

The Sun

Newsletter

Autumn 2021

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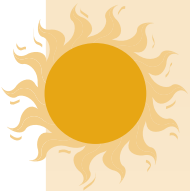
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Our mission

To help people and families affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD)



Like the child pictured here, people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have the ability to experience pure joy and to feel it with utter abandon. This experience is difficult for neurotypical people who get caught up in their own thoughts, social expectations, or value judgments.

“People with autism have uniquely positive traits that are rare or even non-existent among neurotypical individuals,” writes parent and autism advocate Lisa Jo Rudy, M.Div., in her article *Top 10 Positive Traits of*

Autistic People on the Verywell Health website. Additionally, Rudy’s articles have been featured in *Autism Asperger’s Sensory Digest*, *The New York Times*, and *Autism Parenting Magazine*, among others, and she is the author of [Get Out, Explore, and Have Fun](#).

“It’s important to note,” continues Rudy in her article, “that these positive traits are not unique to savants with special talents or skills; rather, they are present in almost every person with autism....

“If you’ve ever bought a car, played a game, or joined a club to fit in,” adds Rudy, “you know how hard it can be to be true to yourself. But for people with autism, social expectations can be honestly unimportant” (<https://www.verywellhealth.com/top-terrific-traits-of-autistic-people-260321>).

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Despite the pandemic!

To those of you who are new to Autism Delaware, welcome. This is an experience that has its ups and downs just like any family has. Ask anyone who is a member of the Autism Delaware family, and they will tell you that we're all about services—I am all about services!

I am also about recognizing that this path is not easy for anyone. When I joined Autism Delaware in 2012, I came with many years of experience directing residential and day treatment programs for children with moderate to severe behavioral problems as well as community-based home visiting models. I brought this experience to bear when I assumed oversight of Autism Delaware's programs and services during a critical period of expansion. As executive director since 2018, I continued this oversight along with executive-level management of Autism Delaware.

For the past year and a half, I added oversight of the complicated, multi-layered process of keeping staff members safe, employed, and paid during the covid pandemic. By succeeding with this goal, Autism Delaware has been able to continue to provide the services you and your loved ones rely on to get through the day. So while many organizations and agencies are not delivering services, we continue offering core services, such as family and vocational services. In fact, in an effort to accommodate all the families reaching out to Autism Delaware, we are now recruiting for additional family support providers (FSPs) to join our team.

FSPs are professionals who are also the parents of children on the spectrum. As our Autism Care TeamSM (ACTSM), they provide experience, resources, and

a shoulder to lean on while working one-on-one with families.

Because navigating the autism world can be complex and overwhelming—even during the best of

times—the family services staff also continues to offer family navigation. This service is perfect for families who have specific questions or who are being challenged by the various state systems that serve their children.

To find out more about our family services, contact our intake coordinator at (302) 224-6020, ext. 219, or send an email of interest to referrals@delautism.org.

Also because of the covid pandemic, many of Autism Delaware's highly valued community partners had to cut back or shut down opportunities for participants in our adult employment and community resources program, which is called Productive Opportunities for Work and RecreationSM (or POW&RSM, for short).

To jump-start our POW&R program and get participants back to work, our team began reaching out to potential new community partners. This effort is extraordinary considering the over-full schedules that most staff members have been juggling every day in order to keep everyone safe while in the community.



Brian Hall, M.S.W.
Executive Director

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Why our kids are wonderful Continued from p. 1

The autistic advantage

Many people on the spectrum are aware that they possess positive personal traits that others don't. And an April 2019 study asked them to identify these traits. The qualitative study comprised interviews with 24 adults with a range of support needs and was run by researchers in the University of Exeter Medical School's College of Medicine and Health in conjunction with the University of Exeter's College of Sociology in the United Kingdom.

"We asked which personal traits adults attributed to their autism, and how these have helped in the workplace, in relationships, and beyond," explain the researchers in their paper titled *Mapping the Autistic Advantage from the Accounts of Adults Diagnosed with Autism*.

