



The King of CONNECTION

Jonah Gold has a gift for forming bonds—and educating people along the way.

BY RAINA WALLENS

Don't know Jonah Gold?

Odds are, if you ask a Tenaflly police officer, firefighter or DPW employee, they do.

Gold, a 26-year-old Tenaflly resident and people magnet, was born with Aicardi-Goutières Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that can cause severe disabilities. In Jonah's case, the disease left him unable to walk, among other challenges.

But Gold has made it his life's mission to advocate for people with disabilities, including those who cannot speak for themselves.

Gold has a big heart, a

unique ability to engage and a love for people, especially the community's unsung heroes. So, from a young age, Gold would greet the sanitation and recycling workers with bottles of water and a smile, forging relationships.

In 2013, Gold was chosen as the first Tenaflly Chief-for-a-Day—a program that gives kids with special needs the opportunity to experience multiple aspects of the police department. Chief of police Robert Chamberlain first met Gold at this event, and it was “the beginning of a lasting

friendship,” says Chamberlain. “His positivity is infectious, and it rubs off on the guys and girls of the department, who congregate around him when he comes to visit. He is quite popular in the other departments as well.”

This popularity was on full view during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Tenaflly fire and police departments, police departments from two neighboring towns and the entire DPW drove by Gold's house, parade-fashion, in honor of his birthday. “That was a pretty amazing day,” Gold says.

A man with dark hair, wearing a yellow t-shirt and blue pants, is sitting in a black wheelchair. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. His hands are clasped in his lap. The wheelchair has a black bag hanging from the side. The background is a garden with purple and orange flowers.

Jonah Gold has become a prominent advocate for people with disabilities, forging relationships with notables such as Governor Phil Murphy (opposite page) and rock star Jon Bon Jovi.



The Gold Touch

Gold's talent for connecting has created relationships that some people only dream about.

Twelve years ago, Gold attended the 12/12/12 concert for Hurricane Sandy relief. There, he saw Jon Bon Jovi play and was blown away by both the star's performance and the kind way in which he interacted with others.

Upon learning that Bon Jovi was hands-on philanthropic—just the type of person Gold admires most—he was determined to meet the artist. Gold carefully composed a letter that a Tenafly friend was able to get to the celebrity.

"Fast forward," Gold says: "We are like buddies. We talk often, we email and it's become a relationship that I will really cherish for a long time."

In classic fashion, Gold found a way to share what he treasures. At age 4, he had attended CTC Academy, a life-changing school that serves students with developmental disabilities and provides support to their families. Upon graduating from high school, Gold returned to CTC Academy for a program

for 18- to 21-year-olds. Currently, Gold is fulfilling a dream of working at CTC.

So, when the opportunity arose, Gold asked Bon Jovi if he would consider visiting the school. Bon Jovi not only visited, "he literally got down on the ground and met every single student and every single staff member," Gold's mother, Tania Gold, says.

Bon Jovi was so floored by the school that he called up his pal Governor Phil Murphy, who also came to CTC and was equally impressed, immediately asking how he could help. His office has since been instrumental in advocating for CTC Academy.

Spreading Word—and Smiles

At CTC, Gold—who plays drums in Temple Sinai's Rock Shabbat band—assists in teaching music, which he says has been "a really beautiful thing."

He explains, "The best thing for me is...I almost give them hope for what's to come for them. These kids are very medically fragile, unfortunately, so their lives could look way different from mine, but at least I'm doing the music for them

and their smiles—that's what I love."

Gold also serves as a CTC ambassador, giving tours of the school. Four years ago, Gold was the guest speaker at the CTC annual benefit gala. He did such a fantastic job that they've asked him to co-host the benefit every year since.

It turns out that public speaking and advocacy are Gold's true passions. He's spoken at several area middle schools, high schools and libraries.

"That's been my favorite thing to do," Gold says. "Having a disability taught me that you can do anything if you put your mind to it. I think people forget that people with disabilities are human beings, and I don't think people really see the person for who they are. That's what I've been trying to teach people."

Gold's goal for the future is to bring his advocacy work to a broader platform. If what he's achieved so far is any indication, expect to be hearing a lot more from him soon.

Raina Wallens is a writer living in Tenafly who's had the distinct pleasure of knowing Jonah Gold for many years.

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To contact Jonah Gold for public speaking, visit <https://iamjonahgold.com>.

To learn more about CTC Academy, visit <https://ctcademy.org>.