Melmark CEO-elect Rita Gardner hugs Billy, a young student at the Andover school for students with autism and other intellectual disabilities.
At Melmark New England, the husband-and-wife team of Rita Gardner and Frank Bird is dedicated to fostering meaningful lives.

A young woman dressed in white stands at the front of the ballroom, her two hands cupping a microphone. She begins to sing from Disney's "Frozen," asking in climbing inflections, "Do you want to build a snowman? It doesn't have to be a snowman."

The ballroom crowd – 300 moms and dads, grandparents and siblings along with the staff of Melmark New England in Andover – cherishes what looks like grace.

In truth, the grace that emerges this Friday morning in December during a school holiday show has come from extraordinary attention to detail.

At the heart of this hard-won normalcy – of the 22 acts featuring students singing, dancing and acting – are the husband-and-wife team of Frank Bird and Rita Gardner.

"Resiliency," says Gardner, the recently promoted chief executive officer of the national Melmark organization, in describing the effort overall. Resiliency, she says, not only in the preparations for the fifth annual holiday show, but in everyday life at the New England campus of the school for students with autism and other intellectual disabilities based on Andover's River Road.

That graceful resiliency has arrived through careful observation, trial and error, discipline, organization, and learning and caring – directed in concert by Gardner and Bird. He serves as chief clinical officer and vice president of Melmark's Andover operation.

The Andover couple, together with fellow Melmark New England founders Peter Troy and Helena Maguire and their staff, have combined a clear vision and strong passion to grow the nonprofit, New England arm of the school from one student at its start in 1998 to the 120 children and 10 adults who benefit from their foresight today.

Half of those students are nonverbal. Many arrived at Melmark's door burdened by deep frustration, reaching what for most is their last stop after other caregivers had thrown their hands in the air, unable to control or curb their disruptive, destructive and often self-injurious behavior.

But here, through diligent inquiry, small discoveries and dogged repetition – all underscored with kindness and compassion – grace often emerges as students enjoy commonplace wonders.

Relaxing in a chair and listening to music, walking in a hall without the hockey helmet they once wore for their protection, applying color and lines to paper, delivering sandwiches to a classroom, or playing an elf who steps onto a sleigh.

These results are what drive Melmark's staff and their founders each and every day.

A study in contrasts

Gardner and Bird followed varied paths to Melmark, but the experiences that molded them connect them at the hip, making them a formidable pair when it comes to transforming lives.

Gardner, 54, grew up in Rockland,
Rita Gardner, the recently named chief executive officer of Melmark’s national operation, shares a moment with Nate, one of the 120 students at the Andover school.

one of 14 children, including an identical twin.

She talks fast and with conviction and moves swiftly from task to task, from person to person. She wears crisp, neat power outfits and neatly styled hair.

Tough on the outside and tender on the inside, she is generous with hugs, but expects much of those who work for her.

Gardner, who earned a Master of Public Health degree from Boston University late in her 30s, came to the conclusion early in her professional career that many people are devoted to their work, but some shirk responsibility.

"There are some people who do not care," she says.

She has no place at Melmark for those who do not care.

Her affinity for caring was nurtured in her youth, growing up in a family with eight girls and six boys.

Her dad was a janitor in the public school and her mom ran the family like a CEO, but still found time to help those in need. A talented seamstress, she collected coats for the poor and taught people with brain injuries patternning and other sewing skills.

Gardner’s husband also grew up learning to help others.

The 58-year-old from Storrs, Connecticut, is a calm man, even tranquil. He listens attentively and engenders patience.

While he favors more casual attire, his style complements his wife’s demeanor. He speaks in complete sentences — except when he finishes hers.

Bird’s father was a doctor and, in 1960, relocated the family to Tabriz, Iran, where he worked as an international medical caregiver, on a mercy mission.

“I just grew up with his influence,” Bird says. “He was a kind and gentle man and always looked after people in need.”

Later, at age 16, Bird was an orderly in an emergency room where many patients, often without means to pay, arrived in severe pain, bleeding from gunshot wounds, injured in car accidents or the like.

Bird brought that sense of humaneness with him to Massachusetts, graduating from Boston College with a master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling in 1981.

It is out of that caring that they both committed to focus their professional work on lessening the pain of others, whether through administrative, clinical or personal means.

**Pivotal moments**

An “aha” moment came to Bird early in his career, while employed at a work program for disabled individuals in Roxbury in 1982.

There he met Jim, a man who could not speak. He had been released recently from a state institution after having been institutionalized since the age of 3 — never having the benefit of special education programs.

By 30, Jim was regularly injuring himself and lashing out at others.

Bird and fellow clinicians discovered through observation, trials and daily programming that Jim’s frustration stemmed from his inability to communicate. They began teaching him simple,
What they were doing was applied behavior analysis. Bird saw it could change the most disturbing and ingrained behaviors.

It was an epiphany as clear as the image of Jim sitting peacefully in a beanbag chair sipping coffee, which he eventually learned to make on his own.

“So this is the beginning, if you will,” Bird says. “That taught me. That one case was so significant in my young career.”

Gardner traces watershed moments in her development to necessity, as in necessity is the mother of all invention.

In the 1980s, she worked as a direct-care counselor and manager for agencies that served recently deinstitutionalized people with schizophrenia, major depression and other life-limiting conditions. These people, who had been locked away from society, were one day thrust into the crucible of everyday life.