"The ability to hyperfocus, attention to detail, good memory, and creativity were the most frequently described traits," continue the researchers in their paper. "Participants also described specific qualities relating to social interaction, such as honesty, loyalty, and empathy for animals or for other autistic people.... [W]e found that traits associated with autism could be experienced either as advantageous or disadvantageous dependent on moderating influences" (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31058260/>).

Super powers

To help people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) discover for themselves how wonderful their traits are, a diverse team of professionals with ASD joined forces in 2018 and founded Embrace ASD. Known as Embrace Autism since April 2021, this digital resource offers information that "can help us discover who we are and the amazing potential we have" (<https://embrace-autism.com/about/>).

How? By seeing personal traits as more than positive—They're super powers: "Our Super Powers (by which we mean unusual talents, skills, qualities, and advantages...) can set autistic people apart in positive ways that allow us to make unique contributions to society" (<https://embrace-autism.com/super-powers/>).

Assisting the process, Embrace Autism's co-founder and chief executive officer, Martin Silvertant, B.Des., shares his personal journey toward his positive potential in a three-part blog that begins with *Seeing autism in a positive light*. Diagnosed at 25, Silvertant includes how he came to understand the difference between being "socially incompetent" and "differently-abled": "[O]nce we have become convinced that other people's misconceptions are an accurate representation of who we are and what we are capable of, we start imposing those limitations on ourselves" (<https://embrace-autism.com/seeing-autism-in-a-positive-light/>). In *What we experience is not who we are*, Silvertant digs deeper into "the relationship between our life experiences and our self-identity" (<https://embrace-autism.com/what-we-experience-is-not-who-we-are/>). And in *The bright side of being autistic*, Silvertant points to his own list of "wondrous aspects of what it's like to be autistic" (<https://embrace-autism.com/the-bright-side-of-being-autistic/>).

The Embrace Autism team also presents a general list of strengths and challenges—called Super Powers and Kryptonites—at <https://embrace-autism.com/super-powers/>.



A pumped-up Sean Tuohy (above) led off a past Walk for Autism. Mom Karen Tuohy is a longtime Autism DelawareSM volunteer and contributor to *The Sun*.



Sami Principe (at left) moved and grooved to the music at the event. Mom Deanna Principe is the event manager at Autism Delaware.

Resource for teens and tweens on the spectrum

The Awesome Autistic Go-To Guide, by Yenn Purkis and Tanya Masterman.

Available in paperback at Amazon. com: <https://www.amazon.com/Awesome-Autistic-Go-To-Guide-Practical/dp/1787753166>

Why Ethan is wonderful!


by Marcy Gause Kempner

Parent-advocate and Autism DelawareSM
co-founder and longtime board member

Loving and raising a child with autism has many, many well-known challenges. But there is also fun and laughter and joy if you stay open to it and remember to breathe and enjoy.

Here is a list—in no particular order—of nine of the best things about Ethan:

1. He can talk and read and write backwards—like taking any name or word and instantly saying it backwards. It's hilarious! He gets tired of having to do it for us because it's so much fun that we ask him all the time.
2. He can remember exact days and dates of places he's been and experiences he's had. He is the family keeper of memories. He can remember and place situations from 15 or 20 years ago!
3. He surprises me all the time. I've spent so many hours worrying that this or that will be too much for him, and so often he just rolls with it and shows me just how far he has come. Watching that progress has been amazing.
4. He rarely complains! (This one comes from his brother, Jack.)
5. You can't buy or teach the kinds of gifts that loving a person with autism brings. The perspective effect includes appreciating the little things, not worrying about what other people think, understanding what's really important in life—and what's not.
6. I've met and become a part of a whole world of truly special people that I would have never known—teachers, therapists, other professionals, other families—who are often like angels in Ethan's life and in mine.
7. He has the greatest laugh!
8. He makes me and his brothers and everyone he interacts with better people.
9. Life is much richer and more interesting with Ethan in it!



This three-person pool totem includes (top to bottom) Ethan Kempner and his brothers, Matt and Jack.



Enjoying a day at the beach takes the sting out of going back to school for (left to right) Judah, Godiva, and Adam—and for their busy mom!

When I think of my children

by Mònique Bullock

Parent of a neuro-typical daughter and two sons living on the autism spectrum

I can't even imagine my life without my children!

