



DENIM & DIAMONDS GALA: A NIGHT OF COUNTRY, CELEBRATION, AND COMMUNITY

The spirit of Berkshire Hills Music Academy was shining bright under the stars at this year's Denim & Diamonds Gala—a sparkling evening of country flair, heartfelt moments, and dazzling performances. Transformed by their western gear and glitter, 270 guests gathered to “whoop it up” for BHMA’s ongoing mission to empower adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through music and community.

For families, friends, supporters and staff, the most anticipated highlight of a BHMA Gala is entertainment by multiple BHMA talents. The accomplished musicians of the Jazz Ensemble performing on the porch set the tone for an evening of musical joy. Energy continued to build as the Capabilities took the stage with a lively country set that had the crowd singing and clapping along to favorites like “9 to 5” by Dolly Parton and “Sweet Home Alabama” by Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Inviting even more participation, BHMA’s SHINE Vocational Dance group led a line dance lesson, getting guests out of their seats and onto the dance floor. With people of all ages and with various connections to one another taking

steps together, this made an unforgettable moment showing the music mission of BHMA in action.

As a popular new feature, the event introduced a unique BHMA bracelet by well known designer Kendra Scott. The sale gave buyers the chance to show off their affiliation, with proceeds going to BHMA. The evening also included a special moment of gratitude and appreciation for outgoing CEO Michelle Theroux, recognizing her twelve years of visionary leadership and dedication to the BHMA community.

Together, we brought in nearly \$160,000 in sponsorships and more than \$12,000 through our raffle and auction—a true celebration of generosity and community spirit. Thank you to everyone who made it possible! Proceeds from the gala help BHMA continue providing life-changing opportunities in music, learning, and independence for our participants.

Special thanks to this year’s gala committee, co-chaired by Mary Richardson and Lori Swartz, along with committee members Sarah Aasheim, Michelle Foard, Mona Jomaa, Kerry Medeiros, Karen Phillips, and Mary Tierney. Their creativity, organization, and energy brought this night to life.

The Denim & Diamonds Gala was more than an evening of music and fun—it was a powerful reminder of the joy and belonging that thrive at BHMA. With every performance, every dance, and every shared laugh, our community continues to grow stronger and shine brighter.

Save the Date: We look forward to welcoming you back next year for our 2026 Gala on **Saturday, September 19, 2026**. The theme will be revealed in the coming months—stay tuned for more details!





Kay and Peter Bernon and Family



EXCELLENCE IN MUSIC: A NEW ERA OF PERFORMANCE AT BHMA

Berkshire Hills Music Academy is proud to announce the launch of the Excellence in Music: Bernon Fund, made possible through a \$1 million gift from Kay and Peter Bernon and Family. This transformative investment, distributed over five years, will strengthen BHMA's commitment to musical excellence by supporting skilled Music Instructors, advancing professional development, building up the Vocational Performance Track, and nurturing ensembles of accomplished musicians to represent the school at high-profile events.

According to Kay Bernon, "Additionally, and equally important, this re-orientation to the founding vision of an education focusing on 'abilities first' is intended to support all BHMA participants to reach beyond what society has typically understood of as a disability, and encourage each one to develop and polish their unique gifts. With staff guidance toward achievable goals, you grow better, grow more confident, grow to be who you can be."

A newly formed Performance Program Advisory Committee will provide expert advice as BHMA continues to expand opportunities for performers to shine on stage and in the community.

DANCING TOGETHER: CELEBRATING INCLUSION THROUGH MOVEMENT

Berkshire Hills Music Academy recently hosted an Inclusive Dance Workshop led by Director of Dance and Movement, Mary Ann Holmes, in partnership with the South Hadley Cultural Council, Mass Cultural Council, and Embrace with Mary Ann. The event brought together individuals with and without disabilities to celebrate creativity, expression, and connection through movement.

The program highlighted BHMA's ongoing commitment to inclusion and community engagement. Participants from across the Valley came together to move, create, and perform, exploring dance as both a personal and collaborative art form. Each dancer contributed their own unique strengths and perspectives, fostering trust, confidence, and belonging.

Reflecting on the experience, Mary Ann shared, "I'm so proud of everyone and the amazing work they did and the beautiful community they created."

One participant echoed that sense of connection and growth, sharing, "A project like this was completely out of my comfort zone, but I feel so grateful to have been surrounded by such open-minded and creative people. I learned something from every person in the room. The individuality that each person brought to this project continues to remind me of the importance of community, holding space for one another, and being uniquely ourselves."

The result of this workshop was powerful: performers grew in confidence, audiences experienced artistry in new ways, and conversations around inclusion deepened across the community.

Through programs like this, BHMA continues to highlight the beauty of diversity and the importance of creating spaces where everyone can shine-moving together, learning from one another, and celebrating the many ways we can express what it means to be human.

