

A Hub of Hope: The Autism Project discusses autism awareness month



The Autism Project launched in 1997 with the plan of becoming a “Hub of Hope” for people and their families on the autism spectrum and other developmental disabilities, providing resources, education and connection that help individuals lead meaningful and purposeful lives. The Autism Project has classes, trainings, workshops and support groups. They provide respite for families and have a brief summer camp, Camp Wannagoagain. They also host various events throughout the community.

The Autism Project is a 501 (c) (3) organization that relies on fundraising to help achieve their mission. There are many ways a person can give to the organization, with their greatest being the annual Imagine Walk and Family Fun Day, which takes place in April of each year. This year promises to be a unique event, as a safety decision was made to make the walk virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They are asking for teams to continue fundraising and also create a platform showcasing what The Autism Project means to them, whether it be a video, photos or a story. The Autism Project plans to post these on their social media pages, filling them all with great stories of positivity.

I spoke with Joanne Quinn, executive director of The Autism Project. We discussed the virtual walk, Autism Awareness Month and some helpful ideas for families adjusting to our current reality.

Bobby Forand (Motif): Please discuss the services you provide, particularly the services you currently provide during this pandemic.

Joanne Quinn: TAP (The Autism Project) offers support to many different groups. During the pandemic, we continue to provide online support for family members as well as phone support for family members and community partners looking for specific resources unique to the state of the world today. TAP staff created a survival kit for our families that includes 11 of the most common visual supports used in classrooms and at home to help structure a child’s day. We also posted the visuals on our website for the public at large to access. We are working to provide support to the schools and families working to keep up their child’s education at home.

BF: What suggestions do you have for families trying to explain the pandemic to their loved ones with disabilities?

JQ: This is a difficult one. Each person’s understanding of the events is different. For some we are

focusing more on the fact that things are very different. We are working and learning from home to keep everyone safe. Safety is the core message. Families know best how much their child can understand and process. It's the same for everyone. We encourage our families to create as much of a routine as they can and stick to it. The structure and information of what's next is crucial for autistic people. That's the hardest part of this. We can't circle a date on a calendar to show when this will end and we'll get back to normal. I think this is the most anxiety producing item for everyone.

BF: What suggestions do you have for families to keep their loved ones occupied/in routine at this time?

JQ: Set up as much structure as you can. Start with a simple schedule of the day's activities. If that's too much for everyone, start with a first/then schedule. Make it visual and accessible to all. Let your child choose some of the activities and times for them if possible. This returns the feeling of control to the person. Most important, don't beat yourself up if you aren't as structured as a classroom. Nobody can do that! Also, reach out for help. We are all in this together and learning the new landscape as we do. We all need help!

BF: Please discuss the Imagine Walk and what people can expect with it going virtual.

JQ: The Imagine Walk is our largest event and fundraiser. It's also a day our community looks forward to because we come together and experience a time of support and community with no judgment. Many feel we are raising our children in a fish bowl. So, the walk has grown into a wonderful, safe environment for the entire family to come to and to enjoy each other and feel supported.

The Virtual Walk continues to be a fundraiser and we will be promoting our community and individuals all month. We want to focus on victories this year. We understand things are hard day-to-day for our families, and we work to help them. We'd like to take April to focus on the positive. We will have a Facebook live event from our office, Kellen will be singing the National Anthem and we hope to have more surprises to bring us together.

BF: What are things that people can do right now to help The Autism Project?

JQ: We need our community to continue to fund raise as they would for our traditional walk. We weren't able to secure a different date to postpone the walk and Goddard Park is the only space large enough for our event. The money raised at this event and from our work in schools is more than 40% of our budget. With the move to a virtual walk and the closing of schools, we are experiencing considerable financial drain. If people create a fundraising page and send it out to their network of family and friends and ask for any donation, it will all add up. TAP does well with grassroots fundraising, and we hope to continue with a lot of people giving what they can during these hard times so we can continue our important work.

BF: What are things people do/can do to highlight April being Autism Awareness month?

JQ: We want people to share their stories this month — the good and the challenges. Post videos or stories on what The Autism Project means to you. How have we helped? Let the community know what your journey has been and still is. What are your hopes and dreams for your child's future? What are you afraid of?

Please visit theautismproject.org for more information on the Virtual Imagine Walk and services The

Autism Project provides. Check their Facebook page for helpful activities and tips.