Many people think they give up their own life when becoming a parent. But honestly, it's the complete opposite: You see what living is all about when you become a parent. You find a greater purpose than just existing.

Two of my children, my sons, were born with autism and cerebral palsy and are nonverbal.

My life may not be the ideal motherhood journey, but every day, I'm reminded that it's the most rewarding.

Why?

Because my children are uniquely made, and they

are wonderful because of that. I never compare them to anyone, not even one another. And I never look to change them; I accept each of them for who they are.

I try my best as their mother to make sure each knows not only that they are wonderful but also that I love each of them individually. I want them

to know that, no matter what, joy and a fulfilled life await them.

I am grateful to be part of their journeys. My input helps their output. To think that I'm able to take care of and love such a wondrous trio reminds me that nothing in life is guaranteed except the unconditional love you have for your children.

Why Stefan is wonderful!

by Marie-Anne Aghazadian

Parent-advocate, retired executive director of the Parent Information Center of Delaware, and longtime member of the Autism DelawareSM Board of Directors



Stefan Aghazadian shares a laugh with his dad, Vartan.

With all the challenges and heartaches set aside, our son Stefan brings us joy and gives our lives meaning that probably only other families that have children on the spectrum can understand.

I like Stefan for his sense of humor, for the fact that he reads people better than anyone I know, and that he loves to hike, ride a bike, and swim, all of which have forced me to stay in shape to keep up with him.

Stefan is also a gourmet. It is uncanny how he prefers Godiva chocolates over Mars bars and stays hungry

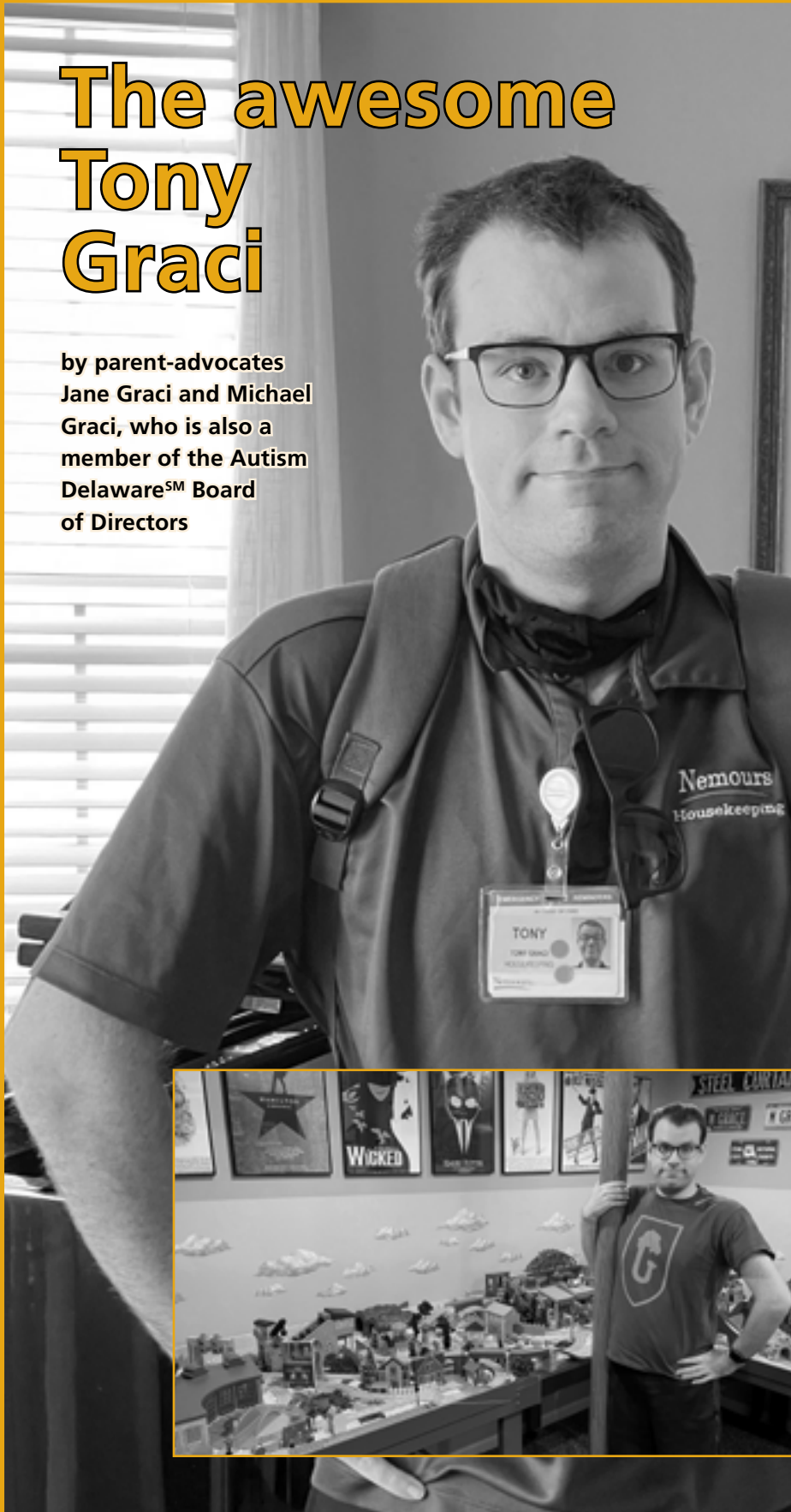
rather than eat bad food. Moreover, we like the same music, classical and rock, which makes our car rides quite pleasant.

