency and compassion and takes immense pride in helping clients address challenges and reach goals they set out to achieve.

Wayne Smith, an Employment Specialist with our Department of Rehabilitation employment program has been an excellent addition to the vocational department. In his three years at The Help Group, his skilled expertise and knowledge of the field has been greatly valued as is his readiness to empower clients in the community and workforce. He is described as an enthusiastic colleague, passionate collaborator and an invaluable asset to the countless clients that have had the pleasure of working with him.



Ashleigh Woods, a Teacher's Aide in our Sunrise School program has worked at The Help Group for two years. Characterized as a pleasure to have in the classroom, she cares greatly for her students and encourages them in achieving their goals. Her professionalism, adaptability and collaborative mindset are key to her approach. Each and every school day, she is committed to nurturing the development of her students, cultivating connections, in addition to bringing smiles to her students faces.

Jason Avila-Winburn, a Teacher Specialist at The Help Group's North Hills Prep has been committed to addressing the intensive needs of his students for the past nine years. Known for his excellence as an educator and his ability to address the complexities of high needs youth, he is valued by our staff and families for fostering the growth and development of an early educational program.



REACHing Full Circle with Our Families

Breaking generational cycles of trauma is at the heart of our mental health efforts. As a teen, Gabriela accessed our mental health programs and as a mother of four now, 15 years later, knowing she needed parental supports, she turned to The Help Group to access our **REACH After-School and Comprehensive Mental Health Programs**.

Funded by L.A. County Department of Mental Health, REACH therapists work hand-in-hand with caregivers providing family therapy and parent training and support groups with the goal of assisting families in promoting positive relationships with their children. Our therapeutic family therapy sessions are helping Gabriela to cultivate healthy, loving relationships. The Help Group provides Therapeutic Behavioral Services to Gabriela's entire family in their home.

"The Help Group has been a wonderful place for me and my children," Gabriela shares. "I have learned to communicate better and because of my work with Help Group staff, I have been given the tools I need and resources to help support me. I have learned how to explore big feelings in a safe way. I feel that as a family we are more united. Although I understand that parenting can be hard and challenging, I feel confident that the bonds within my family are strengthening and that we will continue to learn and grow together."

thg-prevention.org/



Learning Valuable Vocational Skills Beyond the Classroom

Bridgeport Vocational Education Program is now serving 115 young people and is expanding its reach into the community, partnering with more than a dozen local businesses including a nearby animal shelter, the library, food pantry and chain retail stores, like Target, Walgreens, Staples and Smart & Final. Our students, who practice pre-job training skillsets on campus, are accompanied by a job coach to help them navigate the workplace setting.

At Bridgeport Vocational Center, the challenges of transitioning from high school to the next phase, particularly for students with social and learning difficulties, is immense. Central to the educational model is Career Technical Education, designed for students to take part in valuable job experiences, internships, certifications, and more. Through partnerships with **Los Angeles Valley College** and **West Los Angeles College**, students can enroll, earn certifications, and secure job placements in one of six CTE academies: Agriculture, Arts & Media, Construction and Manufacturing, Education-Child Development, Fashion Design, and Hospitality & Tourism. The program is designed to empower young adults and provide them with 21st century employability soft skills. Valuable to this experience, students are learning inter-personal and work-place skills with the goal of preparing them for greater independence in work and in life.

We congratulate Benajmin, Eric, Brenner, Matthew and Citlali, our first students to receive Career Technical Education (CTE) certificates from West Los Angeles College.

Creating Community Employment Opportunities for Our Transition age Students

Since 1993, The Help Group **WorkAbility** program, through the CA Department of Education, has provided vocational assessments to more than 500 students annually.

Reducing drop-out rates and promoting early vocation exploration, The Help Group **We Can Work** programs facilitated paid work experience and training workshops for over 120 students in 2023. Youth, ages 16 to 22, are gaining and refining employment skills with up to 100 hours of supervised job training on-and-off campus with major retail stores like, **Target, Old Navy, Staples, Smart & Final, Sharky's, Walgreens** and more. With the aim of enhancing the quality of life for individuals and fostering inclusive and equitable communities, The Help Group has long offered these kinds of employment programs through the California Department of Rehabilitation.