VOCATIONAL SPOTLIGHT: JEN & ADAM

Vocational Spotlight: Jen Barrett & Adam Shipp

At Berkshire Hills Music Academy, our vocational program supports participants as they prepare for and maintain meaningful employment in the community. This year, we are proud to highlight two individuals who have shown tremendous growth in both independence and confidence through their work experiences.

Jen Barrett has been a valued member at Craft Salon in South Hadley for over a year, where she continues to thrive in her role. Working a few hours each week, Jen helps keep the salon running smoothly by dusting, sweeping, and folding towels and salon capes. What began as a supported placement has evolved into a position that Jen now manages independently—no longer working with a job coach, she relies on her own skills and the natural supports within the salon community. “I love it,” Jen shares. “I love doing things with more independence.”

Amanda, the salon’s manager, adds, “Jen brings so much added value beyond the good work she does. She’s a joy to have around and has become part of our family of stylists and clients—who always look forward to the next time she’ll be working.”

Adam has found a welcoming team at Rocky’s Ace Hardware in South Hadley. With past work experiences behind him, Adam now thrives in a position where he feels a true sense of community. He even played a part in Rocky’s recent move to a larger location. “They’re nice there,” Adam shares. “They tell me what I need to do, and I do it by myself. I schedule my rides with PVTA—and I even work the cash register.” His manager, Allan, says, “Adam brings a special energy to this place when he’s here. He’s always ready to jump in and help whenever there’s a need.”

Building Independence Through Work

The journey toward independence looks different for every participant, but Jen and Adam both demonstrate how determination, confidence, and community support can make a powerful impact. Through their hard work, they’re not only building valuable job skills but also showing what’s possible when opportunities are made accessible for all.



FIVE SAXY GUYS: A PERFORMANCE OF HEART AND HARMONY

Michael Cote, Matt Cloughley, John Libera, Franklin Nichols and instructor Paul Coffill make up Berkshire Hills Music Academy’s Woodwind Ensemble—affectionately known as Five Saxy Guys. This talented group of multi-instrumentalists shares a deep love for the saxophone and a passion for performing everything from classical pieces to pop tunes and jazz favorites. With all four sizes of saxophones in the mix, their performances blend color, texture, and creativity in a way that’s uniquely their own.

While John, Matt, Michael, and Franklin also perform in other BHMA ensembles, this group gives them a special opportunity to join Paul, BHMA’s Woodwind Instructor, to explore their shared enthusiasm for chamber music—and have plenty of fun along the way. Their music can be challenging as it requires not only individual skill but sensitivity to the rhythms and timing of the separate parts.

On Sunday, September 28, Five Saxy Guys gave an impressive, polished concert at St. Paul’s Unitarian Universalist Church in Palmer, MA. They were introduced by Church Music Director Wes Hunter, a Music Instructor at BHMA. The event was dedicated to the memory of a beloved longtime church member and music director, adding a touching layer of meaning to the afternoon.

The program featured a lively and diverse repertoire, including arrangements for saxophone quintet, clarinet trio, and flute trio. From the flowing beauty of “Amazing Grace” to the spirited “Entry of the Gladiators,” and from a Celtic Suite and Spanish melodies to the folk classic “The Water is Wide,” the ensemble showcased their versatility and artistry.

Franklin, John, Michael, Matt, and Paul performed with warmth, precision, and heart—captivating the audience and demonstrating the power of music to connect, comfort, and celebrate.

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MEADOW LANE: A PLACE TO GROW, LEARN, AND BELONG

Just a short walk from Berkshire Hills Music Academy, Meadow Lane is home to four residents who are each developing greater independence within a supportive, structured, and engaging environment.

At Meadow Lane, daily life is centered on learning, growth, and connection. Residents build practical life skills—like cooking, cleaning, budgeting, and time management—while also learning the importance of teamwork, communication, and mutual respect. Meadow Lane is more than just a place to stay; it's a true home—safe, consistent, and empowering.

Each resident takes responsibility for maintaining their personal space, following morning routines, and keeping on schedule for classes and work. These habits foster accountability and self-reliance, helping each individual feel proud of their progress.

Mealtimes often bring everyone together. Whether preparing individual dishes or cooking side by side, the kitchen is a lively hub filled with conversation and collaboration. With the guidance of their house manager residents are encouraged to explore new recipes and gain confidence in their cooking abilities.

Beyond the kitchen, residents also work closely with their house manager on budgeting and planning—skills that allow them to make thoughtful choices about their spending and to participate in preferred community activities. From local outings to weekend adventures, the Meadow Lane residents stay active and connected to the broader community around them.

At its heart, Meadow Lane embodies what it means to live independently with support: a balance of structure and freedom, personal growth and shared joy. Here, friendship and daily life intertwine, creating a home where every resident can continue to grow, learn, and truly belong.



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