Stefan also has an unusual photographic and geographic memory. I can usually count on him to find our gray Subaru in a parking lot full of gray SUVs or rely on him to find our way home when we get lost.

And as I am aging, his once annoying echolalia is turning into an asset. Should I ever forget what I said, I know Stefan will repeat my words.

The awesome Tony Graci

by parent-advocates
Jane Graci and Michael
Graci, who is also a
member of the Autism
DelawareSM Board
of Directors



Frankly, Tony is pretty awesome. He has developed some terrific skills thanks to DAP (Delaware Autism Program), POW&RSM (Autism Delaware's adult employment and community resources program), his siblings Molly and Vince—and don't forget his amazing parents;)—plus incredible effort of his own.

He'll be the first person to text you on your birthday, congratulate you on a milestone, or empathetically console you in a crisis. He proactively calls us every afternoon to let us know his workday is done and he's on his DART bus for home—always closing with the universal question "What's for dinner?"

His desire to keep "everything in order, clean and tidy" makes him a great employee at A.I. duPont Hospital for Children. He has worked consistently during the pandemic, cleaning surfaces and killing germs around the hospital. He loves his job, works hard, and takes it seriously.

And he cheerfully helps around the house. His bed is always made, his clothes are always put away, and his room is always clean.

When not working, Tony loves to watch movies, build with Legos, and maintain the wooden train island world (pictured at left) he built. The detail and imagination displayed in its construction is incredible.

He's a special young man, and we couldn't be prouder to be his parents.

POW&RSM participants are wonderful

// I'm very impressed with Ben and what he can do," begins Anthony DeVico who, as ShopRite store manager in Wilmington, oversees non-food products. "He's part of our team, and we look forward to seeing him.

"Ben was the first POW&R participant that we hired," adds DeVico. "He's been here about seven months.

"The nonfood managers love Ben," continues DeVico. "Our other department employees always enjoy working with Ben, too.

"He does well with following any instruction that he is given. A job coach is with him throughout his shift. She shows him where the products go. Ben is good at what he does."



Taking time out of their busy day for a quick pic are ShopRite supervisor Brian Tabor; Taleasha Tschoepe, who is Ben's natural support at ShopRite in Wilmington; POW&R participant Ben Bashkow; and POW&R direct support professional (DSP) Kourtney Desmuke.

POW&R first came to the attention of ShopRite's HR director, Jennifer Kissinger Selvaggi, SHRM-CP, at the height of the nation's covid infection.

What is POW&R?

Autism Delaware's community-based vocational service is called Productive Opportunities for Work and RecreationSM, or POW&R, for short. This nationally recognized service has earned a reputation for providing its participants with excellent employer-approved support in the workplace.

