THE EMPOWERMENT ZONE

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Empowering People, Building Communities - Together

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From The Desk Of Nanette Forte-Gerst

Dear Friends,

As we move into fall, there is a lot happening at SBRN, and it is exciting to see our programs continue to grow and evolve. From Spina Bifida Awareness Month and our upcoming Empowerment Retreat to new programs for teens and parents, advocacy efforts, and our online auction, the next few months are filled with opportunities to connect, learn, and get involved.

October is **Spina Bifida Awareness Month**, and throughout the month we will be sharing information and our Myth vs. Fact series to help raise awareness and challenge misconceptions surrounding Spina Bifida.

We are especially looking forward to our **2026 SBRN Empowerment Retreat, November 13–15 at the Hyatt Regency Morristown**. The retreat has grown tremendously over the years, and this year we are excited to welcome participants both in person and virtually. We are also introducing our **Unstoppable Teen Program**, a half-day program for young people ages 13–20. Creating opportunities for teens to connect with peers, build confidence, develop self-advocacy skills, and learn from adults with similar experiences is an important next step for SBRN.

We are also building opportunities for families through our new **Parent Group**, while expanding our educational and advocacy efforts. Each of these programs reflects what we hear from our community—people want opportunities to connect, find reliable information, build skills, and have their voices heard.

Giving Tuesday – October 13 - As our programs grow, so does the support needed to keep them going. **Giving Tuesday on October 13** is an opportunity to help make these programs possible.

Your support helps SBRN provide educational resources, advocacy, community programs, scholarships, and opportunities like the Empowerment Retreat and Unstoppable Teen Program. It also allows us to respond to the changing needs of our community and develop new programs.

There are many ways to support SBRN—make a donation, participate in an event, volunteer, become a sponsor, or simply share information about SBRN with someone who may benefit from our programs and resources. **Every contribution helps us continue this work throughout the year.**

Please look for our Giving Tuesday donation link and consider supporting SBRN on October 13. Thank you for being part of the SBRN family and helping us build a stronger, more connected community. We are grateful to have you with us.



Warmly,

Nanette Forte-Gerst

Nanette Forte-Gerst
Executive Director

October is Spina Bifida Awareness Month



October is Spina Bifida Awareness Month—a time to raise awareness, share information, challenge misconceptions, and celebrate the people who live with Spina Bifida every day.

Throughout the month, SBRN will be sharing a series of Myth vs. Fact posts on social media. Spina Bifida affects everyone differently, and there is no single way to live with Spina Bifida. Some people walk independently, some use wheelchairs or other mobility devices, and many use a combination of different supports depending on the situation.

Our goal is to help others better understand Spina Bifida and the experiences of those who live with it. Awareness is an important part of creating a more inclusive community where people with disabilities are understood, respected, and have the opportunity to participate fully in their communities.

We encourage you to follow SBRN on social media throughout October, learn something new, and help spread the word by sharing our posts with your family, friends, coworkers, and community.

Giving Tuesday – October 13

This year's Giving Tuesday is October 13, and we hope you will consider supporting SBRN.

Your donation helps make programs like our 2026 Empowerment Retreat and new Unstoppable Teen Program possible, while also supporting scholarships, educational opportunities, advocacy, resources, and programs throughout the year.

Keep an eye out for our Giving Tuesday donation link and help us continue providing opportunities for connection, education, advocacy, and community. Every gift, large or small, makes a difference.

Help us spread awareness. Help us build community. Help us continue to make a difference.

DID YOU KNOW?

Spina Bifida is a birth defect that affects the development of the spine and spinal cord.

There are different types of Spina Bifida, and its impact can vary greatly from person to person. Some people may walk independently, while others may use wheelchairs or other mobility devices. People with Spina Bifida may also experience differences in mobility, bladder and bowel function, sensation, learning, or other areas.

There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to Spina Bifida. Every person's experience is unique.

2026 SBRN's Live Your Best Life Empowerment Retreat



Connection. Education. Advocacy. Empowerment.

SBRN is excited to bring our **2026 Empowerment Retreat** back this fall! The retreat will take place **November 13–15 at the Hyatt Regency Morristown, NJ**, and participants can attend **in person or virtually**.

What started years ago as a small gathering has continued to grow, bringing together adults with Spina Bifida and similar disabilities from New Jersey and beyond. The retreat is a chance to step away from the everyday routine, connect with others who understand, learn new skills, and focus on goals for the future.

Throughout the weekend, participants will have opportunities to take part in peer-led discussions, educational sessions, interactive activities, and conversations focused on topics such as **self-advocacy, healthcare, employment, relationships, independence, community participation, financial and wealth management, and navigating life with a disability.**

The retreat isn't just about the weekend itself. Participants will also have the opportunity to set personal goals and continue working toward them with **30-, 60-, and 90-day follow-ups** after the retreat.