Bridging the service cliff when students age out of school, The Help Group **Adult Work Experience** program for young adults in the community offers paid internships prior to entering the competitive workforce. These employment services, funded by both the Department of Rehabilitation and the Department of Mental Health, aim to assist adults with special needs in obtaining and maintaining competitive employment in the community.



Help Group Training Program Highlights

Expanding Interventions in the Classroom



The Help Group proudly partners with the USC Mrs. T.H. Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, through its **Help Group - USC Occupational Science Initiative**. The initiative is dedicated to developing evidence-based intervention programs for children with autism spectrum disorder through the guidance of an interdisciplinary team of researchers, educators and clinicians. Each year, Occupational Therapy Doctoral students from USC transform research into intervention in Help Group classrooms, by developing and implementing a therapeutic curriculum to foster growth and progress for young people with autism and other sensory challenges.

Scan QR code to hear more from Grace Baranek, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, Associate Dean and Chair, and the Mrs. T. H. Chan Professor of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at USC.



Furthering Research and Practice with the UCLA Semel Institute



The Help Group is proud of its innovative research and training partnership with the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior. **The Help Group - UCLA Autism Alliance** is an innovative partnership between The Help Group and the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, established in 2007. It is dedicated to enhancing and expanding clinical research, education and treatment of those with autism spectrum disorder, and to contributing to the development, greater understanding and use of evidence based best practices.

The Help Group - UCLA Neuropsychology Program, established in 2000, provides comprehensive assessment, testing and diagnosis for children with developmental challenges as well as family conferencing and follow-up services. It also trains post-doctoral fellows from UCLA's Medical Psychology Assessment Center in pediatric neuropsychology.

Learning and Professional Training Opportunities

The Help Group has long been a hub of special education resources and a model school and vocational education program that attracts the international special education community.



In the fall of 2023, **Cal State LA's Special Education Program** in partnership with a delegation from South Korea visited The Help Group. Comprised of school educators, social workers and vocational education instructors, the delegation toured our campuses, observing first-hand school, vocational and residential programs for youth with special needs and took part in a best practice special education lecture.

Help Group administrators offered expertise on the range of services The Help Group provides to help young people with a variety of special needs achieve and learn. Explaining that there's not a "one size fits all" approach, it's about an education tailored to meet the needs of individual learners and providing the opportunities to help them make progress academically, socially and with the vocation and life skills needed for post high school transition and beyond.

South Korean delegators acquired a framework for how best to design quality special education curricula and adapt instructional and service delivery for the benefit the students and families they serve and their broader special education networks in South Korea.

Ensuring Best Practices for Future Psychologists

The Help Group is committed to increasing access to evidence-based, clinical care for students through the robust training of next generation clinicians. The Help Group's full-time APA-accredited Doctoral Internship in Health Service Psychology attracts highly competitive applicants from across the U.S. Each year, five interns are selected from more than 150 applicants to participate in and learn from our multi-disciplinary staff of experts.

The overarching goal of the internship year is to become more skilled in the breadth and techniques of assessment and intervention with children, adolescents and families. Emphasis is placed on exposure to the varied roles a psychologist plays in a large community-based mental health agency—from program development to outcome evaluation. We are excited each August as we welcome our new cohort and know they will leave at the end of the year prepared to share their newfound knowledge in settings across the country.

thehelpgroup.org/professional/doctoral-internships/

Connect and Engage: Ignite Positive Change

The Help Group has been making an impact on our community for 60 plus years! We invite you to become a vital part of our organization. Together, we can create a vibrant and compassionate community. You will not only enrich the lives of others, but you will gain a sense of fulfillment in giving back, learning and making a difference.

To learn more, visit 'How to Help' on our homepage, thehelpgroup.org.



