

Cardinal Cushing Centers CONNECTOR



Vol. 9 No. 2

A PUBLICATION OF CARDINAL CUSHING CENTERS

Spring 2026

The art of learning



Cushing students Anaya Figueroa and Mason Austin participate in a project during a new multimedia arts class.

PHOTO BY KATIE MORRISON

Growing away from home

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

While home is where our story begins, in the words of Maya Angelou, every departure is a new chapter. For Cushing residential student Matt Ripberger, that chapter has been all about newfound growth and independence.

Ripberger, who turned 18 in March, enrolled at Cushing in eighth grade.

“My cousin went there for many years, so we were familiar with Cushing,” said his mother, Marybeth. “We’ve been thrilled. Everyone is awesome, and the communication with the teachers is wonderful. He was with Gabi for several years and she pushed him to do better, and Brent and Amanda in recreation have given him a lot of confidence in sports.”

Ripberger started as a day student, commuting from Plainville. Last year, he made the transition to residential, moving into a house within Cushing’s Hanover community.

“He’s become so active there,” said Marybeth. “He’s gotten involved in so many sports and tried Special Olympics, and even

weightlifting and softball. It’s really been a great opportunity for him, and he wouldn’t have gotten that at home.”

Marybeth admits the decision wasn’t one their family took lightly, but it’s been the best result.

“It’s not an easy thing to hand over your child, especially when you’ve been so involved, but you have to put faith in the process and we’re so glad we took that step,” she said. “It blows my mind, seeing him grow so much. His new attitude has been ‘I’m going to do it.’ It’s been amazing. We never thought we’d be here, but it gives you hope.”

Ripberger is autistic, has anxiety and liver disease and also suffered complex intestinal issues when he was younger, taking him in and out of the hospital for years.

“We stay on top of that, and being as fit as he is helps,” said Marybeth.

Ripberger is also very talented artistically.

“He has great art and animation skills,” said Marybeth. “His grandparents are animators for Disney and he wants to be an



Student Matt Ripberger has enjoyed living at Cushing.

See MATT page 6

**CARDINAL CUSHING CENTERS
CONNECTOR**



A PUBLICATION OF:

Cardinal Cushing Centers
405 Washington St.
Hanover, MA 02339
Tel. 781-826-6371

www.cushingcenters.org

Michelle Markowitz
President and CEO

mmarkowitz@cushingcenters.org

Jansi Chandler

Chief Development Officer

jchandler@cushingcenters.org

Laurie Maranian

Director of Development

lmaranian@cushingcenters.org

AFFILIATED WITH THE SISTERS
OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI



PRODUCED BY:



PKH COMMUNICATIONS
pkhcomm@gmail.com

Connecting all the dots at Cushing



**MICHELLE
MARKOWITZ**

This edition of the Connector truly lives up to its name.

I think you will agree that the connections that Cushing enjoys are impressive – in their depth, scope and range. Students and staff traveling to Bermuda to experience learning that goes well beyond the classroom.

A pen-pal relationship with a school in Africa. A family whose bond with the school covers two

generations and three decades – and continues through their service and philanthropy. An accomplished marathon runner who, after a chance meeting with one of our staff, decided to run Boston for the benefit of Cushing.

We are truly blessed and sincerely grateful to have the partnership of so many from near and far. I think that is a testament

to everyone at Cushing who has worked to create such a fulfilling experience for our students and adults that it compels people to want to support our mission.

We know we have a great story to tell and the Connector helps us do that. Thank you for your interest and enjoy this edition.

Michelle Markowitz is president & CEO of Cardinal Cushing Centers.

BOARD PROFILE

It's all in the (Harris) family

Board member Hadley Harris has a vested interest in Cardinal Cushing Centers, having watched his younger brother, Traves, thrive with the organization for 30 years.

Traves, who turns 46 in May, enrolled at Cushing as a student at age 16 and has since transitioned to the adult residential program. He lives in a newly renovated Washington Street house.

