

# Berkshire Hills Music Academy

Life Skills • Vocation • Music

[www.berkshirehills.org](http://www.berkshirehills.org)

SUMMER 2018 Newsletter

## Graduation at BHMA: A Captivating Display of Achievement & Acceptance

With a gray sky looming overhead, the eleven members of BHMA's class of 2018 radiated their own light as they **entered the next phase of their independence**. Attended by family, friends, board members, staff, and other special guests, the graduation ceremony on May 20 marked the successful completion of our Two Year Certificate Program—time spent practicing music, gaining independent living skills, and developing job competencies. From the opening procession to the obligatory cap toss, our sixteenth graduation ceremony was **a captivating display of acceptance**—an idea that is central to our mission. Reflected in the day's speeches and the Performance Troupe's moving rendition of "If the World Only Knew," the power of celebrating people for who they are was undeniable. Combined with the tangible feeling of accomplishment that hung in the air, the ceremony was BHMA at its finest.



an organization that "provides information, support, and assistance to parents of children with disabilities, their professional partners, and their communities." Throughout his speech, Robison strongly conveyed his belief that **people with disabilities have unique contributions to offer the world**, something he has learned from personal experience. Describing her as his "greatest teacher," Robison was joined by his

daughter Amy on stage, and together the dynamic duo delivered spirited encouragement to the graduates. Robison ended his time at the podium by urging the members of the class of 2018 to keep being themselves and doing what they love. As he declared, "Our world needs each and every one of you. We need your talents; we need your humor; we need your music; we need your souls."



Rich Robison, the recipient of our Visionary Award, echoed the theme of acceptance as he delivered the c o m m e n c e m e n t address. Entering the world of disability after becoming the parent of two children with Down syndrome, Robison is the longtime Executive Director of the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN)—

The eleven graduates—Alexandra, Andrea, Andrew, Ashley, Cara, Ethan, Jen, Michael, Michela, Otto, and Stephen—read their speeches in a powerful act of personal expression. Ashley spoke of how she has come to thrive, stating, "**I'm more confident now, and happy to be here at this school. Berkshire Hills has helped me grow.**" Ethan talked about what it means to him to have a disability and be immersed in our community, saying, "I have autism, and I've learned that a lot of different people also have autism like me. It feels good to be around other people with my disability. We learn together." Cara articulated how being self-sufficient matters to her, asserting, "**I like doing things on my own. Being independent is important to me.**" And Alexandra expressed her appreciation, stating, "Thank you, Dad. Thank you for letting me come here...it is really special for me to come to BHMA." Many graduates will stay at BHMA and join our LIVE program where they will concentrate on and develop their individual interests—music, art, or general vocation. We hope everyone in the class of 2018 continues to cultivate their originality, share their talents, and celebrate themselves and their abilities.



# A Message from BHMA

## Founder Looks Back: Two Decades Building a Dream

We have arrived! In the past twenty years, Berkshire Hills Music Academy has grown from a seedling concept for a two-year school to an extraordinary community. We now serve over 60 individuals with many different disabilities—united in a shared love of music.

As I step down as founding Chair of the Board, I look back at these years with satisfaction and awe. Watching young people mature and gain confidence has been my greatest reward.

A volunteer fundraiser and mother of two boys, one with Williams syndrome, I found my calling in 1996. Dr. Howard Lenhoff had brilliantly imagined the concept of the music academy and asked me to help, as the idea needed support. It would have remained a dream if not for generous donors, beginning with my husband Peter, our family, and our friends. Carrying the banner of enthusiasm, **together we have been able to raise nearly \$10 million.**

Through student performances at our gala events, potential donors experienced firsthand that **showcasing abilities was critical to the success of overcoming disabilities.** Sharing the spotlight were famous and talented musicians who donated their time to perform for our cause. Without our amazing supporters, most of whom do not have children with disabilities, we would never have come this far.

It has been my great honor to work side by side with many wonderful volunteers, including fellow Founders and the Board, the Professional Advisory Board, various committees, and the key administrative staff. **The commitment of the Board and staff to continuously move Berkshire Hills forward** is what makes BHMA a truly one-of-a-kind program. I am extremely proud of what we have accomplished and am very excited for the future.

**The new Bernon Music Center, opened in Fall 2017, has already exceeded expectations and goals in so many ways.** Thanks to the support of our *Building Our Future* campaign donors, lifelong learning and access to music-centric opportunities are being realized in the BMC on a daily basis. To show our appreciation of those who gave so generously of their treasure, time, and talent, we will be honoring our leadership campaign donors at a special reception and donor wall unveiling in the fall.

Looking forward, I could not be more delighted that fellow Trustee Frank Orlando will be my successor as Board Chair. Frank is an insightful and strategic thinker and will lead BHMA admirably. Berkshire Hills will be extremely well positioned with Frank as the Chair of this excellent and visionary Board.

I look forward to being a part of BHMA for many years to come—as founder, committee member, former Trustee, and parent.