Connect Through Learning

In our monthly, free webcast series, Help Group and community experts dive into educational and therapeutic strategies that support special needs youth. Gaining valuable insights from parents, educators, and mental health professionals, more than 850 members of our community joined us last year to learn about a range of topics, such as:

- Strategies to Identify & Address Bullying of Neurodiverse Students
- Let's Flip the Script: What if ADHD is a Strength, Not a Weakness?
- The Benefits of Psychotherapy in Autism: Addressing Anxiety, Depression, and Trauma Through Therapy
- Unlocking Opportunities for Neurodiverse Young Adults
- Navigating Your Child's Coming Out Journey Together

Check here for upcoming webinars and view past recordings: thehelpgroup.org/webcasts/



Connect Through Volunteering

Join our terrific cadre of more than 200 **Help Mate Volunteers** who are enriching our classrooms and supporting our community events by participating in nearly every program that The Help Group offers. Volunteers are tutoring students, working in the library, teaching art, supporting after-school enrichment classes, recreational and social skills and day camp programs, **Paws and Pals**, and our Silverlining Clothing Boutique.

Volunteers are also supporting our clerical staff, as well as our fundraising and community events such as our Holiday Carnival, Teddy Bear Golf Classic, Annual Spring Resource Fair and professional conferences and seminars.

It is through the talents and passions of our caring Help Mates that The Help Group can more fully meet the ever present needs of our community.



Meet Debi, a remarkable volunteer at The Help Group - Debi's dedication and warmth reflects the compassion of our volunteer community. A retired special education teacher, Debi joined The Help Group as a volunteer this past summer, generously devoting her time twice a week to assist with our elementary school aged students. Since then, she's been indispensable, providing heartfelt support to our students and staff. Despite facing the challenges of multiple sclerosis and navigating the world in a motorized wheelchair, Debi effortlessly zips around the campus, showcasing her determination and adaptability, her unwavering spirit and resilience, and her commitment to young people.

Next meet Mary Murphy, a retired physical therapist who has been a committed volunteer in our Paws and Pals program since 2015. Mary's newly certified therapy dog, Rhett is a wonderful companion to our Help Group students and a terrific new addition to the **Paws and Pals** program. Encouraging social interaction, motivating student engagement in classroom activities and bonding with our young people, these animal-assisted interventions are invaluable. We thank Mary for her long-standing dedication to our young people - our students love her visits and look forward to snuggling with Rhett.



thehelpgroup.org/how-to-help/volunteer/



Connect Through Donating Clothing and Shopping at our Silverlining Resale Boutique

Recognizing the need for vocational training supports and workplace skillsets, in 2011, The Help Group opened **Silverlining**, a resale boutique and vocational training center. Silverlining has enabled the young people of The Help Group to learn and develop valuable job-related skills that contribute to their self-confidence, employability, and future independence.



Consider supporting Silverlining by donating gently used men's and women's clothing and shoes – simply stop by with your delivery to our Sherman Oaks campus. Come and meet our student workers in action and feel great about shopping while supporting a worthy cause. Your contribution will help young people develop the skills they will need to succeed in life...A silverlining for all.

While shopping in our store, you may meet Alex, a student whose transformative story highlights the valuable support vocational training can offer youth with special needs. Alex's employment at Silverlining focuses on his strengths and how he overcame his personal struggles. Witness Alex's inspiring journey and consider how your support can contribute to the success of students like him.

For more info contact: silverlining@thehelpgroup.org



Scan QR code to view Breaking Barriers video of Alex

Connect Through Employment at The Help Group

A career within our multi-faceted organization is rewarding as it provides an opportunity to make a meaningful impact on the lives of individuals with diverse social-emotional and learning needs, families from under-resourced and under-served communities and those seeking supports to build brighter futures for their children and themselves.

Learn more about our work and become part of our team. Check out Careers on our Homepage.