“For Traves, Cushing has been the place where he’s created a home and where he’s made friendships,” said Harris. “Seeing him and his housemates together, it’s like watching an old married couple. And he does it all, whether it’s soccer or bowling or biking. He likes all the activities. We’re just so thankful for everything Cushing has done for Traves and our family, and for the thoughtfulness of the staff over the years.”

Harris is a co-founder and general partner at Eniac Ventures, based in New York City. He focuses on AI-native companies, including the agent layer, tooling, data infrastructure and foundation-level technologies. He also leads the firm’s strategic direction, and has tried to bring his knowledge over to the Cushing board.

“Where I’ve tried to help out is with leveraging technology,” he said. “I’m confident AI will become more important in the years to come. Plus, I can bring a perspective from start-up boards. Ultimately though, I’ve learned a lot more from all of them, especially just seeing what’s possible when people are passionate about their lives’ work. Michelle [Markowitz] has really taken the organization to new heights.”

Before becoming a venture capitalist himself, Harris built two successful, VC-backed startups. He joined Vlingo in 2007, working with talented AI founders out of MIT to manage aspects of the business across product, strategy and marketing, until the company was sold to Nuance. He then became chief business officer at Thumb, a real-time recommendation app that was ultimately acquired by YPulse.

Harris, who grew up in Beacon Hill, earned his bachelor’s in engineering from the University of Pennsylvania and his MBA from Wharton. He began his career as a developer and engineering team lead at Pegasystems, later taking on roles as a product manager at Microsoft and strategist at Samsung. He now lives in Brooklyn with his wife, Anna, and their two sons.



Hadley Harris, left, is connected to Cushing through his brother, Traves.

A legacy of giving to Cushing

BY PHIL AND RITA HARRIS

Cardinal Cushing has been an integral part of our family for almost 30 years. Our son, Traves, attended school and now, as a grown man of 45 years, is part of the residential program. He is one of the many special people who live a fulfilling and happy life, thanks to the caring staff of Cardinal Cushing Centers.

When creating our will, after considering several potential beneficiaries, no other organization and/or persons merited our consideration to the same degree as Cushing, not only because of Traves, but because the mission of Cushing aligns with our personal values. Additionally, when considering our choice, it was paramount that our beneficiary demonstrates a capacity to operate/exist for the long-term; have a compete and reputable



THE HARRIS FAMILY

leadership team and demonstrate a track record of delivering results.

My husband and I, and now our other son, Hadley, have served on the board of trustees for many years. We got a first-hand account that Cushing meets our criteria of delivering day-in and day-out sound programs, delivered

with care and compassion. The organization has a strategic plan for long-term impact and has demonstrated the ability to operate beyond the short-term. Over the years we have witnessed how Cushing has the ability to show innovation and adaptability to ever-changing conditions.

Cushing was our best choice among several potential beneficiaries, not only because of Traves and our desire to insure his long-term welfare, but as a sound investment in the future of an organization whose mission aligns with our family values and fulfills the laudable goals that were established by His Eminence Cardinal Cushing some 50 years ago.

We want our legacy to make a difference. We’re confident that it will.

Rita and Phil Harris are Cushing parents and donors.

Springtime Gala

A LEGACY OF GIVING

May 11, 2026

5:30 p.m.

Seaport Hotel Boston

HONORING

**Kelley and Eddie McGrath
and the Cushing Planned
Giving Advisory Committee**

Tennis serves Henry Buxton well



Henry Buxton enjoys playing tennis at the YMCA.

PHOTOS BY KATIE MORRISON



BY MEAGHAN CASEY

Cushing's Henry Buxton is thriving in his adult years as an athlete, coach, employee, housemate and all-around delightful person.

Buxton, 34, started at Cushing as a student in his teens and is now in the adult residential program. He lives in Marshfield with four others. Eileen Keefe, residential support house manager, has been in the Marshfield house with Buxton since 2018, but has known him since 2014.

"I'm so proud of his independence and advocacy for himself," said Keefe. "He has a life of his own, and he's definitely matured leaps and bounds."

Buxton, who grew up in New York City, started playing tennis when he was young. Keefe says he would join his father at his club in the Hamptons. It's a sport he has never lost interest in.