The first agency she was employed at went belly up and 70 percent of the staff was lost. Gardner was thrown into a management role.

“I learned very quickly how to recruit staff,” Gardner says.

She traveled to the Midwest and...
worked in senior management, writing some of the first housing grants and retraining programs for deinstitutionalized people in Indiana.

Later, she would return to Massachusetts, working in behavioral services and falling in love with applied behavioral analysis.

She saw some of the same progress that Bird saw in his clients. She also found more and more outlets to hone her people skills by hiring and developing staff, building teams and securing funding.

She learned that, just as in applied behavioral analysis, repetition, taking educated risks and learning from mistakes is crucial to success.

“As you practice things, you get better at them,” she says.

A perfect union

Bird and Gardner met in 1986 while working for a company that provided services for adults with autism and intellectual disabilities. Bird was director of clinical services and Gardner was director of residential services.

They would eventually marry and have three children, who today are 13, 16 and 19 years old.

By March 1998, when Gardner was proposing to the Melmark board of directors based in Pennsylvania that she, Bird and Troy, joined soon by Maguire, open a school in Massachusetts for young people with autism and other intellectual challenges, the fours were an experienced lot.

They had started a combined 77 programs before Melmark New England took shape, Gardner says. They were well-versed in how to set rates, meet regulatory requirements, establish training and clinical protocols, design classrooms and provide medical support. And they had the clinical research and background working with autistic students and building staff to go with it.

They were a team.

“The four of us made a whole,” says Gardner, who took on the role of executive director.

Still, it was a risk. In August 1998, five months after proposing the new school, they opened their doors in an office park in Woburn.

Initially, only one student was enrolled. Within six months, they had six students.

They took the toughest of the tough students, those with nowhere else to go who needed the school the most.

“That is who we wanted to serve,” Bird says.

One of these students was a 12-year-old named Jason with brain injuries who had been in a locked hospital unit since he was 3.

When the Melmark team met him at the hospital, he was in shackles. He had hurt himself and others. The hospital psychiatrist, convinced the boy needed to be locked up, wondered why the school leaders were there.

They were there, Bird and Gardner say, because the boy deserved better care.

He got it at Melmark, where he stayed until his late teens, improving academically and socially and working in the community, delivering newspapers under the guidance of a staff member.

Melmark New England today

In 2006, the Melmark New England team opened its current campus on 9 acres along River Road.

Enrollment grew from 60 to 100 students, filling the building within 90 days to its capacity today.

SAL LUPOLI, CEO and President of Lupoli Companies continues to make a difference in our region by developing premier facilities that encourage collaboration and corporate growth.

MAKING AN IMPACT IN OUR COMMUNITY

lupolicompanies.com
riverwalkmills.com
sals-pizza.com
salvatorestoraurants.com
napolitanapizzeria.com
flowfit.net

LUPOLI COMPANIES
The guiding principles have remained the same in the years since. Melmark stands dedicated to a formula of science- and evidence-based educational, vocational and clinical services delivered with warmth, care and respect to allow students to achieve their full potential while providing a sense of peace and belonging for their families.

Bird continues to do clinical work. He makes presentations and publishes reports, as do staff members.

The topics covered in his journal articles and seminars reveal attention to practical matters such as sleep strategies, hygiene and diet; as well as broader topics such as reducing severe aggressive and self-injurious behaviors and helping first responders to understand and assist individuals with autism in emergency situations.

Today, 43 of Melmark New England’s 120 students at the Andover campus live in the organization’s nearby residences. The others are day students, transported from their homes by school buses or their parents.

Melmark also supports 500 students in area public schools through its consultation, outreach and training programs.

With a staff of nearly 300, the school offers seven programs in all, including a new adult day program that opened at the Riverwalk complex in Lawrence this year.

A sense of normalcy

As the holiday show ends, parents cheer the performances. They bask in the warmth generated by what for many parents of school children would be a typical event, a holiday show put on by students.

But this is far from typical. This show didn’t come easily.

The technical part of preparing the students took tremendous instruction and effort to pull off, says Gardner, who continues to be based in Andover, but travels to Pennsylvania weekly following her promotion to CEO.

For a number of these students, many of whom had three or four stops at other schools along the way, being part of a holiday show — whether doing craft projects for it or performing — would not have been possible before Melmark, she says.

Outside the school, two mothers who were part of the audience laugh and chat as they walk.

This is the third school that Mara Mayer’s 15-year-old son, Jordan, has attended.

He is autistic and nonverbal and uses an iPad to communicate. After just two months at Melmark, his mother says she has seen improvement in hygiene and communication, and she is impressed with the way the staff works with the students.

“They treat them as kids first,” Mayer says. “Show them respect, dignity and love while being extremely professional.”

Lisa Marie Noke-Kearney’s 16-year-old son, Ryan, has been at Melmark since he was 7. He had several placements before the family discovered Melmark, where she says Bird and Gardner know the names of every student and parent, as well as each student’s needs.

She is thankful for the changes she has seen in her son’s life. He was once aggressive, physical and crawling out of his skin. Now, he is calm and speaks more, and gives hugs and kisses.

She would follow Gardner anywhere.

“I love her, really I do,” Noke-Kearney says. “She changed the dynamic of my family. I get to experience who Ryan really is.”

And she got to experience a holiday show.

“You know what it is? Part of normal,” she says.