



00:00:00 [Music]

00:00:05 Announcer

This is the Summer 2026 edition of the Facets audio newsletter. It's often said that necessity sparks innovation, and this is especially true in the autism community, where dedicated parents are creating programs to help their neurodivergent children transition successfully to adulthood. Scientists at the Kessler Foundation Center for Autism Research focus on developing strengths-based, evidence-based interventions that support autistic children, adolescents, and adults. Their work highlights confidence-building, life transitions, and long-term success. Today, we share inspiring stories of parent-led initiatives that turn personal challenges into solutions, strengthening communities and opening doors to new opportunities.

Now, let's hear from some parents who refused to accept limitations for their children. They took action to create programs that help autistic youth build skills and find real work opportunities. These stories remind us how hope can lead to a brighter future.

00:1:00 [Music]

00:01:01 Julia

A parent's hope, a community's future

They watched and worried as their autistic children approached adulthood, knowing that when school supports ended, real-life opportunities often did, too. They feared it would be difficult or expensive for their children to find job training, coaching, and safe places to learn daily living skills. And they saw how often people underestimated their children's strengths.



Instead of accepting those limits, many parents have stepped up. Seeking a future of opportunity and purpose for their children and other neurodivergent youth, parents have started programs that help build skills, confidence, and real work experiences.

Change is the goal!

Like other families with autistic children, Mark Debrowski realized the many challenges his growing son Ethan would face, especially in terms of support and work opportunities. That led him to launch The Ethan Foundation for Autism and The Puzzle Café in Haskell, NJ. As a board member of both non-profit entities, Debrowski focuses on making sure people can get the assistance they need, when they need it.

00:02:16 Ryan (Quote from Mark Debrowski)

“We don’t want to turn anyone away. We’ve all experienced that heartbreak, and want to be totally inclusive,”

00:02:23 Julia

he explains, adding how personal this mission is for his family.

00:02:28 Ryan (Quote from Mark Debrowski)

“This isn’t a side gig; it’s a lifetime’s worth of work. Our goal is to create lasting change.”

00:02:35 Julia

An eye on the future

Karen Coccari Bellas shares a similar story. Inspired by her son with Down syndrome, she opened Sorriso Kitchen, a farm-to-table restaurant in Chatham, NJ, that also offers job training through the family’s Reasons to Smile Foundation. True to its name, Sorriso, which means ‘smile’ in Italian, is a happy place.



00:03:00 Natasha (quote from Karen Coccari Bellas)

“Not all parents can do what we can,”

00:03:02 Julia

Bellas says.

00:03:03 Natasha (quote from Karen Coccari Bellas)

“We hoped this program would grow beyond our family and live on for generations.”

00:03:08 Julia

Access and affordability

For Lori Hull, motivation came as her son approached adulthood.

00:03:15 Victoria (quote from Lori Hull)

“We hit a cliff. Finding the right help was limited and the services he benefited from and truly needed became cost prohibitive,”

00:03:23 Julia

she explains. Determined to close that gap, Hull reached out to a few friends and said,

00:03:29 Victoria (quote from Lori Hull)

“What if we created services here and made them affordable and available for other families who might not have access?”

00:03:36 Julia

That led her to found Spectrum Independence Living. She now serves as president of this Arkansas-based



nonprofit, which helps neurodivergent young adults gain skills for independent living, regardless of their family's financial situation.

Many parent-led organizations share a common goal: helping their children and others reach their full potential. Next, we will explore the four key ingredients these programs focus on to support neurodivergent young people. "People with MS often say they want to take control of their lives. And while you may not be able to control the disease itself, you can control its impact on your brain and cognition."

00:04:07 [Music]

00:04:12 Snap

4 keys to success

Parent-led organizations share a common goal:

- To optimize the overall well-being and potential of their neurodivergent children and young adults. While the scope of these programs varies greatly, most target:
- Access to needed services, regardless of age or cost
- Opportunities to explore individual strengths and develop skills
- Participation in activities that foster relationships and positive social interactions

Some parents have turned their personal hopes into small businesses that welcome and train neurodivergent youth. Let's take a closer look at how these businesses create important jobs and teach valuable skills.

00:04:48 [Music]



00:04:54 Jarnathan

Small businesses. Big opportunities.

Parent-founded food companies are creating welcoming workplaces where neurodivergent youth can learn, grow, and build new paths to employment.