"In the 12 years that I've known him, he's always played," she said.

"I like it," said Buxton. "It's a good game to play. I enjoy being part of a team and I enjoy my coaches."

Buxton takes lessons at the South Shore YMCA Emilson in Hanover and is part of the Lob-Stars Tennis Team, an inclusive tennis program for adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities. The program, which has been running for more than 20 years, ensures all athletes are welcomed.

Participants range in age from 14 to late 60s and in level from beginners to advanced. Buxton usually participates in two to three travel tournaments each year with the team.

"He's been able to travel with the team on his own now, which is huge," said Keefe. "It just shows his personal growth."

He also participates in a number of other tennis tournaments at the Y, as well as Special Olympics with his team.

For the past few years, Buxton has also started coaching the Junior Lob-Stars, a program for players ages 7-16.

"I like showing them the ropes and helping them out," said Buxton. "It's really fun to help them learn."

Buxton's enthusiasm for tennis also turned into a job at the Y. He works there two mornings a week, watering down the tennis courts, cleaning equipment, prepping the lobby and more.

"He really enjoys it because he's a social guy and loves to be around people," said Keefe. "He loves to see many of his friends that he's made at the Y."

Buxton is glad his path to Cushing brought him to the South Shore, where he has developed such a strong sense of community.

"There are a lot of things I love about Cushing," he said. "I have a job and I get to hang out with my friends. I do a lot of activities, which is fun."

VOLUNTEER PROFILE

Roberts travels the road to volunteerism

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

For more than 25 years, travel agent and certified autism travel professional Holly Roberts has been quietly working behind the scenes, ensuring Cushing graduates get to fully experience the happiest place on earth.

When Cushing first started fundraising for graduating seniors to go on a fully-paid vacation to Walt Disney World, Roberts immediately got involved. She helps coordinate details of the trip and even arrives at the hotel a day early to secure room keys and greet the students upon arrival.

"That way, there's no waiting and they can go directly to their rooms, which is just what they need," said Roberts. "It's so heartwarming when

I'm in the lobby and see them walk in. They're so happy to be there and it's such a special time in their lives."

The annual trip has become a milestone event that Cushing students look forward to for years, and for many, it is their first vacation. Funds for the trip are raised at Cushing's annual St. Patrick's Day Dinner and Auction, sponsored by South Shore Bank. Roberts has also served on the planning committee for the event. This year's event raised \$150,000 and all 14 students in Cushing's graduating class will be Orlando-bound this spring.

Roberts, a Hanover resident, worked for Liberty Travel for many years and is still working two days a week with a former colleague who started her own firm, Travel

Designers in Hingham. She also volunteers at Take 2, the thrift shop at Cushing's MarketPlace, every Friday.

"It's fun working there with the other volunteers and students," she said.

Roberts' late daughter, Erin, attended Cushing for a short time in her teens in the '90s. She was born with Niemann-Pick Type C, a rare and fatal neurodegenerative disease, and passed away at age 24. Roberts and her husband, Michael, also have a younger daughter, Rebecca, and three grandchildren.

"Cushing has always been such a wonderful place to be, and I still love going back," said Roberts. "The employees there care and they want to be there, and you just see the big smiles on the students' faces."



Holly Roberts volunteers at Cushing's MarketPlace.

PHOTO BY KATIE MORRISON

Freedom of expression

By MEAGHAN CASEY

There's a new outlet of expression for Cushing students, thanks to a recently launched multimedia arts vocational site.

"It's a really innovative way to try to promote the student voice and student vision," said Meghan Byrne, Cushing's associate vice president of marketing and admissions. "As with all of our vocational sites, we want to help them move from least to most independent, and collaborate with one another. Social skills will be a big part of this class."

"We were brainstorming about opening a new site, and a lot of students were asking about technology and creativity, so I pitched it to Meghan," said Vinny DeSilva, Cushing's director of vocational services. "It's another opportunity to expose them to global vocational skills."

