

June 23, 2017

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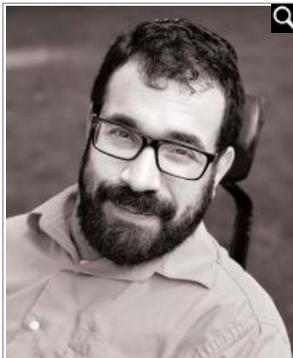
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Natan takes a cotton to Matan

Disability activist Matan Koch wins grant from Natan Fund to inform youth about inclusiveness

By Catherine Perloff
Advocate staff



Matan Koch
PHOTO COURTESY MATAN KOCH

BOSTON - The Natan Fund selected local disability activist and lawyer Matan Koch as one of five recipients of their 2017-2018 grant for ROI entrepreneurs, which distributes \$40,000 to people in the ROI community "spearheading projects that create new and diverse access points to Jewish life."

Koch has always strived toward that goal. As the principal of the Igniting Inclusion Initiative and leader of the consulting practice CapitalAbility LLC, he educates and consults businesses and Jewish organizations on how better to include those with disabilities. The philosophy of the initiative is that if barriers to inclusion are eliminated, people of all abilities can better realize their full potential, and the world can fully benefit from the talents of those typically labeled as disabled.

Koch was eligible for the grant due to his membership in the ROI Community, a network of "activists and change-makers" who are working to innovate traditional ways people engage with the Jewish community. The network is an initiative of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation.

"The grant is to create a toolkit version of my very successful youth program, which will then be marketed to congregations and organizations where it would not be cost effective for me to run a program," said Koch, who was an Obama appointee to the National Council on Disability.

Koch currently gives presentations to youth at various Jewish organizations, teaching them how to work toward inclusion.

"It's a basic introduction for the kids to the ideas and philosophies when we think about inclusion in the Jewish sphere," Koch said. "It's helping them to think about how they can become advocates for inclusion and really empowering them to take those first steps."

Koch said some of the grant money would go toward creating educational videos of him doing parts of his traditional presentation. The majority of funds will go to the organization Matan, which advocates for better inclusion of children with special needs in Jewish educational settings, to create instructional materials for the toolkit, he said.

"They are the ones that have expertise into how to turn my activities into instruction guides teachers can follow," Koch said.

The goal of the program is for kids to start thinking about ways to eliminate all barriers to inclusion, he said. He noted "disability" could be an under-inclusive label; children who have not been formally labeled as having social anxiety, for example, may still face exclusion.

"In that case, it doesn't matter what's in the DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] for the condition or [if it's] a kid who's a little shy and awkward," Koch

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said. "The line doesn't matter. What matters is that they're facing a barrier to participation in the activity."

Koch also hopes he can prevent youth from developing a belief that including those with disabilities is a task only for professionals.

"A huge part of why this program works," Koch said, "is that it catches them before they think, 'This is something professionals, not something I, do.'"

He was inspired to expand his program, he said, in part because of the creative ideas children would come up with to increase inclusion.

"The thing that blows me away," Koch said, "is that 6- and 7-year-old children are coming up with ideas like safe spaces for people who feel overwhelmed; and buddies for people who feel isolated; and hiring a counselor for people to talk to when they feel unhappy."

He plans to target the toolkit toward late elementary-school-aged children.

"When I went into this," he said, "I expected they would talk an awful lot about ramps and go-carts. Instead, you have these really insightful kids."