With much gratitude,

Kay Bernon

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## NEW KITCHEN FOSTERS GROWTH OF COOKING PROGRAM, STUDENT CONFIDENCE

At the end of every cooking class, students file out of the teaching kitchen with a sense of satisfaction and eager smiles—ready to eat the meal they just prepared for themselves. After following recipes that suit their palates—ranging from pasta alfredo and broccoli, to turkey burgers—they leave feeling accomplished for having created a meal on their own. As recent Two Year Certificate Program graduate Andrea says, “I feel proud about my cooking...I’ve learned to cook all by myself.”



**Being able to cook is a crucial skill for independence**—one that our Life Skills curriculum develops by increasing students’ ability to understand and implement meal preparation, healthy eating, and kitchen safety.

Over the course of the semester, individuals in the cooking program split class time between theoretical and practical learning. Each class begins with a lesson on nutrition and kitchen safety. As Cooking Teacher Leigh Daniels and Life Skills Assistant Connor Sheriden write, the “lessons are a fun, interactive way to learn the details of macronutrients and inform the students of everything they are putting into their body.” Using the food pyramid and the five food groups, **the nutrition portion of the class promotes healthy snacking, appropriate portions, and balanced meals.** In the second half of class, students apply their earlier learning to make healthy recipes that are customized to their preferences. Exemplifying this concept, recent graduate Andrew says, “I make my own protein shakes, and make healthy choices, so that I get stronger.”



Cooking at BHMA is made easier by assistive technology that allows individuals with disabilities to better navigate the kitchen and execute recipes on their own. Integrated into our program over the past five years, **assistive technology has changed the way students learn and practice cooking skills.** As Life Skills Teacher Karen Morison explains, all cooking classes utilize an application called Pictello, which allows students to receive both a verbal and visual instruction for each individual step of the cooking process. Throughout the semester, recipes are repeated to further mastery of basic cooking techniques, and the length and level of difficulty are increased as students work toward the goal of creating a variety of full, balanced meals.

The Bernon Music Center’s state-of-the-art teaching kitchen has also revolutionized the cooking program at BHMA. Opened in Fall 2017, it features six independent cooking stations that mirror apartment-style living, each with its own set of tools.

Our teaching kitchen employs the use of adaptive cutting boards, can openers, egg crackers, large kitchen timers, and rocking knives,



allowing students to be safe as they manage more of the cooking process independently. **The innovative set-up gives students the space to experience all elements of the meal creation process on their own—from preparation to clean up, and it fosters accountability for how their recipe turns out.** “This independence is a huge confidence builder for our students,” states Morison.

### Have you made your gift to BHMA’s Annual Appeal in 2018?

To everyone in our community who has made a donation to Berkshire Hills Music Academy during the current fiscal year, thank you.

Your generous gifts have improved current programs, made new initiatives possible, and enhanced the BHMA experience for those we serve.

If you have not yet donated to BHMA’s annual appeal this year, please join us. You can make your gift with the envelope enclosed, or online at [www.berkshirehills.org/giving](http://www.berkshirehills.org/giving). Your support ensures a brighter future for young adults with intellectual disabilities.

### Stay connected to BHMA

Have you moved recently? Have you changed a phone number or email address?

If you need to get better connected to BHMA, please update or add your information online at <http://bit.ly/updateBHMA>.



## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: ANA LI

Ana Li began her journey at BHMA as a 16-year-old Summer Program participant in 2014. She has attended every summer since then, and made the transition into our Two Year Certificate Program last fall. As Ana Li enters her second year at

BHMA, there are many successes to reflect on. An active and engaged member of our community, she has taken advantage of many of the opportunities for participation across the board. When asked about her favorite classes, Ana Li exclaimed, "Music is my favorite! I love playing the drums in World Music Ensemble, and Musical Theater is so much fun." She is a talented drummer, pianist, and vocalist, with a desire to learn and grow her repertoire. Described by staff as a social butterfly, she is kind, compassionate, and helpful. She maintains innumerable friendships from her hometown on Massachusetts' North Shore, as well as here on campus. She loves being in the company of others and listed going into town with her friends, playing on the BHMA soccer and basketball teams, and attending open mic nights at local music venues as a few of her favorite recreational activities. Ana Li embodies the spirit of Berkshire Hills; she is highly motivated and demonstrates a strong work ethic in her many endeavors. She exudes pride in all domains— whether she is whipping up delicious dumplings in cooking class, buying groceries for her apartment, working shifts as an associate at TJ Maxx, or managing her hard-earned cash in Money Management class. She continues building her independence each day, all while immersing herself in an environment filled with music. We are so excited to see what else is in store for Ana Li at BHMA!



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Tim helped us promote Valley Gives Day on May 1. With the support of our community, we raised nearly \$5,000.



Our second-year group took a class trip to celebrate before graduation—the day included trampoline jumping, museum venturing, and ice cream eating.



Our Ascending Artists capped off a successful semester with a trip to Amherst College's Mead Art Museum.



Ana Li, staff Melina, and Emma took a break from the action of Field Day to pose for a picture at the photobooth.