

To Whom it May Concern,

As a parent of a child with Autism, I am a member of the Autism Society of the Keys. My child was diagnosed with Autism in 2014. At the time, there were minimal services and supports for families within 100 miles of our home. We paid out of pocket for speech therapy to build on the service received through the school. ABA services, other therapies, and any sort of support group were not available or in some cases they were inconsistent and therefore not helpful. It was around 2016 when I heard about the Autism Society of the Keys and was made aware of the local meetings. I decided to join the monthly meeting, and I am so glad that I did. Within this group I have found an amazing source of support and fellowship amongst a group of parents experiencing challenges very similar to my own. This monthly group gives us an opportunity to vent about our frustrations, problem solve issues we otherwise would feel stuck on and with the help of the group leader, Jill Campbell, we gain access to more programs that our children need and the resources many of us need in order to participate in these programs.

For my family, finding summer camp programs that would meet my son Ryan's needs could be challenging. With the help of the Autism Society of the Keys, Ryan was able to participate in the Dolphin Therapy Program at Island Dolphin Care in Key Largo for two summers. This program is incredible and offers an hour of therapy every day for a week, followed by an hour of swimming with a dolphin- everyday for that week. People travel from all over the world to have this experience. It is very expensive and for most families it would be out of reach, especially in the Florida Keys when you consider the high cost of living. However, if you are a member of the Autism Society of the Keys you benefit from the partnership established between this organization and Island Dolphin Care and the scholarship offered. In addition, the Autism Society pays any cost not covered by the scholarship. This means that our children with very special needs, get to participate in the experience of a lifetime and it's at no cost to the families. The program is truly magical and brings about positive changes in the lives of the children and families who participate- if swimming with a dolphin doesn't motivate you- what will?

Additionally, The Autism Society of the Keys has provided other resources to my family, such as books, an iPad, air pods, sensory items, a timer, school supplies and any other item I may need can most likely be provided upon request. One of my favorite parts of this group is the social play dates offered to the children. We are limited in kid activities and social groups in the keys. Having the opportunity to take my child to do something fun with other children and families who get it- get him- get me is a tremendous comfort. I am so thankful to have a group of people in my corner whose sole purpose is to make life easier for me and my family.

Sincerely,

***Julie Bridger***

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