



# BHMA

BERKSHIRE HILLS MUSIC ACADEMY

## GRADUATION DAY AT BHMA: A CELEBRATION OF REALIZING DREAMS

Dressed in forest green caps and gowns on a cool spring morning, the graduates of the class of 2019 lined up outside before following the procession through the lobby of the Bernon Music Center. As the familiar tune of Pomp and Circumstance filled the performance hall, they marched in behind board members, founders, and staff, and were greeted by loud applause and congratulatory cheers. With only seven individuals—Josiah Alicea, Travis Dobson, Ana Li Harper, Omar Jomaa, Madhav Malhotra, Brandon Marquis, and William Duffy, who graduated the day before—it is a small yet cohesive group that together participated in life skills classes, went on vocational outings, and immersed themselves in music. The May 19th graduation marked their completion of our Two-Year Certificate Program, and also commemorated the twentieth anniversary of BHMA's founding in 1999. Through the day's speeches, presentation of certificates, and Franklin Nichols and Justin Scott's moving performance of "Wind Beneath My Wings," the ceremony was a joyful celebration of realizing dreams—both on an individual and programmatic level.

As a hallmark of BHMA's graduations, students opened the event by delivering their own speeches that reflected on their time in our two-year program—covering everything from personal accomplishments and future goals, to gratitude for those who supported them. Brandon Marquis is a great drummer and rock singer, and he spoke about the variety of skills he acquired, stating "I learned how to be more independent at Berkshire Hills by taking care of my money, following my own schedule, learning how to talk to staff about different things, and performing in front of an audience." Ana Li Harper gave an enthusiastic speech that detailed her trips to Big Y, her piano lessons, and her time living in the women's on-campus apartment; she closed by

saying "without this school I would not have become a better person." William Duffy loves technology and hopes to be a videographer, declaring "I want to work at Berkshire Hills and share my knowledge and experiences with others." Many graduates will continue at BHMA as part of our Long-Term Independent Vocational Experience (LIVE) Program, where they will focus on obtaining paid employment in the areas of music, vocation, art, or dance.

In an apt tribute given the twenty-year anniversary, the Visionary Award was presented to four BHMA founders: Thomas Dwyer Jr., Esq, Veronica Ohanian Heath, Laura Wernick, MEd, and Kay Bernon. Each individual was acknowledged and honored for their remarkable contributions in making BHMA a reality—from friendraising and fundraising, to advocacy and legal work. Kay Bernon, introduced as a force of resilience and an incredible connector, delivered the commencement address. Centered on the theme of *ikigai*, a Japanese word that Bernon described as the reason you get up in the morning, her speech detailed how every person's *ikigai* is unique. For her son with Williams syndrome, CB, music has always been his *ikigai*—allowing him to develop his sense of self and connect with others. Bernon quickly recognized the power of music for individuals with disabilities, and joined with the other founders to build a program where people are celebrated for their abilities and music is the key to other forms of success. It is clear that twenty years later, as BHMA's sixteenth graduating class sat in the audience, Bernon and the rest of the Founders made the dream of BHMA—and the dreams of all of its past, current, and future graduates—come true.

**ABOVE:** THE MEMBERS OF THE CLASS OF 2019 TOSS THEIR CAPS IN THE AIR.

## Founders

Kay Bernon  
Thomas E. Dwyer Jr., Esq  
Deborah Goldberg, MBA  
Nancy Goldberg, MEd  
Veronica Ohanian Heath  
Howard Lenhoff, PhD  
Sharon E. Libera, PhD  
Laura Wernick, MEd

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On March 15, 2019, BHMA marked 20 years since its founding and incorporation. In the late 1990s, our founders envisioned a place where individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities could learn and thrive while being immersed in a music-infused environment. Through dedication and perseverance, the founders created our unique program and welcomed the first class of students in 2001.

We have evolved and changed over the years—as our student body has increased, we have offered more dynamic programming, provided additional vocational options, and expanded our campus. Despite our growth, BHMA's mission holds as true today as it did 20 years ago!

We owe a debt of gratitude to the pioneers of our program. At this year's graduation, four of our founders received the Visionary Award, an award given to honor individuals who have made an impact in bettering the lives of people with disabilities. To commemorate the achievement, each honoree was presented with a glass sculpture of a G-clef—a musical symbol used at the start of a staff to indicate the pitch. How appropriate when you consider that these wonderful individuals began and set the tone for what was to become BHMA.

As we look forward to the next 20 years at BHMA, the board of trustees and the administration are committed to serving our individuals in meaningful ways and helping them grow their independence. Our founders' vision remains at the core of who we are and what we do!

WITH GRATITUDE,

**MICHELLE N. THEROUX**  
Executive Director

**FRANK ORLANDO**  
Chair of the Board



## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: JACK RYAN

“I’m good at dates,” declares rising second-year student Jack Ryan with conviction. Centered around holidays, birthdays, and other significant events, Jack can quickly calculate the exact date or day of the week of something years before and decades ahead. It is an impressive yet unexplainable skill, and one of the ways he easily connects with peers and staff in the BHMA community. A social and inquisitive individual, Jack loves to swim in the ocean, ride the subway in New York City and Washington, D.C., and watch Boston sports and the Olympics. Jack has autism and he is the oldest in a set of triplets—the bond he shares with his siblings Amelia and Conor is apparent when he talks about them and their own college adventures. Born in Los Angeles in 1999, Jack and his family made several stops around the United States—from Idaho to Maryland—before settling in Longmeadow, Massachusetts over ten years ago. He attended the Learning Clinic in Brooklyn, Connecticut for four years and after graduating, Jack started at BHMA as a day student on June 25, 2018.