"We provide ongoing support for quality assurance," notes Autism DelawareSM POW&R director Katina Demetriou, "and we expect to provide customer satisfaction!"

For more information about this Autism Delaware service, visit <https://www.autismdelaware.org/services/adult-services/>.

"An associate at ShopRite told me about Autism Delaware and POW&R," explains Selvaggi, "because we reach out to organizations that have associates, such as students and adults, to hire in partnership.

"Tracy [Horn, POW&R employment services manager] discussed this program with us via Zoom," continues Selvaggi. "We told her what we're looking for. They came out first to see what we had, what the jobs were like.

"Ben is our first, and he's a good fit," adds Selvaggi. "He's very friendly, smiles and waves, seems excited to be here and shows the same to customers, too.

"He made himself part of the team, became part of the group because of who he is."

The benefits of hiring people with autism

by Virginia Sticinski, M.S., M.Ed.

As parents, teachers, and advocates for people with autism, we know their amazing qualities can enhance any work setting; however, the global unemployment rate of people with autism is more than 80 percent (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/autism/autism-and-the-workforce>). Fortunately, a growing number of employers are starting to embrace people on the spectrum and are reaping the benefits of their employment.

What makes people on the spectrum ideal candidates for employment?

Psychology Today reports it has to do with neurodiversity—that is, a variation in brain function that enables people on the spectrum to “think differently” (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/autism/neurodiversity-and-the-benefits-autism>).

Such diversity is typical among people on the spectrum, and often helps them to recognize solutions not immediately evident to their co-workers. The ability to think differently may also help support focus, enhance pattern recognition, and promote the attention to detail we so often observe among people on the spectrum—all attributes that make them great candidates for hire.

Neurodiversity isn't the only talent that makes people with autism model employees. Honesty, integrity, respect for structure, and resilience are other notable assets. These assets not only are appreciated by employers, but they also attract customers and support a positive work environment. In fact, Canadian researchers have noted that employers who hire people on the spectrum enjoy high employee retention, low employee turnover, and high levels of customer loyalty and satisfaction (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29392591/>).

By hiring people on the spectrum, employers also support the autism community. For example,



POW&RSM participant Reed Bellinger at work at Grain on the Rocks in Bear.

meaningful employment enables economic inclusion and supports financial choice and control among people on the spectrum. Moreover, people with autism who are given the opportunity to work enjoy broader social networks, enhanced self-worth, and improved quality of life over those who do not have opportunities for meaningful employment (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29392591/>).

What happens when employers hire people on the spectrum?

Everybody wins! So, to all employers: Take a serious look at the talented and diverse pool of Delaware workers living with autism. Recruiting any one of them will enhance your workplace.

Sun contributor Virginia Sticinski, M.S., M.Ed., is employed as a social sciences instructor at Delaware Technical Community College, Stanton. A valued member of the Autism DelawareSM newsletter committee who is also working on her Ph.D., Virginia is the parent of four sons, two of whom are on the autism spectrum.

INSIDE **Autism** Delaware

POW&RSM staff creates ShopRite connection

Since POW&R participant Ben Bashkow was hired by ShopRite about seven months ago—See the full story on page 8—the family-owned grocery chain hired three more POW&R participants—at a time when many Delaware businesses have been cutting back or closing down opportunities for individuals with autism.

So, how did the Kenny Family ShopRite find out about Autism Delaware’s adult employment program?

Popularly known as Productive Opportunities for Work and RecreationSM (or POW&R, for short), the program has a range of staff members who have been actively reaching out to local organizations and agencies to find work for participants, like Ben. When POW&R project services manager Noel Olson discovered a personal connection with ShopRite, she pitched the idea of POW&R as a training program to ShopRite’s HR director, Jennifer Kissinger Selvaggi, SHRM-CP.

“Jennifer was willing to consider us right from the start,” notes Noel. “I suggested that the participants could try out different areas, see what worked for them, and if the department head had a need and the participant fit well, the participant would be hired. And Jennifer agreed!”

