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LIVING



THE
MCKENNA-NAFTZGER FAMILY
DIFFERENT IS GOOD

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BY KATHRYN SCHMIDT

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PHOTOS EDITED BY GREG STEWART

The McKenna-Naftzger Family

DIFFERENT IS GOOD



With two PhDs, two careers, two kids, and too many hobbies, Laura McKenna and Steve Naftzger lead busy lives. Laura graduated from Tenafly High School, earned a BA in Political Science from SUNY Binghamton, an MA in Political Science from the University of Chicago, and, over the course of 10 years, her Ph.D. in Political Science from CUNY Graduate Center, writing her dissertation on school vouchers. Steven graduated from Rocky River High School in Ohio, went on for a BA in History and Political Science from Miami University, Ohio, and, because the job market in 1991 was a tough

one, decided to go to graduate school, pursuing an MA in History from Cleveland State University and a Ph.D. in History from CUNY Graduate Center in 2002. His dissertation focused on the interwar years in Germany.

Coincidentally, Steve's History Department and Laura's Political Science Department at CUNY were right next to each other, "and," Laura adds, "I remember seeing those beautiful blue eyes." Steve and Laura both loved academic life and became college professors. "I liked talking about ideas," Laura notes, "especially ideas, policies and programs that could change society." She taught classes at Hunter College, Columbia

Teachers College where she spent 35 years, and Ramapo College, and Steven taught at Bronx Community College and Baruch College.

Those early years of managing careers and raising a young family, while living in a five-floor walk-up apartment in Washington Heights, were not easy. "I carried two babies up five flights of stairs and developed abs of steel," Laura shares. So Steve made the first move out of academia, taking a temporary administrative job and leveraging that into a full-time position on Wall Street. He is now the US Head of Trading Documentation at a major international bank, responsible for a team of documentation

specialists who ensure capital markets transactions close for clients while also protecting the bank. Steve thinks about going back to the classroom someday. "I could see teaching general history at a community college where I know I would add value to a student's overall education."



In 2011, Steve and Laura moved to Ridgewood, attracted to the schools. As parents of an autistic child, they also wanted a community with other families whose children did not "fit" the typical mold. Since Ridgewood had a special needs parent group, it seemed to be a place where they could connect with people "who get it." By this time, Laura was also a freelance writer for publications such as *The Atlantic*, *The 74*, *Edutopia*, and *HuffPost*, focusing on K-12 education, higher education, and eventually, autism. She currently maintains two Substack newsletters @"Laura McKenna's Apt 11D."

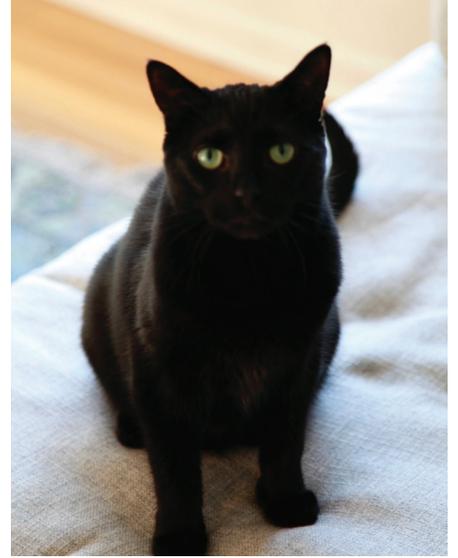
"The good news," Laura observes, "is that today there are more options available for autism than ever before, even more than a mere five years ago." An example of those increased options is The Cope Center for Autism where Laura currently works as the Director of Parent Education and Outreach. Located in Ridgewood, the non-profit center was

started last year by Dr. Jennifer Cope, a pediatric neurologist with the Neurology Group of Bergen County, to help families with autism by conducting medical evaluations, supporting and educating parents, and providing a welcoming after-school space. Laura's work includes consulting with parents, managing the center's newsletter and monthly webinar series, and broadening the center's partnerships and resources nationwide.

Laura and Steve met Dr. Cope in 2007 when the doctor diagnosed their son Ian who, at age five, was reading but had limited speech, with autism. "Not every autistic child or family looks the same," shares Laura. In fact, autism can often be an "invisible disability" since it is not as apparent to outsiders as some other conditions might be. Instead, the inability to pick up social cues, a hallmark of autism, can be misinterpreted as rude, disrespectful, or disobedient behavior. Laura is the administrator of "Ridgewood Special Moms and Dads," a Facebook



Selecting seeds for this year's garden.



The family's foster fail, Grimm.

group she started 10 years ago for parents of children with learning differences, and which now has close to 2000 members.

Today, Ian is pursuing a degree in computer science at Landmark College in Vermont, looking to combine his technology, mathematics and musical talents. He built a computer entirely on his own by watching YouTube videos, programs in four languages, and looks forward to someday working at the Geek Squad at Best Buy. Ian has a strong bond with his older brother Jonah, as evidenced in Laura's 2021 article "My Autistic Son Didn't Have a Prom Date." Jonah, a graduate of Rutgers University with degrees in political science and environmental policy, is currently a freelance AI trainer. Having caught the family's travel bug, he is spending this year exploring New Zealand and hopes to align his passion for travel with his technology skills. Steve was lucky to join Jonah recently to conquer "Mount Doom."



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"When Ian left for college last year, it took Steven and me about a month of feeling confused and out of sorts before we found our new rhythm as 'empty nesters,'" shares Laura. "Now, we meet up at the Ridgewood Y after work or have a date night at the bar at Park West Tavern." And Grimm, the family's foster fail cat who was found in an engine block of a police car in Paterson, keeps them company.

Steve likes to garden. He has created several raised beds in their yard — "It's easier to bend down," he observes — and cultivates winter-hardy varieties so the family can enjoy fresh-grown salad greens year-round. In the spring, he starts gardening from scratch, procuring Baker Creek Heirloom's Old Amish seeds which are bred to withstand the winter. "But in general," he laughs, "I take it seriously for about the first two months of the growing season and then go with whatever happens.

Still, we eat from our garden all summer long and then we preserve peppers and pickle cucumbers for the off-season." His advice for gardeners? "Don't ever give up. Every year is different. Some years are better than others and a variety can do well one year and not the next. Cultivating is a long-term goal."

Books are important in this household of academics. Not only do they read extensively, but Laura has developed a passion for vintage books. "I enjoy scouring estate sales for books to sell on Etsy. I've sold first editions to collectors, encyclopedias for movie scenes, and color-coordinated books to decorators. I even found a first-edition Dickens and purchased a signed Kipling book for \$1.00.

Steve and Laura love their Salem Ridge neighborhood near Glen School, which they describe as "a quiet nook of Ridgewood

Jonah, Steve, Laura and Ian capturing their 10th state capital selfie in Honolulu.

where we go for evening strolls and wave to our neighbors, where there's the 2-mile Deer Hill Loop for running, and where there's no traffic to speak of. We even have our own Facebook group." The family loves being 40 minutes from the myriad of day trips in New Jersey and New York, from the Ramapo Mountains to the High Line. Further afield, they are on a mission to take a selfie outside of every state capital building in the United States, having counted 10 with their recent visit to Honolulu.

At the end of the day, Steve, Laura, Jonah and Ian have determined that "Different is Good" and they are proud to be quirky, resilient, patient and adventurous while they work toward acceptance for their family and the larger autistic community.

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