Baking with love

Kelly Castro's son Carson isn't old enough to work yet. But that didn't stop her from establishing a bakery in Fair Lawn, NJ, that employs youth with autism and other different abilities. Kelly shares,

00:05:19 Hannah (Quote from Kelly Castro)

"We finally decided to start a business where he can work one day,"

00:05:23 Jarnathan

Named after her son, Carson's Cookie Dough teaches employees more than just baking skills. They learn about the business itself, from packaging and shipping to accounting and customer service.

Popping with purpose

Popcorn for the People in Piscataway, NJ, sells flavored popcorn with a unique twist: Each bag includes a description of an actual employee, giving customers a connection to the people behind the product. Executive Director Theresa Santana says,

00:05:52 Kaylin (Quote from Theresa Santana)



“We encourage staff to learn different aspects of our business so they can move up from entry-level positions.”

00:05:58 Jarnathan

Food for thought

At Invictus Bakery in Brooklyn, NY, co-founder Molly Sebastian also turned a personal worry into a model employment program.

00:06:22 Julia (Quote from Molly Sebastian)

“I realized that despite my daughter’s incredible work ethic, her lack of spoken language would likely be a barrier to future employment,”

00:06:22 Jarnathan

So, she started a small home-based business for her daughter that grew into Invictus Bakery.

00:06:28 Julia (Quote from Molly Sebastian)

“Watching my daughter thrive showed me this model could serve a broader community”.

00:06:33 Jarnathan

Today, Invictus is the first-ever, speller-led bakery, using alternative communication methods in its training.



These inspiring programs thrive because communities get involved. Up next, learn how you can help spread the word and support opportunities for neurodivergent individuals to grow and succeed.

00:06:55 [Music]

00:07:00 Victoria

Spread the word!

Programs like those featured in this issue of Facets thrive with community support. By showing up, sharing about, and investing in their mission, you can help expand opportunities for neurodivergent individuals.

Consider these ways to get involved:

- ▶ Create awareness through social media, word of mouth, and or local partnerships
- ▶ Purchase products or services to support their work
- ▶ Leave reviews online to build credibility and reach
- ▶ Attend or volunteer at events and fundraisers

Every action counts. Visit the links in the program notes to share their mission, and help spread the word! Together, we can build a more inclusive and supportive community for all.

Knowledge is power! Kessler Foundation's Center for Autism Research offers great resources and webinars that dive into how focusing on strengths can change life's path for autistic young adults. Let's hear more about their important work.



00:7:57 [Music]

00:08:06 Victoria

Listen up!

Kessler Foundation's Center for Autism Research offers a wide range of information and resources on its website, including highly engaging webinars.

For example, in Focused on Strengths, Dr. Helen Jennova, the Center's associate director, discusses how research is changing the trajectory for neurodiverse young adults by helping them identify their strengths, communicate more effectively, and achieve their personal and employment goals.

A strong partnership between parents and Kessler Foundation is making even greater strides. Together, they are developing innovative tools like KF-Stride to prepare autistic youth for job success. We'll close with stories about how this collaboration is helping families and young adults thrive.

00:8:55 [Music]

00:08:59 Julie

Working partnership

Parents in the autism community are sharing their insight and joining forces with Kessler Foundation to bring about meaningful change.



In collaboration with Kessler Foundation, many families are helping advance the development of tools that prepare neurodivergent young adults for employment success. This dynamic partnership led to the introduction of the award- winning KF-Stride, a web-based program designed to support autistic youth during the job interview process by highlighting individual strengths and building confidence.

00:09:33 Belinda

“There’s a tremendous need to assist neurodivergent young adults in navigating the world of employment, and I want to support this highly important initiative,”

00:09:40 Julie

says Lauren Markon, founder of WorkAble NJ, an organization inspired by her autistic son. Feedback from parents like Markon has helped KF-Stride become a more engaging, realistic, and easy-to-use platform. Parents see the difference KF-Stride makes in their own children. Carla Vicari notes that

00:10:01 Liz

“Both of my sons participated in KF-Stride, and, despite their different learning styles, the program was effective for each of them. Their confidence grew with every meeting, and they were proud of their accomplishments.”

00:10:13 [Music]



00:10:16 Announcer

Innovative parent-led programs are making a real difference in the lives of neurodivergent youth, supporting their skills, confidence, and independence. At Kessler Foundation's Center for Autism Research, we are committed to advancing research that helps empower these individuals for life and work. You can make an impact too—get involved by supporting local programs, raising awareness, or sharing these stories. Together, we can help create lasting change and build a future filled with opportunity for all neurodivergent young adults.

00:10:49 [Music]