Unstoppable Teen Program!
For the first time, SBRN is adding a special **half-day Unstoppable Teen Program** to the Empowerment Retreat! Designed for young people **ages 13–20**, the program will take place on **Saturday, November 14, from 11:00 AM–3:00 PM** at the Hyatt Regency Morristown.

This program gives teens and young adults an opportunity to connect with peers, participate in educational and interactive activities, and begin building the skills and confidence they need as they move toward greater independence and adulthood.

Topics and activities will focus on **leadership, decision-making, communication, self-advocacy, independence, and the transition from school to adulthood.** The teens will also have lunch with adult retreat participants and an opportunity to connect with adult mentors who can share their own experiences and perspectives.

We're excited to introduce this new part of the retreat and create an opportunity for the next generation of young people with Spina Bifida and similar disabilities to connect, learn, and see what is possible. For more information contact infor@thesbrn.org

Can't Attend in Person?

The adult retreat will also be available **virtually**, making it possible for participants who cannot travel to still take part in the weekend's programming and connect with the SBRN community.

Scholarships Available
SBRN is offering a **limited number of scholarships to help cover the registration fee for the full Empowerment Retreat**, either in person or virtually. Individuals are responsible for all other expenses.

If you are interested in applying for a scholarship, please email info@thesbrn.org to request an application.
Registration is now open. Visit www.thesbrn.org for complete retreat information and registration details.

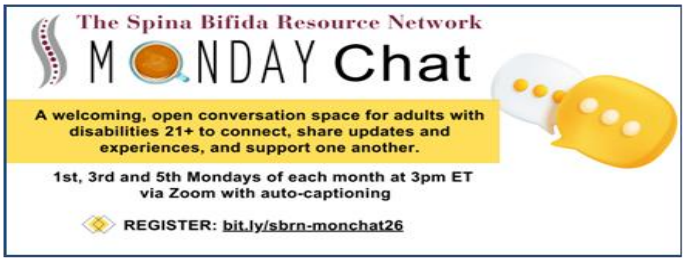
Call for Speakers: SBRN is looking for a few more people to lead sessions at the retreat. If you or someone you know could present a workshop, guide us in an activity, or lead a movement session, email groups@empowermentzone.net. Priority given to people with disabilities.



SBRN offers individuals with spina bifida and other disabilities a convenient, enjoyable way to learn and network online. We offer peer-led support groups as well as interactive workshops and seminars on a wide range of topics presented by disabled experts in a variety of fields. There is no need to travel - simply join in from the comfort of your phone, tablet or computer.

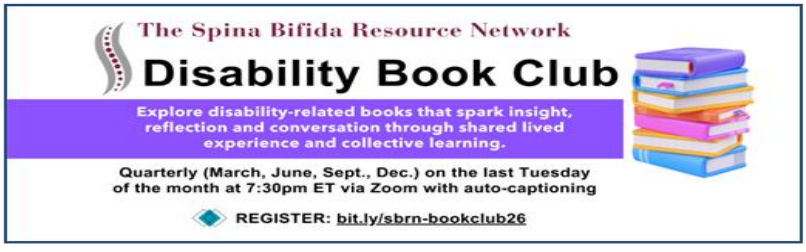
Sessions are free and usually last about an hour. Registration is required. Groups are open to adults with disabilities only.











SBRN Advocacy in Action: Making Our Voices Heard

Advocacy is an important part of SBRN's mission. We believe that people with Spina Bifida and other disabilities should have a voice in the decisions, policies, and systems that affect their lives.

This year, SBRN has been building our **Advocacy Initiative**, providing opportunities for members of our community to learn more about how government works, understand disability policy, and become more comfortable speaking-up about issues that matter to them.

Learning, Speaking Up and Taking Action

Our advocacy training series has covered topics including **Government Basics, the current disability policy landscape, and Telling Your Story**. Future sessions may include opportunities to learn more about communicating directly with legislators and other decision-makers.

We are also following several issues that can have a direct impact on people with disabilities, including:

- **Accessible and affordable wheelchair equipment and other durable medical equipment**
- **Catheter access and coverage**
- **Accessible and inclusive housing**
- **The Olmstead decision and community-based living**
- **Independent living and access to home and community-based services**
- **Disability-related legislation at the state and federal levels**

One example is the **Inclusive Home Design Act**, which would promote accessibility features in newly constructed homes and help make housing more adaptable for people with disabilities.

Advocacy doesn't always mean traveling to Washington or meeting with a legislator. It can mean learning about an issue, contacting an elected official, sharing your personal experience, responding to an action alert, or helping others understand why an issue matters.