Since Ben started work in the Wilmington store’s health and beauty department, ShopRite has placed POW&R participants Jordon Wells in the Wilmington store’s produce department and Ben Knapp in health and beauty at the Four Seasons store. And Eva Stromwasser was hired in ShopRite’s Riverfront store, matching skills she’d been using as a volunteer.

“When I stop by the sites now,” continues Noel, “I see community being built around our participants. Their fellow employees engage with them, make a point of saying hi. This is part of what being employed is all about. It’s exciting!”



Noel Olson, project services manager (PSM) for Autism Delaware’s POW&R program, made the all-important connection with Delaware Supermarkets Inc./Kenny Family ShopRite. “The family believes in working with and investing in people who have goals and dreams for their lives” (<https://delawaretoday.com/partner-content/kenny-family-shoprites-june/>).



Jordon Wells



Ben Knapp



Eva Stromwasser

2021 Walk for Autism sponsors
The most ever!

Below are the names of the most individuals and organizations to generously sponsor the Walk for Autism: “Many are new this year, and many have direct connections to Autism Delaware,” notes Autism Delaware’s fund development and engagement director, David Woods. “For example, Susan Patel and Sharon Cirillo, through Hertrich and SC Associates respectively, are current board members, and Dorian Rowe Kleinstuber, Esq., is a longtime supporter of the Blue Jean Ball.

“Autism Delaware is grateful to all our sponsors for supporting our mission: helping people and families affected by autism spectrum disorder. I want to invite our community to help show our gratitude by patronizing these businesses.”



Exclusive level

Hertrich Family of Automobile Dealerships
Printed program sponsor

Del One Foundation
T-shirt sponsor

Swift Pools
Starting line and midway point sponsor, Wilmington

Brandywine Body Shop
Sanitation sponsor, Wilmington

Clean Delaware, Inc.
Sanitation sponsor, Lewes

Champion level

SC Associates
Bright Bloom Centers
Christiana Care
Team Masterson

Champion level (cont'd)

New Castle County Council
iHeart Radio

Partner level

Anderson Center for Autism
The Bellmoor Inn and Spa
Ferris Home Improvements
Lorne & Sharon Solway
Nickle Electrical Companies
NEIL (Nuclear Electric Insurance Limited)
SchagrinGAS
Sharp Energy
Tybout, Redfearn & Pell, Attorneys at Law

Advocate level

Achieve Beyond Pediatric Therapy & Autism Services
Allen Insurance Group
Artisans' Bank
B&F Towing
Beaverdam Pet Food
Beebe Healthcare
Benchmark Transmission
The Car Clinic
Central Delaware Speech-Language Pathology
Children's Dental Health
County Bank
DR's Lawn Maintenance, LLC
Dover Tents & Events
John F. Kleinstuber & Associates, Inc.

Advocate level (cont'd)

Kennedy Krieger Institute/SPARK
Limestone Pension Associates
McAndrews Law Offices
Meyer & Meyer Realty
Patterson Schwartz–Team Landon
State Farm Insurance–Kim Benton Agency
State Farm Insurance–Jeanine O'Donnell Agency
Office of the State Treasurer Collen C. Davis
J.W. Tull Contracting Services

Friend level

Continuum Behavioral Health
Highroad School
Insurance Commissioner Trinidad Navarro–Delaware Department of Insurance
Lingo Realty
Mitsdarfer Bros. Tree Services
Signature Furniture Services
Sparano, Vincelette & Joiner, CPAs
Salesianum School
Tiger Roofing, Inc.
Data Management Internationale



Photo by Pippa

Thank you, [Newark Natural Foods \(the co-op\)](#), for including Autism Delaware in your register round-up program for a second year—and for a combined two-year donation of almost \$1,850!

And many thanks to everyone who supported Autism Delaware by shopping at the co-op and rounding up your bill!

All your efforts will go a long way toward helping people and families affected by autism.

Standing at the register (L–R) are Carla Koss, Autism Delaware’s content strategist–writer and longtime member of Newark Natural Foods (the co-op); Declan Poehler, the co-op’s produce assistant; Catherine Hallman, the co-op’s produce manager; Newark Natural Foods Board President Jerry Dorsman; and Dylan Furlano, the co-op’s marketing coordinator.

