

The Daily Voice

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COMMUNITY COMMENTARY: A DAD REVEALS HIS BATTLE AGAINST SON'S AUTISM

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By Barry Saywitz

Some of you reading this article may know me through my 20-year commercial real estate business or just by meeting me at a local business function. Known for being a private person, writing this article is a bit foreign to me but increasing awareness for autism is more important to me than being silent.

About three years ago, my life was turned upside down when my son Ryan was diagnosed with autism. While having a child changes your life completely, especially as a single dad, I never expected I'd have a child with special needs.

When he was first diagnosed, I really had no idea what it was, what the symptoms were or how to deal with it. While my initial reaction was denial but once I recognized that my son was having difficulties with learning, social interaction, eating and digestion, I made the conscious decision to find out all I could about autism and what treatments were available.

Since Ryan is the most important person in my life, I was determined to keep researching information about autism until I found a way to address his condition. After completing my research, I developed a plan of action such as an application for services from the Regional Center

of Orange County, which included private therapy sessions with an autism specialist and a gastroenterologist to take care of my son's digestive issues.

Recognizing that autism is not a condition that can be cured overnight and this could be a lifelong issue, my goal for Ryan was to try and have him become as fully functional of an individual as possible, grow to his maximum potential and participate in society as much as he can.

My short-term goal was to hopefully have him attend a regular kindergarten class without special assistance. His mother and I embarked on a combination of behavioral and occupational therapies to address his social and learning deficiencies.

Additionally, through a change of diet and implementing a gluten-free, dairy-free and soy-free diet combined with several vitamins and supplements, we were able to address his digestive issues. We performed a series of blood, urine and hair sample tests to try and assess what foods he was highly allergic or susceptible to as well as high levels of metals and other substances in his body that may be affecting his behavior.

Over the next 18 months, we had made significant progress. At age 3, we enrolled Ryan in the Newport-Mesa Unified School District's Starfish and Seahorse Program, which is specifically for children with autism. All of the children in the class had varying degrees of autism and it was really at that point that I felt some connection with other parents. I felt fortunate that not only had my son made significant progress, but was also on the higher end of the functioning scale.

Through increased social interaction with the teachers and the other students, he was able to significantly increase his social skills. I believe the structured classroom environment was a real positive experience for him. To this day, I can't tell you whether there was one defining moment or one therapy or vitamin, supplement or prescription that really did the trick.

At the age of four, Ryan graduated to a mixed-classroom that was a combination of autistic and normal functioning children. Today, he is enrolled in the regular preschool program and was the only child in the class with autism and excelled tremendously, becoming one of the leaders in the class.

I am proud to say that today he will begin the regular Newport-Mesa kindergarten program. I attribute a large portion of his success in learning and behavior to the teachers who have assisted

him throughout the preschool program at the school district, as well as the special needs therapists both in the school district as well as those we have been utilizing on a private basis.

While today he still has his moments, he is a completely different person than when we began his treatments and the process. I can only hope that he continues to grow and outperform his parents' expectations.

Over the last three years, I have devoted a large portion of my time to raise funds for autism research. The "An Evening for Autism Charity Event," which will be held at my home on Saturday, is my way of trying to give back to the community, create awareness for autism and raise money for well-deserving charities and organizations that provide services to people and children with autism.

I had hosted many events at my home in the past and two years ago, I decided to use my home and my contacts to not only create one of the social events of the year, but to also raise money for a deserving cause.

Last year's event, the first of its kind, raised more than \$200,000 for Easter Seals of America, Talk About Curing Autism (TACA), the Autism Society of America, and the Special Needs Program at the Newport-Mesa Unified School District.

We are hoping to raise more money than last year. This year's event will offer nine high-end restaurants (a Taste of Orange County), seven bars, six live bands, a live and silent auction and a host of politicians, celebrities, musicians, professional athletes, corporate CEOs and parents of children who are affected by autism. Tickets are limited and we expect the event to sell out with more than 600 people attending the event. However, tickets can still be purchased at our website at www.aneveningforautism.org or by calling (949) 930-7588.

I recognize that we all are struggling in this down economy, which is why "An Evening for Autism" is even more important than ever before. All of the organizations, including the school district, have had significant budget cuts, which have hindered these charities from providing services to people of all ages who struggle with autism. I am truly thankful to receive such tremendous support from the local community and beyond.

Barry Saywitz, a Newport Beach resident, is president of The Saywitz Company