Your Voice Matters

SBRN is looking to grow our **Advocacy Group** and would love to have individuals and families from our community involved. You don't need to be an advocacy expert or have previous experience. We will continue providing information and opportunities to learn along the way.

Interested in getting involved? Complete our Advocacy Group Interest Form here or contact SBRN at **info@thesbrn.org** to learn more.

Together, we can make sure the voices and experiences of people with Spina Bifida and their allies are heard.



Save the Date: 2026 SBRN Empowerment Online Auction

Get ready to bid!

SBRN's **2026 Online Auction** is coming this November!

November 9 through November 22

Online through Bidding Owl

We're putting together another great selection of items, including **gift cards, tickets, experiences, sports-related items, and more.** There will be something for everyone—and because it's an online auction, you can participate from wherever you are!

All proceeds from the auction help support SBRN's programs and services, including educational opportunities, advocacy, community programs, and assistance for individuals and families.

Want to Help?

We're still looking for auction donations! If you or your business would like to donate a **gift card, tickets, experience, sports memorabilia, or another item valued at approximately $25 or more**, we'd love to hear from you.

Whether you're bidding, donating, or sharing the auction with friends and family, **your support helps SBRN continue providing programs and resources to the Spina Bifida community and beyond.**

Watch for more information and the auction link coming soon!

New SBRN Parent Support Groups Coming Soon!

Connecting Parents, Sharing Experiences, Building Community

SBRN is excited to begin offering **three new Parent Support Groups** for parents and caregivers of children and young adults with Spina Bifida.



Parenting a child with Spina Bifida can bring different questions and challenges at every stage. Whether you have recently received a prenatal diagnosis, are raising a young child, or are helping your teenager prepare for adulthood, having other parents to talk with can make a real difference.

These groups are designed to provide a welcoming place for parents to **connect, share experiences, ask questions, exchange resources, celebrate successes, and support one another.**

Three Groups for Different Stages

Expectant Parents
For parents who have received a prenatal diagnosis of Spina Bifida and are looking for an opportunity to connect with others who understand the questions and uncertainty that can come with a new diagnosis.

Parents of Young Children — Birth through Age 12
A place to talk about the early years, including medical care, development, education and IEPs, encouraging independence, family life, and the many questions that come with raising a child with Spina Bifida.

Parents of Teens through Young Adults
Focused on the transition years and the changing needs of families as children become young adults. Topics may include independence, self-advocacy, education, employment, relationships, healthcare transitions, and preparing for adulthood.

Led by Melissa May, APN



The groups will be led by **Melissa May, APN**, a healthcare professional and mother of a son with Spina Bifida. Melissa brings both professional knowledge and personal experience to the groups, along with an understanding of what it is like to navigate the healthcare system and support a child as they grow into adulthood.

How the Groups Will Work

The groups will meet **monthly**, with an opportunity to gather in person approximately once each quarter. The first session is planned as a **hybrid meeting**, allowing families to participate either in person or virtually. After the first session, the monthly groups will primarily meet virtually.

Our hope is that these groups will become a place where parents can find **connection, encouragement, practical support, and a community that grows with their families.**

More information about the first meeting, including the date, time, and registration details, will be shared soon.

“Falling Into Fall: Fun, Family & Safety Tips”

Fall Fun & Safety



Apple Picking
Fall is a great time to get outside and enjoy an apple-picking trip. Before you go, check the farm's website or call ahead to ask about accessible paths, parking, restrooms, and whether hayrides or other activities are accessible.

Pumpkin Picking
Not every pumpkin patch is created equal! If you're planning a visit, check ahead to see whether the fields are accessible and whether there are paved or firm pathways to the pumpkins.



Enjoy the Changing Leaves
You don't have to hike a trail to enjoy fall colors. Take a scenic drive, visit a local park, or find an accessible overlook and enjoy the changing leaves from a comfortable spot.

Watch for Wet Leaves
Beautiful fall leaves can become slippery when they're wet. Keep an eye out for wet leaves on sidewalks, ramps, steps, and parking areas—and take your time.

It Gets Dark Earlier
With shorter days, outdoor activities can quickly go from daylight to dusk. If you're heading out later in the day, consider reflective clothing or accessories and make sure lights on mobility equipment are working.

Dress for the Weather
Fall weather can change quickly. Dressing in layers makes it easier to stay comfortable when a sunny afternoon turns into a chilly evening.

Fire Pit Safety
Planning a backyard fire or gathering around a fire pit? Keep a safe distance, watch loose clothing and blankets, and make sure everyone has a comfortable and safe way to move around the area.

Halloween Accessibility
Halloween can be fun for everyone! When decorating or setting up a trick-or-treat area, keep pathways clear and make sure decorations, cords, and displays don't create obstacles.



Trick-or-Treat Tip
If you're handing out candy, consider keeping some treats at an accessible height so children who use wheelchairs or have difficulty reaching can participate independently.