High school and vocational students are taking the multimedia arts classes, which started in late March, led by Hannah Meallo, who had been working as an administrative assistant for Cushing's Individualized Education Program (IEP) service department, jumped at the opportunity to get into the classroom.

"I always wanted to have a much more interactive role with the students," she said. "I had done some extra volunteering and gone with seniors on the Disney trip, but when I heard about this new program, it just sang to me. I love that I get to flex that creative muscle and work with the students."

Students kicked off the class working on poster or Google Slides presentations about themselves. "There were some really cool little pearls that came out of that, like learning who loves jazz or whose favorite cake is lemon cake," said Meallo. "I want them to understand how to express themselves in a non-traditional way and know that they can be creative without using paint and paper or what they would normally consider typical art supplies."

Meallo plans to focus the first part of the class on photography and videography. Through photography and design, they will work on newsletters, a yearbook and a Cushing cookbook. Through videography, they will explore a newscast, animation and coding.

"They're reporting on events that are meaningful to them," said Byrne. "They're really excited about a yearbook publication and the news broadcasting. And it will be instructional as well, teaching them how to safely navigate Internet technology."

"It's a different way to express their creativity and interests," said DeSilva. "So many of them are way more tech savvy than me, so it's fun to see what they're bringing to the class."

Down the road, Meallo will introduce them to the idea of becoming makers and sellers, creating their own branded merchandise such as T-shirts and artisan products. Embroidery and Cricut machines will likely be introduced, and students will learn about pricing and marketing items.

"I'd love to take them to craft fairs and have them create an Etsy page," said Meallo. "I want them to see you can be self-sufficient off of your hobbies or interests, and this could lead to jobs within the field of media and journalism or by having your own Etsy shop. I want to broaden their horizons and encourage that they can and should do whatever their hearts desire."

Multimedia arts teacher Hannah Meallo instructs her class on how to construct a collage that represents them. 2. Hannah Meallo assists Kate Monach with a project, while Zach Gates shows off his artwork. 3. Cushing student Zach Gates shows off his work. 4. Davide Rosa works on a project. 5. Hannah Meallo works on a laptop with student Xavier Morales. 6. Student Anaya Figueroa places stickers on a collage. 7. Hannah Meallo helps students Anaya Figueroa and Mason Austin. 8. Cardinal Cushing student Hannah Deloury laughs. 9. Student Dylan Singer places stickers on a collage.

PHOTOS BY KATIE MORRISON



Penpals make a world of difference

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

Thanks to a partnership with the Africa Exchange Project, a group of Cushing students have made a special connection with peers half a world apart.

For the past year, they have become pen pals with students in Tanzania, East Africa, exchanging letters, pictures, emails, video recordings and even gifts — like Cushing T-shirts and stuffed animals.

The Africa Exchange Project, a nonprofit, volunteer organization, provides access to clean water, quality education and reliable healthcare in the rural community of Pomerini, Tanzania. Its primary work is building relationships, and all projects are chosen and carried out by the people whose lives

the organization is helping to improve.

“They have a commitment to sharing ideas and culture — the exchange part of the project — so they requested a visit,” said Meghan Byrne, Cushing’s associate vice president of marketing and admissions.

Jim Ahern, chairperson of the organization’s U.S. board, accompanied Tumaini Ngajilo, head of special education at the Pomerini Primary School, to tour Cushing, meet with staff, learn about technology and possibly implement some ideas in his own school.

“He was eager to learn how Americans support children with special needs,” said Byrne.

Following their visit, Byrne reached out to teacher Elizabeth Abbott to see if there was interest in a pen pals program, and

students embraced the idea. They visit the Pomerini School’s Facebook page weekly to check in on their friends, and Abbott and Ngajilo communicate monthly, sharing photos and videos of their classes.

“The students love having their pen pals from Tanzania,” said Abbott. “The connection just melts my heart.”

In addition to the new friendships, Abbott hopes her students are discovering how students learn differently in other cultures and countries.

“When we watch the videos, the students in Tanzania are speaking in another language (sign language or another spoken language) and we talk about how that’s different, but also wonderful. We can embrace our different cultures, countries and abilities.”



