

# NATE'S PARISH

## FROM INCLUSION TO BELONGING

by Cassandra Dougherty



This year, the American with Disabilities Act celebrates 30 years of the landmark document which laid the groundwork for physical access in our country. St. Norbert's is one example of how the ADA has encouraged inclusion and belonging at the parish level. St. Norbert's church was built in 1984, a time of growing awareness for disabilities rights in our country, and shortly before the signing of the ADA in 1990. St. Norbert's is remarkably accessible. There are no steps to get into the church, the doorways are wide and

welcoming and the aisles have ample room for wheelchairs and walkers. This is a story about a fine young man named Nate Makowicz, his faith-filled family, and his parish, St. Norbert's Church in Paoli, PA.



Nate, age 22, is the eldest of three children born to Heather and Dave Makowicz of Malvern, PA. Nate was a miracle child born at 23 and ½ weeks gestation. He was diagnosed at birth with Cerebral Palsy and his health challenges include Epilepsy, and IDD. He is also considered to be on the Autism Spectrum. Nate is a joy to be around and will strike up an animated conversation with anyone around him. He loves scouting, elevators and cracking jokes.

19 years ago, the Makowicz family moved to Philadelphia and immediately began seeking out a parish for their family. When they walked into St. Norbert's, they saw a young man with Spina Bifida walk up to the lectern with crutches and read the scripture passage for the day. This man's witness had an immediate impact on Heather and she turned to Dave and said, "This is where we need to be".

When the Makowicz Family first began attending Mass at St. Norbert's, like many families of children with disabilities, they sat in the back. Their family, which included Nate and his two younger siblings Noah and Hope, while feeling very welcomed, did not want to call attention to themselves. Nate was energetic and verbal and did not always filter his responses at Mass. It was their pastor at the time, Fr. Dominic, who approached them while Nate was preparing for First Holy Communion. He pointed out that it would be a long walk for Nate down the aisle to receive communion. He asked them to consider sitting up front to help Nate, but also because St. Norbert's welcomed all children and considered each one a gift to the parish community.

So, the Makowicz family began to sit up front and that is where this story really begins. Other families of children with disabilities started sitting up front with them and before long they had a little pew club. Heather and Dave began 'Hope Ministry' in their parish, a support group for parents and siblings of children with disabilities. They met regularly in each other's homes, eventually outgrowing their space and moving to their parish meeting room.

As the Makowicz children grew in years, Dave and Heather decided that it was very important that everyone in their family serve at Mass in some way. All three children altar served and both Nate and Nate's younger brother, Noah, became lectors. St. Norbert's welcomed and embraced training Nate as both an altar server and eventually a lector. Nate had a remarkable presence when he read scripture in front of their large congregation, taking appropriate pauses and emphasizing the most important words. His proclamation of the word of God moved people, and Nate proved to be a gift to all who heard him. Sometimes his brother would help him up to the lectern, and there was always a slant board placed on top by the parish to make reading easier for Nate. One day, unbeknownst to the Makowicz family, two permanent railings were built on the altar steps approaching both lecterns. This was an unexpected blessing which helped Nate and many of the elderly in the parish who were also serving at Mass. Heather will never forget that day and one other: The day Fr. Dominic and the parish prayed over their family after the homily at Mass. Nate had been experiencing seizures and their family had entered into a time of great distress. After the homily, with hundreds of hands raised in prayer led by Fr. Dominic, the Makowicz family was blessed with a healing for Nate. It would be many years before Nate would experience a seizure again.



St. Norbert's is an exceptional parish for families with disabilities and the church has embraced many of the principals behind ADA. Admittedly, there have been challenges with both attitudinal and physical barriers over the years, and Nate has pushed past them, moving ever upward and onward like the elevators he loves. The Makowicz's are forever grateful for their St. Norbert's parish family. It is evident that St. Norbert's works hard to create inclusion and belonging. A visit to their narthex with their abundant food bags for those who are hungry, welcome signs for newcomers and more ushers than any other parish around, is a testament to their Gospel values. More importantly, Nate feels like he belongs and it is the place he calls his parish home.