

## Family of six helps special needs community

BY MEGAN CROUSE EDITOR | Posted: Wednesday, September 3, 2014 10:15 am

**BOONTON TWP.** - Inspired by a child with a developmental disability, Earl Pedersen and three other members of the Pedersen family now work to help the special needs community.

Their unique solidarity within a unique community was fostered by Earl and Kathy Pedersen's son Ben, 24, who was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorders, autism with attention deficit disorder (ADD), hyperactivity and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and several learning disabilities at about age three.

"He's definitely made me who I am today," said Ben's sister Annie, 26, in an interview on Thursday, Aug. 28. "He's made such a huge impact on my career choices."

His father Earl Pedersen is a financial adviser at Langdon Ford Financial in Parsippany, and works to help families create financial plans to support special needs children.

"Caring for a family member with special needs can at times seem to leave little time for anything else. That is why I help families create personalized strategies that help ensure their loved ones get the care they need," Pedersen said.

Earl Pedersen will be exhibiting his business at the Special Needs Expos New Jersey from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 14 at the Glenpointe Marriott in Teaneck.

Kathy Pedersen works as a paraprofessional at Lake Drive School in Mountain Lakes, a school for deaf and hearing impaired children from birth to high school graduation.

Annie Pedersen started work in September at Early Childhood Learning Center in Chatham, the school for children ages 5 to 21 with disabilities from which Ben graduated.

Dana, Ben's twin sister, is a special education teacher in Baltimore, Md.

Ben himself attends a program run by CommunityOptions called The Daily Plan It, which trains and employs people with disabilities in an entrepreneurial business environment.

The family credits the Mountain Lakes and Boonton Township communities with encouraging Ben's outgoing nature and providing a foundation for his life and work.

This is especially the case for Mountain Lakes, where Ben grew up. The family lived there until about 2008.



### Family Connection

Earl, Ben, and Kathy Pedersen pose in their front lawn in Boonton Township on Thursday, Aug. 28.

“Something very important about the town of Mountain Lakes is that there was always someone looking out for him,” Kathy Pedersen said.

“Ben was fiercely independent; he would ride off on his bike or roller skates, but people were always looking out for him. They say ‘it takes a village,’ and that’s true for us.”

### **The Friend**

Ben Pedersen loves sports. At his family’s home in Boonton Township, in the screened porch beside the pool, Ben proudly showed the championship ring he earned when the Mountain Lakes High School lacrosse team took the state championship twice in a row, in 2007 and 2008.

He has played soccer and lacrosse since second grade, he said. Although he did not attend Mountain Lakes High School, he received special dispensation to play on their sports teams. Now he plays with the JESPY House recreation team out of South Orange, as well as at Pepe Field in Boonton and with his father’s adult soccer team.

“The guys on my team encourage me,” Ben said.

“When I was feeling very nervous, my friends would say ‘no, come out, come out,’ and I would.”

“I love meeting friends,” Ben said.

His family told about how easily Ben makes friends through sports. He’ll join any game, once even joining a soccer game at a hotel in Denmark on a family vacation before the rest of the family had even unpacked the car.

Along with his job at Community Options, Ben sometimes helps his father out at events such as the Special Needs Expos.

The job is “a wonderful thing for me.

“They’re helping me to get better at what I do,” he explained.

### **Career Changes**

Exhibiting at the Special Needs expo is part of Earl Pedersen’s life mission to meet the unique financial needs of people with disabilities and their families.

His move into the field of financial planning for special needs families specifically began when his previous work on Wall Street, at an agricultural exchange for the New York Board of Trade, dissolved.

I was one of those guys you see on TV waving their arms going “Sold! Sold!” Pedersen said. But it wasn’t to last.

“By 2008, 85 percent of all the volume traded was traded electronically,” he said. “Over two years we absolutely saw a shrinking of the trading floor community.”

This necessitated a new job for Pedersen.

After some setbacks, he found work at Langdon Ford Financial and was encouraged by co-workers to create a niche for himself in the special needs field.

Creating a special needs trust fund for Ben gave him some of the experience he needed to begin to learn how to help others with the same kind of processes.

This brought him the same kind of fulfillment he had found when he coached Ben's sports teams.

"Making money is great, but serving society is a part of all of our needs, things we mentally and emotionally need to keep a balance in our minds," he said.

As part of that balance, he has coached multiple sports, taught CCD and been involved in many charity and community groups, as well as playing on Mountain Lakes adult soccer teams for 18 years.

He said that through this and through interactions with Ben he has seen an entire network of their friends and family becoming more understanding of special needs. "Our children's friends who grew up around Ben are so much more compassionate. They're more understanding."

He said that he felt blessed to be able to use his good fortune to help others.

"I'm so proud of knowing that these girls (Dana and Annie) will be able to impact so many lives over the span of their careers. And whether you're a dad coaching kids or a teacher, whether they're typically developing or special needs, you never know how you can impact a child.

Ben's mother Kathy worked in special needs education before Ben was born, and has a degree in therapeutic recreation.

"It's like he doesn't have two parents, he has five parents," she said.

This can create a helpful sense of community, but it also taught the family when to give Ben some space.

Kathy Pedersen said that her education helped her accept Ben for who he was.

She started to work at Lake Drive School in 2007, and said that being accommodating comes naturally to her,

"We try to look at the positives of everything," she said.

She said that, while not everyone Ben has met has been kind to him, the community around him often encourages him, and are rewarded in turn.

"When they encourage him, he encourages them. He's learned good sportsmanship on the Mountain Lakes teams.

"He's always patting them on the back."

### **Family Connections**

Dana and fraternal twin Ben were born March 20, 1990.

"He's 20 minutes older," Earl Pedersen said. "He always rubs that in."

Dana and older brother Pete were a big part of Ben's support group, their father said.

"They really have a connection," he said of the twins.

Pete works on Wall Street, while Dana is a special education teacher in Baltimore.

Ben would call Pete when he needed consolation, the family said, while Dana and Ben have a strong emotional connection.

Annie, 26, graduated from Loyola University in Baltimore, Md., in 2012 with a graduate degree in speech-language pathology.

Before gaining her job as a speech-language pathologist at the Early Childhood Learning Center, she worked at New Beginnings in Fairfield, a school for children with autism, for two years.

"I think that having him as a brother made me always want to become a special education teacher and help kids," she said.

Working at the Early Childhood Learning Center was a dream job for her, Annie said.

She said that her colleagues often compliment her patience, which was something she learned not just in classes, but in growing up with Ben.

"I always feel very comfortable with kids with special needs," she said. "I always feel a connection with them."

"I feel like I'm a better person because of Ben," she said. "We're a better family because of it."

"Some people are just not aware of kids with special needs," Annie said. "They're not very tolerant or patient, and that's part of our job, too."

Like the rest of the family, Earl Pedersen also sees that as part of his job.

*Earl Pedersen can be reached at Langdon Ford Financial (at 973) 299-9222 ext. 317. For more information about the Special Needs Expos, call (516) 279-3727 or visit [specialneedsexpos.com](http://specialneedsexpos.com).*