Cushing teacher Elizabeth Abbott has enjoyed introducing her students to students in Tanzania. The African students sport their Cushing t-shirts.



Finding a happy home at Cushing

MATT from page 1

animator. He’s into the Marvel superheroes and drawing and editing and all that. Creativity and drawing have been outlets for him since he was young. He uses it as a coping skill.”

Randy Wiskow, Cushing’s manager of art enrichment and community engagement, noticed Rippberger’s talent right away.

“He’s just unbelievable,” said Wiskow. “Early on, I saw he always carried around a sketchbook. He was very shy when he first got here, but he really came out of his shell. I’ve never seen anyone latch onto the Cushing spirit as much as he has. He’s joined every club, sport, committee. It’s great. And, he carries the Franciscan values of helping others and being kind. He’s a good person to be around. He just shines.”

Rippberger is working on some large canvases for Wiskow and sold some of his artwork at Cushing’s St. Patrick’s Day dinner and auction. He enjoys his art studio time and is taking Cushing’s newest multimedia arts class.

Outside of Cushing, Rippberger has also taken classes at MassArt. “We try to give him as many opportunities as possible,” said Marybeth.

Lately, Rippberger has been rotating through job sites through Cushing’s vocational program and is enjoying his work in the MarketPlace.

“He’s gone through all eight of our sites, as well as off campus

with our job coach,” said Vinny DeSilva, Cushing’s director of vocational services. “He’s just a great kid all around. He’s really come into his own, showing growth and independence.”

In the fall, Rippberger also went to Bermuda with a small group of Cushing students and adult participants.

“That was a great opportunity,” said Marybeth. “He loves to travel and see new things.”

Basketball has become a new passion for him as well, and he’s become one of the best defensive players at Cushing. Win or lose, he always enjoys being part of the team.

“This is my first year coaching Matt on the basketball team, but he easily became one of my favorite players to coach,” said vocational teacher and basketball coach Jared Foster. “When he first started practicing, what he lacked in skill, he made up for in determination and hard work, especially on the defensive end. His willingness to listen and get better every day really showed as the season went on. He’s definitely the most improved player on the team. I can’t wait to see his continued growth next season.”

Rippberger’s next goal is to get his driver’s license, and Marybeth says he takes a practice test on his own on a regular basis.

“We want him to know he can achieve what he wants, no matter how long it takes,” she said. “We’ll always support him.”



Matt Rippberger enjoys his art studio time at Cushing.

Supporting Cushing is a marathon, not a sprint

By MEAGHAN CASEY

For runner Karin Herzmann, the Boston Marathon marks her 114th marathon, and holds special meaning. She is running for Cardinal Cushing Centers, and in honor of a family friend's late daughter, Emily, who had Down syndrome.

"As an athlete, I wanted to run Boston to give back to the community," said Herzmann. "It's a chance to give kids more opportunities to experience different aspects of life, and Cushing gives them that chance."

Herzmann, who lives in Minnesota, said running has brought her around the world. She has run marathons in every state at least once, as well as 10 international marathons. In 2022, while vacationing in Costa Rica, she met Danielle Silverberg, Cushing's director of health services. The two kept in touch and Silverberg saw her run the Cape Cod Marathon and mentioned Cushing offers Boston bibs.

"Immediately, I took interest in Cardinal Cushing Centers," said Herzmann. "Educating all students is important. The

community spirit and vast number of areas that assist the students in life activities at Cushing is exceptional. From creating employment for students to promoting sports, it creates an inclusive atmosphere needed for growth. Long after the Boston Marathon is done and medals are hung, I will still be a serious advocate for Cardinal Cushing Centers. Cushing helps intellectually disabled children succeed in life, and I will always support that cause."

Herzmann joins runners Meghan Asha, Mike Hannon and James Miller in raising funds for Cushing.

"This year feels especially meaningful," said Asha, who lives in New York. "I'm coming off running Tokyo in March, and Boston has always been one of those iconic races that represents both grit and heart. But more than that, I wanted this race to be about something bigger than just finishing. I wanted every mile to have purpose."