A Few More Just-for-Fun Ideas – Fall Bucket List

- Visit a pumpkin patch
- Make or decorate pumpkins
- Go apple picking
- Take a scenic drive to see the fall colors
- Make homemade apple cider
- Have a family game night
- Bake a fall favorite
- Visit a local fall festival
- Take family photos in the fall leaves
- Have a cozy movie night with blankets

Fall Comfort Food – Easy Recipes for Cozy Days

Cooler days call for something warm and comforting! Here are a few easy fall favorites that don't require a lot of ingredients or complicated preparation. Use shortcuts when they make things easier—there's no rule that says everything has to be made from scratch!

Easy Chicken & Vegetable Soup



Ingredients

- 2 cups cooked shredded chicken (rotisserie chicken works great!)
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 2 cups mixed vegetables, fresh or frozen
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1–2 celery stalks, chopped
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 cup cooked noodles or rice, optional

Directions
Add the chicken, broth, vegetables, onion, celery and seasonings to a large pot. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for about 20–25 minutes, or until the vegetables are tender.

Stir in cooked noodles or rice during the last few minutes, if desired.

Easy shortcut: Use frozen mixed vegetables and a store-bought rotisserie chicken to cut down on chopping and preparation.

Easy Baked Mac & Cheese



Ingredients

- 1 box elbow macaroni
- 2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 cup milk
- 2 tablespoons butter
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- ½ cup breadcrumbs, optional

Directions
Cook the macaroni according to the package directions and drain.

Return the pasta to the pot and stir in the butter, milk, cheese and seasonings. Pour into a greased baking dish and top with breadcrumbs, if desired.

Bake at **375°F for about 15–20 minutes**, until hot and bubbly.

Make it your own: Add cooked broccoli, peas, chicken or another favorite ingredient.

Easy Apple Crisp



Ingredients

- 4–5 apples, peeled and sliced
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ cup old-fashioned oats
- ½ cup flour
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 4 tablespoons butter, softened

Directions

Place the sliced apples in a greased baking dish and sprinkle with cinnamon.
In a bowl, mix the oats, flour and brown sugar. Cut in the butter until the mixture is crumbly. Sprinkle over the apples.

Bake at **350°F for 35–40 minutes**, until the apples are tender and the topping is golden brown. Serve warm with vanilla ice cream for an extra treat!
Easy shortcut: Don't worry about peeling the apples if you'd rather save the extra step.

Simple Pumpkin Bread

Nothing says fall quite like the smell of pumpkin bread baking in the oven! This easy recipe makes a moist, lightly spiced loaf that's perfect for breakfast, an afternoon snack or sharing with family and friends.

Ingredients

- 1¾ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup pumpkin puree (not pumpkin pie filling)
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 2 large eggs
- ½ cup water
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon pumpkin pie spice



Optional: ½ cup chocolate chips or chopped walnuts

Directions

- In a large bowl, whisk together the pumpkin, sugar, oil, eggs and water.
- Add the flour, baking soda, salt, cinnamon and pumpkin pie spice.
- Stir just until combined—don't overmix.
- Fold in chocolate chips or nuts, if desired.
- Pour the batter into the prepared loaf pan.
- Bake for **50–60 minutes**, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.
- Let cool for about 10–15 minutes before removing from the pan.
- **Easy shortcut:** Use a stand mixer or hand mixer if stirring by hand is difficult. You can also make the batter ahead of time and refrigerate it until you're ready to bake.

Make It Work for You

Cooking doesn't have to mean doing everything the traditional way. **Pre-cut vegetables, frozen ingredients, rotisserie chicken, prepared mixes and kitchen gadgets can all save time and energy.** The goal is to enjoy the process and the finished meal—not to make things harder than they need to be!

Make It Accessible: Tips for Easier Cooking

A few simple tips:

Choose recipes with fewer steps. One-pot and slow-cooker meals can mean less prep, fewer dishes and less moving around the kitchen.

Use shortcuts when you need them. Pre-cut vegetables, frozen produce, rotisserie chicken and prepared ingredients can save time and energy.

Sit while you prep. A sturdy chair or kitchen stool can make chopping, mixing and other tasks more comfortable.

Keep frequently used items within reach. Store everyday ingredients, utensils and cookware where they are easiest for you to access.

Use helpful kitchen tools. Electric can openers, lightweight cookware, jar openers, food processors and other adaptive tools can make everyday tasks easier.

Make recipes your own. If a recipe calls for an ingredient or step that doesn't work for you, look for an alternative. There is usually more than one way to prepare a meal!

Ask for help when you need it. Cooking together can be a great way to spend time with family or friends.

There is no "right" way to cook. Find what works for you, make adjustments when you need to, and enjoy the process!

