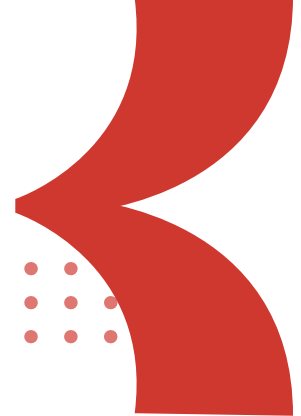




facets



Center for Autism Research at Kessler Foundation



A parent's hope, a community's future

The most impactful programs for neurodivergent youth are often created by parents determined to overcome barriers to their child's independence.

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.

**Above,
a family affair:
Karen Coccari
Bellas' son inspired
the farm-to-table
Sorriso Kitchen**

>> continued inside

SUMMER 2026

Parent power

It's often said that necessity sparks innovation. And that is increasingly true in the autism community where parents of neurodivergent youth are creating programs to help ensure a successful and productive transition to adulthood. After all, who understands a child's needs better than a parent?

In this issue of *Facets*, we highlight some of the many parent-led initiatives that are turning love into leadership and personal challenges into solutions that strengthen our communities.

Helen Genova, PhD
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**KESSLER
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A parent's hope, a community's future

<< continued from cover

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.

"We don't want to turn anyone away. We've all experienced that heartbreak, and want to be totally inclusive," he explains, adding how personal this mission is for his family. "This isn't a side gig; it's a lifetime's worth of work. Our goal is to create lasting change."

An eye on the future

Karen Coccari Bellas shares a similar story. Inspired by her son with Down syndrome, she opened **Sorrismo Kitchen**, shown on the cover, 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. "Not all parents can do what we can," Bellas says. "We hoped this program would grow beyond our family and live on for generations."

Access and affordability

For Lori Hull, motivation came as her son approached adulthood. "We hit a cliff. Finding the right help was limited and the services he benefited from and truly needed became cost prohibitive," she explains. Determined to close that gap, Hull reached out to a few friends and said, "What if we created services here and made them affordable and available for other families who might not have access?" That led her to found **Spectrum Independence Living (SplndL)**. 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. ↻

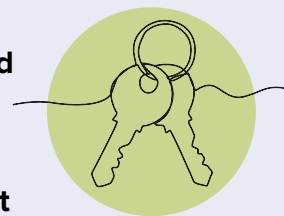


4 keys to success

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:

1 ACCESS to needed services, regardless of age or cost



2 OPPORTUNITIES to explore individual strengths and develop skills

3 PARTICIPATION in activities that foster relationships and positive social interactions



4 COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT that helps build awareness and acceptance



Our research develops interventions focusing on the critical adolescence-to-adult transition. Learn more at kesslerfoundation.org/autism-research or scan the code, left.

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. "We finally decided to start a business where he can work one day," she says. 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, "We encourage staff to learn different aspects of our business so they can move up from entry-level positions." Team members can become lead associates, train others, and oversee shipping, resulting in long-term careers.

Food for thought

At **Invictus Bakery** in Brooklyn, NY, co-founder Molly Sebastian also turned a personal worry into a model employment program. "I realized that despite my daughter's incredible work ethic, her lack of spoken language would likely be a barrier to future employment," Sebastian shares. So she started a small home-based business for her daughter that grew into Invictus Bakery. "Watching my daughter thrive showed me this model could serve a broader community," she explains. Today, Invictus is the first-ever, speller-led bakery, using alternative communication methods in its training. 🗣️

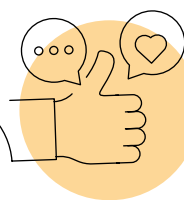


Spread the word!

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



Carson's Cookie Dough
carsonscookiedough.com

The Ethan Foundation
ethanfoundationnj.com

Invictus Bakery
invictusbakery.org

Popcorn for the People
popcornforthepeople.com

Sorriso Kitchen
sorrisokitchen.com

Spectrum Independence Living
spindrivervalley.org

WorkAble NJ
workablenj.com

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*, Helen Genova, PhD, 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.



◀ Scan the code to watch the video, or go to bit.ly/4ecq33x



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.

"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," 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.



Despite their different learning needs, both of Carla Vicari's sons made gains with KF-Stride.

Parents see the difference KF-Stride makes in their own children. Carla Vicari notes that "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." 🧡



◀ If KF-Stride sounds like a good fit for your child, scan the code or email AutismResearch@kesslerfoundation.org