Asha's brother-in-law, Ari Tannenbaum, is a Cushing resident. "I've visited several times, and seeing the environment they've created — the care, the dignity, the sense of community — has

been incredibly moving," she said. "What stands out most is their focus on helping individuals live as independently and fully as possible. The impact they've had on Ari and our entire family is something I carry with me, and it made this an easy decision to run in support of them."

Hannon, who lives in Chicago, was connected to Cushing through his mother-in-law, Christine Lenahan, who served as associate vice president of education and program development.

"This year's Boston Marathon holds special meaning for me," he said. "My mother-in-law spent years working with the Cardinal Cushing community, so being able to run in support of this mission feels deeply personal. As I pursue my goal of completing all six World Marathon Majors, I'm proud that this journey can also make a meaningful impact along the way."

To learn more about the marathon team or to donate, visit <https://www.givengain.com/campaign/join-us-in-changing-lives-for-the-130th-boston-marathonr-31620>.



Mike Hannon



Meghan Asha



Karin Herzmann

Discover

THE Market Place

at Cardinal Cushing Centers

Where every visit supports meaningful job-training opportunities for our exceptional population and strengthens the connection to our local community.



The Cushing Café



The Unique Boutique



Take 2 Thrift Shop



The Greenhouse & Garden Shop



Unique Boutique | Take Two
Cushing Café | Cushing Greenhouse
120 Columbia Road, Hanover
cushingmarket.com

The science of learning knows no bounds

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

From exploring limestone caves and mangroves to swimming in the stunning turquoise waters, a group of Cushing participants had the trip of a lifetime in Bermuda last fall.

The group, composed of five students, three adult participants and five staff members serving as chaperones, spent a week of learning and fun at the Bermuda Institute of Ocean Science (BIOS).

BIOS serves as the Atlantic research headquarters to Arizona State University's School of Oceans Futures. The research work is focused on experiential learning opportunities that study the current and future state of the ocean and the challenges our environments experience due to human activities.

The Cushing participants stayed in the student dormitories, studied in the labs, went out on research vessels, hiked, visited parks, museums, the aquarium and zoo, enjoyed local food and shopping and more.

"I learned about science, mostly coral and fish," said student Cate Saulnier. "I loved climbing up the huge rocks, and I also loved going out to dinner and going to the aquarium."

"I loved looking through the microscopes and researching the jellyfish and coral reefs," said adult participant Michael Jaxtimer-Barry. "We learned coral reefs can live for a very, very long time under water."

Student Vinny Johnson also enjoyed looking at pieces of coral under a microscope.

"We learned how they take care of their environment and about the coral reefs and how new or old they are," said Johnson. "I really liked the water, and the cave was a really cool experience. Also, the food was amazing."

"I can't say enough about the BIOS experience," said Cushing President and CEO Michelle Markowitz. "They tailored activities based on students' comfort levels and sensory needs. It was so meaningful for them to do things like cave swimming or learning about being more responsible with our environment."

Markowitz said the experience was also a lesson in independence and adaptability.

"For some, it was their first travel experience away from their families," she said. "It really pushed them out of their comfort zones, going out to dinner and ordering on their own and adapting to new schedules, new experiences and new people. It's exciting to provide them with opportunities for social and emotional growth. We're working on these things every day, but it really put those skills to the test."

"I was a little nervous at first," said Jaxtimer-Barry, as it was his first trip to Bermuda and his first time traveling without his family. "But it felt really nice, and I liked everyone. I got to make a new friend, my roommate, and I want to start traveling by myself now."

"Traveling to another country and coming together as a group — with a lot of Cushing pride — was really special," said Dave Babcock, community integration coordinator for adult services. "We went around the room talking about our highlights and one of the participants put it best when she said 'meeting all of you.' It was just an amazing group."

Plans for a second trip to Bermuda are already underway, and Markowitz expects it will happen in late September. Funding will come from "fund-a-need" donations at the annual Springtime gala.

