

Support for Programs for Adults and Adolescents

ix years ago when The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation embarked on its mission to award grants to programs for adolescents and adults with autism, we received very few requests. It may seem shocking that organizations were not flooding us with applications for the funding we offered, but we were not too surprised. First, we were a new organization, and the only one in the United States to focus our grant giving specifically on adolescents and adults with autism; thus, our initiative was unexpected. Second, there were very few programs out there for teens and adults with ASD. However, all this was about to change.

HELPING OUT AT THE FARM

Soon after we promoted the availability of funding and request for applications, I was reading the New York Times and came across an article about a place called High Point Farm run by Fountain House, Inc., a New York-based organization whose goal is to help its members with mental illnesses by providing opportunities to live, work and learn, while contributing their talents through a community of mutual support. The farm described in the article looked amazing—477 acres in rural Montague, New Jersey. Members grow vegetables, harvest wood and raise llamas and alpacas; these endeavors provide sources of income for the farm's operations. High Point Farm seemed like an ideal place that could be a model for an adult farmstead for individuals with autism. I decided to call them.

When I first approached Fountain House they were more than a little curious as to what I had in mind, but their executive director and the manager of the farm graciously agreed to meet with

> me. At our meeting we sat together and brainstormed ideas as to how

> > we could include adolescents

and adults with autism in the farm's activities. Charlie Saggese, the farm's manager, mentioned that they had always wanted to build a wildlife habitat trail where members and guests of Fountain House could enjoy the

Sonding with man's best friend beauty and serenity of this gorgeous

site. I remembered that a parent I knew from the Forum School in New Jersey, a program my son had attended for children with autism, was very

involved in boy scouts and had brought the scouting program to the school. The idea was born that teenage boy scouts with autism could work with members of Fountain House to construct a 2-mile wildlife habitat trail and that they would earn their Eagle Scout rank for their work. Everyone loved the idea and a partnership was forged.

The building of the trail provided an extraordinary opportunity for members of Fountain House and young adults with autism to socialize, work together and benefit the community, the farm and themselves. Importantly, a program was developed where none existed before by adapting an existing program that

natural environment for adults with autism to develop and use vocational skills in a community setting.

We should continue identifying existing day programs as well as residential settings for other populations to see how adults with autism can participate in them, keeping in mind that appropriate supports are needed for this to be successful.

TRAINING THE FAMILY DOG

oped wy new puppy in dog training classes. After a few sessions with Kathy Santo, a well-known dog trainer and author, I realized that

The building of the trail provided an extraordinary opportunity for members of Fountain House and young adults with autism to socialize, work together and benefit the community, the farm and themselves.

served a different population to serve those with autism. The program continues to thrive and grow, engaging more people in its benefits. Currently, fitness stations, bike paths and a wellness program, including sensory adaptations to benefit visitors with autism, are being added to the trail.

WORKING WITH THE ELDERLY

The idea of taking an existing program and adapting it to include adolescents and adults with autism can be applied to a variety of residential, recreational, educational, family and vocational endeavors. For many years, we have funded a day program for adults with autism that is incorporated within a day program for the elderly known as the Broadway Adult Medical Day Care Center. It is a thriving partnership and everyone at the day center benefits. Adults with autism get vocational and social skills training at the center, with appropriate supports that further their abilities. They then get to practice these skills in real jobs at the center, such as food service and janitorial work. They also have the opportunity to socialize with the elderly participants, including participating in art and recreational activities. Senior centers such as this are a

the classes provided a great opportunity to bond with my puppy, as well as teaching me how to groom and care for her. It occurred to me that many parents of children and young adults with autism get a family dog to provide a friend for them, yet probably most do not know how to foster this relationship. Kathy and I came up with the idea of providing dog training classes for teenagers with autism and their family dogs that led to the creation of a program called Paws Four Autism These are family pets, not therapy dogs, and the training sessions increase social skills, life skills and even dog grooming vocational skills for the young adult participants. Most importantly, a special bond of friendship and companionship with the family dog evolves through the training experience, which was the reason

for getting the dog in the first place.

JOINING WITH THE FAITH COMMUNITY

The momentum of an existing program can be augmented when programs merge their expertise, thereby creating a new program. Last year, The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation funded a resource guide entitled Autism and Faith: A Journey into Community,

which was produced by the Boggs Center for Developmental Disabilities. It is an outstanding resource for families, religious institutions, lay leaders, clergy and congregants that provides guidance and useful advice as to how to include individuals with autism and their families in faith communities. The guide is filled with personal stories that portray both positive and negative experiences in a range of faiths and opens the dialogue on what works and what needs to be improved to include individuals with autism throughout their lives.

In the same year, our organization funded a series of symposia at The Autism Center (TAC) of New Jersey Medical School called *Bridging the Gap*. This program is particularly focused on providing information to families, caregivers and individuals with autism who reside in the under–served communities sur–

illustrates this point is a meeting I had with a dear friend and her 32-year-old son with Asperger Syndrome. He is a very independent man who lives on his own, drives and holds a job. Although he is extremely articulate, entertaining and a talented storyteller who adores the theater, he told me that there are no programs for him to pursue his interests and to meet adults his own age with similar interests. I thought this was terribly unfair and was determined to create an opportunity for my friend. There is a local equity theater company not too far from where he lives, so I called and asked to speak with director of the program. When I told him the story he was very interested in the idea and specifically wanted to meet with my theater-minded friend. When we all met together, my friend told him about his interests and the kind of program he sought. This fall, the first theater program for adults

This fall, the first theater program for adults 21 and older will be launched based on the ideas of my friend and his dreams.

rounding TAC. Realizing that one's faith community, especially in under-served communities, is often an important support for families, I wondered if those with autism and their families felt welcomed to participate. What evolved was a symposium forged by a partnership between TAC and the Boggs Center that was reflected in the name of the program: Bridging the Gap Between Autism and Faith. Authors featured in the resource guide, along with community faith leaders, joined together to share experiences, ideas and proven strategies with parents, individuals with autism and community organizations, empowering all participants to become full partners in the inclusion process. We should constantly be thinking about how organizations serving individuals with autism could partner, using their expertise, to create new programs that engender more ways for adults to participate in all aspects of community life.

LAUNCHING A THEATER PROGRAM

There is no greater resource for developing programs for young adults and adults with autism than the individuals themselves.

The guiding principle of The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation is to honor the individuality of each person, which includes nurturing their strengths and talents. One of my favorite recent stories that

21 and older will be launched based on the ideas of my friend and his dreams. This is a remarkable story, but there is really nothing remarkable about listening to those with autism and/ or their families as to what is needed in developing programs for adolescents and adults. The inspiring part is that there are so many people in the community willing to listen. We just need to ask.

ABOUT THE DANIEL JORDAN FIDDLE FOUNDATION

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation is a 501(c) (3) not-for-profit organization. The mission of the foundation is to award grants to residential, recreational, vocational, educational and family programs that enrich the lives of adolescents and adults with autism. Our expertise encompasses developing, identifying, supporting and supervising exemplary programs nationwide that honor the individuality of each person. For more information, visit www.djfiddlefoundation.org

About the Author

LINDA WALDER FIDDLE, ESQ., is the founder and executive director of The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation. The mission of the foundation is to award grants and develop programs that benefit adolescents and adults with ASD.