On making the shift toward the positive



Cory and Casey Gilden

// My kid is not *Rain Man!*” says parent-advocate Cory Gilden, Ph.D. “A lot of parents get asked ‘Oh, your kid has autism. So, is there something he’s really good at?’ This question is based on movie impressions of autism, and they are expecting some extraordinary skill.”

As the research and evaluation manager of the National Leadership Consortium on Developmental Disabilities, Gilden sees the importance of reframing how we see our kids and learning to appreciate their strengths: “So many parents get bogged down in the negative stuff. My son experiences extreme emotions, too, which is really hard when his anxiety spikes or when he’s upset, because he’ll have really strong reactions and take longer to calm down than a neurotypical person. But he also has really strong positive reactions and gets really excited about things, and his excitement gets the people around him excited, too—which I love!”

With a shift toward a positive focus comes a reframing of how we see our kids. How to reframe the negativity placed on some autistic traits is the subject of *8 Awesome & Admirable “Autism Traits,”* an online article by Nicole Day. As a parent with training in early childhood development and Collaborative Problem Solving®, Day helps explain this transition by reframing eight negatively labeled autism traits, such as being obsessed with a single topic and making inappropriate observations.

For example, Day suggests we take the negative connotation out of an individual’s “obsession” by acknowledging the individual’s “expertise in area(s) of special interest.” Also, a strong attention to detail does not make someone a perfectionist; it makes him or her crucial when important details need to be recalled and errors need to be fixed (<https://hes-extraordinary.com/positive-aspects-of-autism>).

And drop the nonsense about your loved one with autism making inappropriate observations and having difficulty understanding sarcasm and figures of speech. Instead, relish that your loved one is “honest, trustworthy, and realistic” (<https://hes-extraordinary.com/positive-aspects-of-autism>).

To read Day’s article in its entirety, visit the [he’s extraordinary website](https://hes-extraordinary.com/positive-aspects-of-autism).

In the movie *Rain Man*, Dustin Hoffman plays the title character, who is based on the real life of an individual with savant syndrome named Kim Peek. “Unlike many individuals with savant syndrome, Kim Peek was not afflicted with autism spectrum disorder,” points out Berit Brogaard, professor of philosophy and the director of the Brogaard Lab for Multisensory Research at the University of Miami, in her *Psychology Today* article. “Though he was strongly introverted, he did not have difficulties with social understanding and communication” (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-superhuman-mind/201212/kim-peek-the-real-rain-man>).

Despite the pandemic, by Brian Hall *Continued from p. 2*

And here’s something else extraordinary: Our staff succeeded in creating several new avenues of employment and volunteering. It is a blessing to have community partners step up and support our work. But this success has created more challenges for the program—and we are struggling to take advantage of all the opportunities. For example, we need more team members known as direct support professionals (or DSPs). These team members are the key to serving the roster of current and future POW&RSM participants. DSPs provide the high standard of support, reliability, and quality assurance that enhances each POW&R participant’s value as a detail-oriented, trustworthy, and outcome-driven employee.

Though every day is a struggle, we believe things will improve and appreciate the many families across this state flexing their schedules to help us serve as many participants as possible. One example of the POW&R staff’s success is spotlighted on page 8 in this issue. Trust me when I say, the featured POW&R participant made believers out of his new employer! Since then, the employer hired three more: See page 10!

In addition to DSPs, community partners are always needed because each POW&R participant has his or her own interests and dream of employment. If you would like to become a new community partner, please contact our POW&R director at (302) 224-6020, ext. 202, or send an email of interest to Katina.Demetriou@delautism.org.

Of course, we also appreciate any financial support you can offer. Consider the POW&R Job Sponsorship program. It addresses the ever-growing number of adults on the spectrum who want to work and the cost of maintaining the high-quality support each needs for a successful outcome. For more information, send an email to David.Woods@delautism.org.

All of us in the autism community are in this work together. We are driven by the same mission—helping people and families affected by autism spectrum disorder. To this end, we at Autism DelawareSM create and promote opportunities for individuals and families to live more inclusive lives, and we will continue our work—despite the pandemic!