

# Our Towns

## People with autism lead group Campaign D



**West Extra**

Caurie Putnam

Guest columnist

On Nov. 17, Dalton Letta takes his final bow as the lead in Artists Unlimited's production of "Shrek the Musical" at Kodak Center. His most influential role, though, is that of the founder of Campaign D, a new organization based on the west side to spread autism awareness and promote inclusivity.

"Campaign D is run by individuals with autism," said Letta, 24, a charismatic actor and autism awareness advocate who was diagnosed with the spectrum disorder at age 3. "It is the personal voice for people with autism and a way to give back to the community."

Community is a key piece of Campaign D, which was recently incorporated and is on its way to nonprofit status.

The group holds many of its activities at the town of Gates' complex on Buffalo Road. Gates was the first town in New York to receive an Autism-Friendly Community designation (by the Autism Council) and has embraced Letta and his organization.

"To watch Dalton grow into this role has been a joy," said Gates Town Supervisor Cosmo A. Giunta, who has known Dalton — also the town's autism ambassador — since he was a little boy. "I'm really proud of him."

It's not unusual to stop by Campaign D's social club on a Friday afternoons at the town's recreation center and find Giunta playing ping pong with club members or a Gates Police Department officer hanging out with the group.

"The best way to learn is through interacting," said James VanBrederode, chief of the Gates Police Department. "Campaign D has added a new dimen-

sion to our training and department. We all know Dalton now and all of our officers have a puzzle piece on their uniform."

The puzzle piece, a universal symbol of autism awareness, is also on all of the town's police cars. Letta has spoken to Gates officers on topics like how to interview individuals on the autism spectrum who have witnessed a crime.

Jerri Sparks of Churchville, who attends Campaign D events with her son Jared, 22, has heard Letta speak on issues such as autism and law enforcement.

"Dalton is such a great leader of this movement because he is so articulate, funny and well informed about the issues," Sparks said. "To have an organization run by individuals with autism is so unique and getting their perspective on issues is so important."

Advocacy is critical to Letta, who hopes Campaign D will have a voice in changing laws and policies beyond a town level. One of his goals is for school districts to improve educating families about transition programs for individuals with autism after they graduate.

After Letta, the son of Krystin Letta and the late Travis Letta, graduated from Greece Arcadia High School in 2013, he faced a period of downtime before his family learned about the Bridge to Earning, Living and Learning (BELL) program at Roberts Wesleyan College.

The four-semester BELL program is an inclusive postsecondary certificate program on campus for students age 18 to 26 with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It focuses on personal growth and also prepares graduates for competitive employment.

Volunteers from the BELL program, from which Letta graduated in 2016 and now serves as the program's special liaison to the community, also attend Campaign D's social club.

That's where you'll also find Letta's mom — giving support to other parents and caregivers of children and adults on the autism spectrum and looking on with pride at her son as he leads Campaign D.

"Before Campaign D, families with members with autism didn't have a presence on the west side," Krystin Letta said.

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From left: Gates Police Chief James VanBrederode, Campaign D founder Dalton Letta, Gates Town Supervisor Cosmo A. Giunta and Daniel Hoock, director of the Gates Recreation & Parks Department. CAURIE PUTNAM