

FALL 2023 - WINTER 2024

# Messenger



**UNLOCKING  
HAPPINESS:  
ELIJAH AND ALETA**

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**UNLOCKING  
INDEPENDENCE:  
CHRIS, JAMES,  
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**UNLOCKING  
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# Unlocking Happiness:

## HOW LIFE SHARING TRANSFORMED ONE FAMILY'S LIFE



When Elijah McKenzie was only two years old, he was diagnosed with autism. This diagnosis began a long, rocky journey for the entire family, including Elijah's mother, Aleta, and his best friend and twin sister, Myriah.

The family met with countless doctors, near and far, with a wide variety of credentials. While the diagnosis was a necessary first step, no treatments or interventions, including hiring direct care aides, seemed to help. Elijah grew more and more agitated with each passing day.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut the world down, their entire support team quit. It was then that Aleta found Mainstay. Program Manager Gavin O'Marehen encouraged her to apply to support Elijah through Mainstay's Community Services program. In 2023, Elijah and Aleta's partnership transitioned to Life Sharing.

Life Sharing is a program where families, friends, or other community members welcome a person with an intellectual disability and/or autism (ID/A) into their home to live in a shared, supportive family environment. Life Sharing has many benefits which include learning life skills, improving self-esteem, and increasing growth and development. Additionally, each person is given individualized attention and most importantly – the support of a family.

While Aleta had reservations about taking this leap, this decision would completely change their lives for the better. Because Elijah is a night

owl, Aleta's husband stays home with Elijah during the day while she works at Target, and Aleta takes over providing supports at night. Myriah started working at Mainstay shortly after Aleta; she is a member of Elijah's team and has begun providing support to another person as well.



Now, the entire family is happier than ever, and Elijah can be himself on his own schedule in his favorite place – their bright, beautiful blue house. Elijah spends his time going out to eat, watching movies, and growing his collection of superhero action figures. Aleta continues to find new ways to keep life exciting, including the addition of two feathered friends – their chickens!

Mainstay is proud to partner with Aleta, Elijah, and Myriah to give them the opportunity to lead fuller, better lives. After all, as Aleta put it, "When Elijah is happy, the house is happy."

