



Autism on the Seas Foundation, Inc. Family Grants “Case for Support”

Supporting Families... Enriching Lives

Janine Garrick's world was filled with stress and anxiety from the moment Connor was diagnosed with autism. Connor's violent physical outbursts directed toward his mother, sudden tantrums, and unsafe and unhealthy behaviors consumed Janine's life and all but made her a prisoner in her own home. Connor could not be left alone for even one minute for fear of hurting himself or someone else. Constant overwhelming feelings of grief, continuous worry about the future and what it may bring, and the never ending search for the support and services Connor and his family need took a heavy toll on Janine and contributed to her intense depression. For the most part, Janine felt completely alone because, as a single parent, she had no one to help share in her overwhelming burden. Until she found Autism on the Seas....



Who We Are and Why We Exist

Janine's plight is not uncommon. Autism is diagnosed in 1 in every 68 children. This debilitating disorder significantly impairs an individual's ability to communicate and socially interact, and is more prevalent than juvenile diabetes, pediatric AIDS, leukemia, and muscular dystrophy combined. Multiple research studies have shown that families like Janine's experience extreme stress due to the nature of autism and the behaviors of affected individuals. These behaviors also prevent families from participating in the enriching activities that typically help to relieve stress. This places members of families living with autism at a much higher risk of clinical depression and other mental health issues. Although not as severe, families affected by other developmental disabilities are also subjected to more stress and instances of depression than the typical family.

“I was so stressed out.... I constantly tried to deal with Connor with no help. It took some time for me to ‘let go’ and accept help. I have never had help before.”

Approximately 10 years ago, our founder had a vision - to use his love of cruise vacationing to help families like Janine's. In 2007, Michael Sobbell made his vision a reality by starting the Autism on the Seas travel company to organize and staff cruise and resort vacations for families and guests coping with autism spectrum disorders, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and other cognitive and intellectual developmental impairments. Since then, Autism on the Seas has provided thousands of families the opportunity to vacation with a sense of normalcy through accommodated group activities, with professional staff assistance throughout the cruise and daily respite that enables families to relax, recharge, and reconnect with siblings and other family members that may take a backseat to a child with special needs.

Shortly after creating the travel company, Michael realized there was an underserved group within the disability community that, because of financial limitations, was unable to enjoy the stress-relieving opportunities of a staffed vacation. Michael also learned many families considered to be financially secure were also struggling given the average of \$20,000 more spent per year than the average family to raise a disabled child. Michael decided to do something about this, and thus the Autism on the Seas Foundation was born.



Founded in 2014 and designated a tax exempt 501.c.3 organization by the IRS in 2015, the Autism on the Seas Foundation supports families living with autism and other developmental disabilities and enhances their lives by creating family bonding and stress relief opportunities. Our vision is that all families living with autism and other developmental disabilities have the opportunity to improve their overall quality of life by participating in stress relieving and family enhancing experiences with the support and accommodations necessary to assist with their loved one's disability. We offered financial assistance to our first family in June of 2015. Since then, sponsors like you have enriched the lives of countless deserving families by providing the opportunity to participate in a vacation experience designed with the professional staff assistance and services necessary to relieve stress and contribute

to healthy living. It is only with your assistance that we can continue our noble cause.

Our Programs

The Autism on the Seas Foundation helps relieve stress and promotes healthy living in families and individuals impacted by autism and other developmental disorders by providing stress relief outlets and promoting family bonding, solidarity, and communication. We do this through our four major programs:

Financial Assistance

We provide financial assistance to deserving families and individuals with developmental disabilities to afford them the opportunity to participate in stress relieving family activities and vacations to improve their overall quality of life. We are proud that over 60% of the families we served since 2015 met the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development low-to-moderate income guidelines and are committed to continue serving this segment of the population.

Many studies have proven that vacations are one of the most effective ways to relieve stress, improve health, and promote family bonding. We use the services of Autism on the Seas, Inc., the only travel company that caters to families living with autism and other developmental disabilities. By providing the financial assistance to participate in an Autism on the Seas assisted cruise, our families also receive the following stress relieving and family enhancing services:

- Peer support through an established community network.
- Access to the special education and behavioral management professionals that staff our cruises during cruise planning.
- Strategy and services planning.
- Continuation of special therapies during the vacation.
- Pre-vacation visual aids to help prepare the developmentally disabled family members for their vacation (PECS, picture and social stories).
- Customized pairing of our professional staff members with disabled family members through the use of questionnaires and intake interviews.
- Professionally staffed respite services.
- Professional staff assistance during transitions.
- Professional staff assistance during all meals.
- Special meal planning and dietary assistance to meet special dietary needs.
- Priority boarding, disembarkation, and show seating to minimize wait times. Professional staff assistance is also provided at each of these events.
- Professional staff assistance during private muster drills that are designed to minimize the stimuli and sensory overload with which autistic individuals oftentimes struggle.
- Professional staff assistance at all ship activities, scheduled pool time, and organized beach excursions.
- Specific events and activities designed to allow parents and other caregivers the opportunity to socialize in a relaxing, nurturing environment.
- Peer-to-peer events to foster social interaction and the development of life-long bonds between members of the families we serve.