Connect and Engage: Ignite Positive Change

Connect Through Parent Education and Support Groups

The Help Group offers free, ongoing support groups for parents and families of children, adolescents and young adults. Each group is facilitated by a team of experts, including members of The Help Group's educational and therapeutic staff. We welcome you to join us and learn new parenting techniques, gain insights, discover resources and connect with others through shared experiences.



Parents Like Me, school-age parent support groups



LGBTQ+ Kaleidoscope, Family Supports



Parent 2 Parent Support group for parents of young adults



SUMMER CAMPS 2024

Sherman Oaks, CA

For 6 – 17 year olds across the autism spectrum

kidslikemela.org/camps

STARTS JUNE 10TH



APPLY TODAY

Our 2023 Reach and Impact

For more than 60 years, The Help Group has partnered with children and their families to provide comprehensive and multi-faceted services that uplift, empower and strengthen lives within the vast network of communities we serve.

Who we Serve:

Age Demographics:

UNDER 17 63%

18+ 36%

Each year, we reach:

6,000 CHILDREN and families with our services

We have a dedicated, caring team of: **750 STAFF**



We are located:

On **6 MAJOR CAMPUSES** in the greater Los Angeles region.



Last year, we celebrated:

120 STUDENTS graduating from Help Group Schools.



In our programs:

3,000 CHILDREN AND FAMILIES living in under resourced communities received Mental Health services and supports.



2,000 PARENTS AND PROFESSIONALS received educational supports with access to our Credentialing Education offerings, webinars and trainings and support groups.



200 LGBTQ+ youth received our affirming supports.



We partnered with:

80 SCHOOL DISTRICTS across Southern California

7 MAJOR governmental agencies:

L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services

L.A. County Department of Mental Health

L.A County CalWORKs Welfare-to-Work program, Department of Public Social Services

CA Department of Education

CA Department of Rehabilitation

CA Department of Health Care Services

US Department of Housing and Urban Development



Beyond our staff and administration, we thank the many who make the work we do possible, including the many generous donors and the more than 200 volunteers in classrooms and at our community events who enhance our programs and enrich the lives of those we support.



Ask the Expert

EPIDEMIC OR GREATER AWARENESS:

What's behind the dramatic increase in autism diagnosis?

By Dr. Laurie Stephens, Senior Director of Autism Programs

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause a wide range of social, communication and behavioral challenges. Once thought to be rare, the prevalence of autism has skyrocketed in the past 20 years. In the late 1990's, it was estimated that ASD occurred in approximately 1 in every 10,000 children. By 2004 that number had jumped to 1 in 250 children and in the beginning of 2023, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported the prevalence of ASD in the United States to be 1 in every 36 children.

At The Help Group we are often asked if this increase is "real" or a factor of better awareness and acceptance, leading to increased diagnosis. And if autism is truly increasing, what is causing this increase? We know that increased prevalence in autism has been influenced by greater awareness, improved expertise in diagnosis, and an expanded definition. However, it is unclear that these factors totally account for the increase.

One interesting, recent finding is that for the first time since autism prevalence records were kept, Asian, Black, and Hispanic children are now exceeding Caucasian children in diagnosis. This change likely reflects improved awareness of autism and better access to services among previously underserved communities. It also indicates that the prevalence of autism was likely underreported all these years in minority populations.

As the signs of ASD become more commonly known and access to diagnostic services increases, this will lead to more children (and adults!) receiving the diagnosis. But another factor to consider is that the diagnostic criteria were refined and broadened when the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) was revised in 2013. Thus, while we know that we have gotten better at diagnosing autism, we have broadened the criteria for the diagnosis.

Researchers have also looked at the genetics of autism as it, and other neurodevelopmental disorders, tend to run in families. As of 2022, more than 185 genes have been identified as "significantly associated with autism." It has been hypothesized that the genes may be mutating as they are passed from generation to generation, leading to a higher occurrence of autism. It is also thought that the high number of genes associated with autism may partly explain the wide spectrum of symptoms and levels we see in autism. However, the exact role genetics plays in autism remains unknown.

