



Why the Y

Our Y Story: A Place Where Everyone Belongs

-Anonymous Madison Area YMCA Member

When our family first came to the Madison Area YMCA, we were just beginning to understand our children's epilepsy diagnoses. Both of our kids had recently been diagnosed, and like many parents navigating this path, we were afraid—afraid to leave them with just anyone, unsure of how they would be received or understood.

That all changed when we met Mr. Gus in 2016. He didn't hesitate. He listened, reassured us, and always made sure we knew where our children would be and that they were safe. That kind of care is rare—and it's what makes the Y different.

Our son has a motor coordination issue but loves sports. We tried traditional teams, but it was always a struggle. The coaches didn't know how to meet him where he was. But at the Y, he was never judged, and he gets to play. Coach Shaun and so many others made sure he felt like an athlete, capable and supported. Now that he is 13 years old, he can work out in the Fitness Center alongside me and my husband, and we love it. We're together, stronger, and healthier as a family.

Our daughter loves to dance. Other studios didn't know how to handle her anxiety or her challenges. We were once told to just leave her to "calm down" alone in a waiting room—an experience she still remembers years later. Then we met Ms. Cheryl at the Y. Her warmth and empathy have changed everything. Dance has become her passion, her comfort zone. There are days when her anxiety makes it hard to enter the room—and here, that's okay. She's met with patience, not pressure. Just understanding.

Participating in the Madison Area YMCA's School of Performing Arts has truly been life-changing. Performance Day—an event that could easily trigger anxiety for any child—has become our favorite day of the year. It's incredible. Despite experiencing periods of high anxiety in her daily life, she steps onto that stage with confidence. Thanks to the empathy, preparation, and behind-the-scenes magic of the Y staff, she gets up there every time. And she shines. No anxiety. No fear. Just pure joy. That's the power of this place. That's what the Y gives our family.

And there's more—swimming with Y Instructor, James, has given both of our kids a level of water confidence we never imagined. That confidence has extended beyond the Y pool, transforming our family time at the beach and in the ocean into experiences that are not



only safer but more joyful and free. We also love Family Swim. It's our time to be silly, laugh, connect, and enjoy the water as a family. And the Y makes that possible.

For me, the Y is my respite. It's a place where I can recharge while the kids are at school. Being greeted with a real conversation, not just a "hello," means more than most people know. As a licensed clinical social worker, I can tell you—this is the kind of healing environment every family needs.

In the early days, the Y met us with compassion and flexibility. With so much uncertainty around our children's needs, committing to a membership felt overwhelming. Thankfully, the option for day passes gave us space to find our rhythm. That kind of flexibility made all the difference. Now, the Y is our second home. I came here as a child myself—jazz, ballet, gymnastics, summer day camp—and now, I get to watch my children grow up here too. Every hallway holds a memory.

The Y isn't just inclusive—it's uniquely equipped to support all children, not by separating them, but by integrating them with care. Our daughter was even placed in a class created just for her, where she could thrive with younger children where she felt more connected. Where else does that happen?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Y still showed up for us—through videos, check-ins, and the familiar faces of instructors like Mr. Gus on our screens, bringing energy and familiarity into our home.

This Y story is not just ours—it's one that shows what's possible when inclusion is more than a buzzword. Here, it's real. We're not just members. We belong. And we hope sharing our story helps other families find their place here too.

Why anonymous? Our children, now ten and thirteen, both have a genetic mutation that causes their conditions. But their challenges aren't visible. We want our kids to decide for themselves when, how, and how much they want to share about their journey. This story is theirs, too.

We truly belong here. And we're sharing our Y story not just to reflect on what this place means to us, but to help other families see what's possible.

If you're looking for a place where your child is seen—not just accommodated, but embraced—and where your whole family feels supported, understood, and uplifted, this is it. The Madison Area YMCA is more than a gym or a studio. It's a community. It's a second home. And for us, it's the place where we all found the courage, the confidence, and the connections to grow.