

Life with Autism

By Summit County Prosecutor Sherri Bevan Walsh

Our Guest Columnist this issue is Summit County Prosecutor Sherri Bevan Walsh. As a service to our readers, these columns will appear intermittently throughout the year.

Like most working mothers, I wear several hats in my life. Most of you know me as the Summit County prosecutor, as an advocate for crime victims, as the "Child Support Lady," as the "boss"--so many titles make up my position as chief prosecutor for the county. I am also the mother of two boys, ages six and nine, one of whom has a diagnosis of autism.

April is Autism Awareness Month and instead of writing on crime issues, as I usually do, I wanted to focus on the other very important job in my life, being a mother and an advocate for my son.

I am on the board of the Greater Akron Chapter of the Autism Society. The month of April is filled with local and national activities to bring awareness to autism. Locally, our chapter has been working with ClearChannel Outdoor to produce 10 billboards that will feature educational messages about autism. I would like to highlight the meaning behind some of our messages.

"Intelligent. Unique. Autism."



Intelligent: At one time, it was believed that 75 percent of individuals with autism were mentally retarded. Recent research reveals that number is way too high. While these individuals cannot always express their knowledge and intelligence due to their language difficulties, it is important not to underestimate their abilities. Education and early intervention is the key to unlocking their potential.

Unique: Individuals with autism are also unique because they are different. Not wrong, not dumb, just different. Accepting those unique differences is another reason to bring more awareness to autism.

Autism: While it may appear to be self explanatory, it is more accurate to say Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). ASDs represent an entire spectrum of disorders that are characterized by



interactions, and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior.

The sub-messages on each billboard are really about patience, support, and acceptance of individuals on the spectrum. One says "Making friends is harder with autism. Be a friend." As a parent, one of my biggest fears is that once my son reaches middle school, he may be bullied and misunderstood. Talk to your children about individuals with disabilities and how to treat them with understanding and respect. Our children want friends just as other children do; they just need some extra help.

Another message is "People with autism see the world differently. Don't we all?" This billboard features a 15-year-old teenage boy who can tell you more than most adults about the September 11 tragedy. He has an unusual memory for "disaster" facts, and is a very interesting boy to speak to... but he is different than most 15-year-olds who do not share this intense interest. Take the time to learn their unique point of view.

"One in 150 kids has autism. Offer your support." This message highlights the importance of friends and family supporting not only the individual with autism, but their families. Autism is a very intense diagnosis for a parent to deal with. Provide support by listening and not offering platitudes, offering your time to relieve parents, and not making judgments that the individual--or their parents--are somehow bad because the child appears to be "out of control." Our kids sometimes look that way and it only makes it worse to be stared at or hear harsh or insensitive comments.

Of all my jobs, autism and its impact on my son and our family is one of my most challenging. With community tolerance, patience, and support, my job is a lot easier. Δ

For more information about autism, Bevan Walsh recommends the following sites:

*Greater Akron Chapter of the Autism Society of America
www.asagreaterakron.com*

*Autism Society of America
www.autism-society.org*

*Autism Speaks
www.autismspeaks.org*

Center for Disease Control

