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Sharing the lessons from an autistic child

Group offers early screenings and help with diet and doctor costs

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When Jordan Soriano was just over a year old, he seemed to shut down.

"His mother had him on video, smiling and playing with trucks," said Colleen Buccieri, Jordan's godmother. "Then all the sudden, boom. He just went into his own world. For about six months, we thought he was deaf because he would not respond to anything. We even rang a big cowbell behind his head, and he did not even flinch."

It would be another four years before Jordan, now 10, would officially receive an autism diagnosis, and help through the public schools.

"As time went on and we learned more about autism, we kept saying, 'If only we'd known this a year ago, or known that two years ago,'" said Buccieri, also a longtime friend of Jordan's mother, Yvonne.

Buccieri and the Sorianos do not want other youngsters with autism to go years without the treatment they need. So they have founded Face Autism, a local group devoted to providing early autism screenings for children ages 18 months to four years, and to helping families through small grants for things like medical appointments and gluten-free food.

"If you can identify these children early and get them the resources they need, that's not only going to help the family, it's going to help the community," Buccieri said. "I see so many adults now going, 'What do I do with my child who has autism who didn't get any services earlier?'"

Face Autism will hold its first annual poker run and motorcycle ride Sunday and hopes to raise at least \$10,000 to fund its screenings and grants. Since its founding in February 2009, the group has been able to help about 20 families, Buccieri said.

Julie Aldridge received a grant to subsidize the cost of taking her two autistic twin daughters, Emily and Abigail, to a biomedical doctor. After being put on a gluten-free diet, the twins improved their communication; Emily's word comprehension improved from seven to 83 words in one week.

"What Face Autism is doing is absolutely amazing," Aldridge says. "It's really good to know there are agencies like them to help locally, because with a lot of the big autism agencies, it's hard to even get started with them."



CORRESPONDENT PHOTO / CHRIS HAWES

The Soriano family founded Face Autism along with Colleen Buccieri, back right, after encountering numerous struggles in getting 10-year-old Jordan, bottom left, the diagnoses and therapy he needed. Also shown, from left: grandmother Dorothy Rosenbloom, mother Yvonne, father Cesar and brother Julien, 11.

The Sorianos say they hope Face Autism will provide them the opportunity to share other lessons they have learned while addressing Jordan's autism.

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For example, Yvonne Soriano said, therapy helped the entire family better understand why Jordan would kick repeatedly, or laugh or lay down at inappropriate moments. She realized those behaviors were her son's way of coping with an oversensitivity to noises, smells, and expressions on people's faces.

"I learned through therapy that he wants to turn all of that off. He wants to tune it out," she says. She also realized that whatever anxiety or embarrassment Jordan's behavior causes the family, "he is stressed out every day with trying to do what people want him to do."

Cesar Soriano said the divorce rate is higher among parents of children with autism, largely because of the additional financial stress. Jordan's therapy, for example, costs the Sorianos \$500 to \$1,500 a week.

Buccieri hopes the work she and Soriano do through Face Autism will help more families realize they have a resource for information and financial aid. She also hopes it will help the public better understand the challenge of treating autistic children.

"I don't think the public understands the struggles and emotional burdens families of kids with autism go through," Buccieri said.

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