A year later, he is mastering our social skills curriculum and his banking routine, becoming braver in the kitchen, and establishing job skills at Neighbors Helping Neighbors and the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts. As Life Skills Instructor Angela Papaniou writes, “Jack adds a fun dynamic to any class or outing he is part of. He has built a variety of work skills, including teamwork, and has mastered the balance of being professional while working with his peers.” In the future, he plans to implement what he has learned on the job and become a cashier at the Big Y in Longmeadow. Musically, Jack sings with a beautiful tone, and he is continuing to develop his right- and left-hand coordination on the piano. Through singing hits like “I Lived,” “Let It Go,” and “Sixteen Tons” at Variety Hour, he has practiced being in front of an audience and working with different accompanists. Next year will be an exciting one for Jack—aside from it being a leap year, he is looking forward to performing at nursing homes and going out to lunch each week as part of our Music and Human Services Seminar. Jack is bright, kind, and funny, and is always the first to wish everyone in the BHMA community a happy birthday.



ASCENDING ARTIST

Our Ascending Artist Program continues to try new mediums; artists like Alexandra Kirwan have begun creating ceramic air plant hangers, pendants, and small jewelry dishes.



MHS SEMINAR

Each week students in our Music & Human Services Seminar prepare and deliver music programs for older adults—building vital social, performance, and vocational skills.



TROUPE GIG

The Troupe took a three-day road trip to Washington, D.C. in May to perform at the Center for START Services annual conference, where they have been named the official band.



JEREMY ON WHEEL

On May 16th, LIVE member Jeremy Swartz was a confident puzzle-solving competitor on Wheel of Fortune, a dream come true for him.

## EXPANDING THE BHMA & UMASS PARTNERSHIP: PROMOTING HEALTH AND WELLNESS AT THE BODY SHOP

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The sound of clinking weights and cardio machines fills the UMass Amherst Body Shop Fitness Center on a weekday evening. A scan around the room reveals BHMA residential students like Nicole Balise, Catherine Hackett, and Mark Palardy running on treadmills, lifting weights, and doing small agility drills. They are working hard, with looks of determination and satisfaction painted on their glistening faces. BHMA and UMass students are paired together at each activity—symbolizing the broader significance of BHMA's twice-weekly outings to the fitness center. The Body Shop, described as a teaching lab for Kinesiology students to apply and share their knowledge with the community, gives those at BHMA a chance to access the university in a new way and discover the importance of health and wellness.

Initiated by BHMA Residential Director Mike McArdle in the fall of 2017, trips to the Body Shop are the latest iteration of the partnership originally forged between our program and UMass Amherst in 2001. The fitness center expands beyond the primarily social value of the university's community outreach programs, the Boltwood Project and Best Buddies, to offer education and health-oriented mutual benefits. Kinesiology students have a space to train and connect with people with different abilities—practicing how to tailor their teaching to the individual, how to provide appropriate supports, and how to best relate to diverse segments of the population. Through this unique, collaborative experience, they learn firsthand about creating an inclusive and encouraging fitness environment. BHMA's individuals thrive in this setting, and in receiving personalized workout strategies that are centered around growing their strengths.

BHMA students complete an individual assessment of their needs and abilities at the beginning of the school year, McArdle details, and their "personal trainer" uses the evaluation to devise a workout plan that supports the student's goals. For some, the plan may involve general fitness objectives, such as increasing

stamina and building muscle. Others could have a more targeted approach that addresses deficits in fine and gross motor skills through specific exercises aimed at improving dexterity. From lateral pulldowns and arc trainers, to squats and stretches, the Kinesiology students model proper techniques and safety, while fostering a meaningful bond between trainer and trainee. They also further the knowledge students acquire in our teaching kitchen—reinforcing the advantages of staying hydrated and eating right, while illustrating how both are sources of fuel that are essential when working out.

With raised heartrates and bursts of endorphins, BHMA and UMass students bring the workout plan and the science behind it to life. Through these one-to-one interactions, our individuals develop a strong rapport with their trainer and are integrated into a welcoming fitness setting. BHMA students leave after each session with "a sense of accomplishment and a boost to self-esteem," writes McArdle. A more enduring impact, however, is realizing the benefits of working out as it relates to the health of their body, mind, and overall well-being. These lessons are a critical part of growing autonomy for individuals with disabilities, allowing them to assert control over their bodies and their lives in an engaging and productive way. The Body Shop provides BHMA and UMass students with an opportunity to learn from each other and promote health and wellness, while empowering them to use fitness as a means of building independence and community.



**LEFT:** RISING SECOND-YEAR CATHERINE HACKETT WORKS OUT ON AN ARC TRAINER