Finally, there have been several environmental risk factors that are thought to play a role in autism. Various prenatal and birth complications are associated with an increased risk of autism, including preterm birth, low birth weight and maternal diabetes or high blood pressure during pregnancy. Increased parental age at time of conception has also been associated with autism. Other complications that have been associated with autism include fetal distress, umbilical-cord complications, and cesarean delivery. Exposure to environmental toxins, including pesticides, microwaves and air pollution may contribute to autism.

In summary, more people are being diagnosed with autism now than ever before, which has raised the question of why? We now know more about autism and its various forms than we did back in the 90's, and as we gain more knowledge, we are better able to identify autistic individuals, which has led to expanded diagnostic criteria. Expanding the diagnosis in turn increases the prevalence rate. We have improved and standardized diagnostic instruments which has allowed clinicians to diagnose people of all ages more accurately. Autism advocates have worked hard to destigmatize autism, and this has likely led to more people seeking diagnostic confirmation. Greater awareness of autism, particularly the early signs of autism, has led to more minority and underserved children receiving proper diagnosis. These explanations all indicate that there may not be more autistic people being born now than in the past, but that we are better at identifying them. This idea, however, does not hold up to scientific rigor as the sole cause of the increase in autism prevalence. Research has also highlighted genetic factors that may lead to autism, in addition to potential environmental causes. Thus, the increase in incidence is most likely caused by a multi-faceted combination of gene mutations, environmental causes – though no one cause has clearly been linked to autism – and a greater understanding of what autism is. The upside of all of this is that there are now better services, supports, educational and therapeutic programs available for those diagnosed with autism and their families.

If you have concerns or questions about your child, The PLAN Center offers diagnostic evaluations and developmental assessments. thehelpgroup.org/p-l-a-n-center/

Administrative Office

13130 Burbank Boulevard
Sherman Oaks, California 91401

Upcoming Events:

Music for Autism Concert

Experience music as a family at this free, autism-friendly, interactive concert

The Help Group Autism Center
March 17, 2024

Upcoming Webcast

Free, live monthly webcasts where we have experts in education and the special needs community provide valuable insights to parents, educators, and mental health professionals.

For event calendar visit: thehelpgroup.org/webcasts
April 10, 2024

Festival of Arts: I See the World, the World Sees Me Exhibition

A Celebration of Young Artists sponsored by Bear Givers

Brad Buckman Photography Studio
April 14, 2024

Special Needs Resource Fair

Discover the wonderful resources that Los Angeles has to offer its special needs community | Free Admission

The Help Group Autism Center
April 28, 2024

Mental Health Awareness Breakfast

Engage with experts on destigmatizing mental health and promoting prevention and intervention sponsored by Lumina Counseling

The Help Group Autism Center
May 9, 2024

2024 Annual Conference

Featuring leading experts whose research and practice support, advance and celebrate neurodiverse young people

Skirball Cultural Center
Keynote Speaker: Dan Siegel, M.D.
November 15, 2024

Schools & Educational Programs:

Bridgeport School · Bridgeport Voc. Ed. Center · North Hills Prep · STEM³ Academy · Summit View School
Sunrise School · Village Glen School · Westview · Young Learners

Programs:

The Help Group Child & Family Center · Lumina Counseling · Outpatient Mental Health Services
Intensive Family-based Programs · Prevention & Early Intervention · Kaleidoscope LGBTQ+ Services & Supports
Adolescent & Adult Vocational Services · Kids Like Me Enrichment Classes & Camps
Advance LA Life Skills Coaching · Paws and Pals Animal Assisted Intervention
The Help Group Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders · Project Six Residential Program

University Affiliations:

The Help Group - UCLA Autism Alliance
The Help Group - UCLA Neuropsychology Program
The Help Group - USC Occupational Science Initiative

Campuses:

CULVER CITY · INGLEWOOD · SHERMAN OAKS EAST · SHERMAN OAKS WEST · VALLEY GLEN · VAN NUYS

Administrative Offices

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