"The financial aid was such a blessing. Any little bit helps. I am not able to work, and without the financial aid there would be no vacation."

"After I applied I continued checking until I received the email that said YOU WERE AWARDED A GRANT. I yelled, and the tears started flowing because my dream was going to be made!"

"Thank goodness for respite. I know I can trust them because the staff is screened and trained. And most of all- they LOVE what they do. If Connor has a meltdown, they are quick to intervene and take him for a walk. I never knew what the word 'respite' meant until we cruised with Autism on the Seas for the first time."

Professional Staffing Services

Since families of autistic and other developmentally disabled children spend on average \$20,000 more per year raising their disabled child than the typical family, we consider it important to provide some amount of financial relief all families receiving services through the Autism on the Seas disability travel company. So, we subsidize the cost of professional staffing services for all families regardless of income or financial standing.

"Autism Friendly" Cruise Line Services

Continuing to raise cruise line and resort employees awareness of the specifics of autism and the related spectrum disorders, as well as the strategies to help families cope with these disorders, remains one of our priorities. Cruise line and resort employees interface with and play a significant role in helping our families on a daily basis. Because of this, we maintain the industry standards and measures designed to ensure cruise lines and resorts operate, provide their services, and train their staff in a manner that accommodates the developmental disability community. We also provide consulting services to cruise lines and resorts to improve their ability to serve guests with autism and other developmental disabilities.

"With Gold status, we're going to have advanced training with our youth staff that goes into the more challenging situations they may face." - Ron Pettit, ADA and access compliance consultant for Royal Caribbean



Scholarly Research

We want to continue to identify and develop strategies that result in positive outcomes for the families we serve. We conduct research, through universities such as Columbia University, to analyze the impact of accommodated and staffed vacations on the quality of life for families coping with Autism and other developmental disabilities to better understand the value of the accommodations and service we provide and to further assist the direction of required accommodations and services.



The Impact

Although only recently founded, the Autism on the Seas Foundation has a solid track record of providing assistance to autistic and other developmentally delayed families. We received our tax exempt status and quickly placed our first family on an Autism on the Seas vacation experience in June 2015. Since then, we have created the opportunity for dozens of additional families to relieve stress, renew bonds, and strengthen their family unit. We have actively and aggressively advanced our autism friendly training and scholarly research programs. We created and implemented the professional staffing subsidy program in late 2015. We also started developing the corporate and individual relationships necessary to fund this worthy cause. Rather than continue to provide statistics and data, it is best to let Kim Ansley, mother to Kaleb, discuss the impact the Autism on the Seas Foundation had on her family.

“Kaleb was 10 when we sailed away into dream world. Kaleb is non-verbal, had very violent outburst at any given time. When we walked onto the ship, we never realized we would be returning to Texas a whole different family. The staff had a way with each child, and approached each situation as if it was going to make a difference. The staff used simple but direct words. ‘Kaleb, eyes on me’ and ‘Kaleb, use your nice hands.’ Since returning from our cruise, my Kaleb is a total different child. His violent [episodes] are few and far between. His eye contact has become more meaningful, instead of just staring at you while you talk. You can actually see the ‘wheels turning’. In fact, there have been numerous times when Kaleb will stand still, his mouth moving and shaking his head. For the longest time we had no idea what he was doing. It turns out he was thinking of doing something bad, and he thought of his choices and decisions, and was choosing not to do the bad things that he would of done before the cruise. To this day, the staff [at Kaleb’s school] says that Kaleb should be the poster child for the organization because to see the before Kaleb and the now Kaleb, you are looking at a totally different boy. His teacher remarked ‘...something on that cruise changed you all. You have this different more relaxed, at ease look towards you, and Kaleb, the progress I see in this child every day makes me want to demand you go cruising every year.’”

We Need Your Help

The demand for our services is strong. **Over 4,000 families (as of March 2017) like Janine’s and Kim’s have applied for financial assistance and are waiting for our help.** The good news is we could successfully place each and every one of these families on a cruise vacation this year; both the Foundation and the Autism on the Seas disability travel company have the capacity and capability to serve these families. The bad news is it would take over \$9M to help all of these families. And that doesn’t include funding to subsidize professional staffing, develop and deploy the next levels of certification training for cruise lines, or advance our scholarly research. That funding also does not account for the 100 new families who apply for financial assistance each and every month.

For the sake of Janine, Kim, and all of the families we serve, please help us meet or exceed our goals by selecting a “Sponsor a Family Grant” option that fits your budget today. With your help we can continue to support our families and enrich their lives!

