



Frankie, Linda, Frank and Michael Kuepper



Michael and Linda Kuepper

Linda Kuepper Changes the World for Children and Adults With Autism

By Debra Wallace

Linda Kuepper is a loving mom who vividly remembers her emotional reaction to receiving a diagnosis of autism for her younger son before his third birthday.

A formidable Bucks County woman, who has the tenacity and drive to accomplish major goals despite any obstacles that appear in her path, Linda, and her husband, Frank, had no idea about the journey their family was embarking on.

In fact, after a developmental neurologist handed them a prescription with the word "autism" on it, they felt overwhelmed with grief.

"Initially, we were extremely depressed finding out that what Michael had would affect him for his entire life," explains Linda, now 58. "I call it the grieving process because the unknown is very scary, and, honestly, that's when we knew as a family moving forward that we had to change the entire direction of our lives."

While her typical older son, Frankie, was hitting all of his developmental milestones and had a variety of social activities, sports pursuits, and afterschool play dates, Michael was non-verbal and had poor eye contact and frequent outbursts.

His life involved what she called "a revolving door" of therapists, and he was left out of birthday parties and other social activities that his typical peers enjoyed.

The status quo might have suited other women, but it was definitely not good enough for his mom. There was no "game plan or blueprint" for helping a child with autism, so Linda and her husband decided to write their own.

"We couldn't take a wait-and-see attitude because we knew that what was out there wasn't good enough to meet Michael's social needs," she explains.

"So, Frank and I talked about throwing out the 'old rule book' and starting something new to help Michael and other children with autism have more fulfilling and satisfying lives," she recalls. "We believed that they have a purpose in society and that they deserve to have the same quality of life as any other child."

The first event they held, a music class at a local library, was such a success that the librarian asked them to find a larger, more suitable space. They expected 10 people to come, but 70 showed up.

Linda quickly discovered that there were many local families that needed social programs and events tailored to their special needs and unique abilities.

"We knew that we were doing a great service for the community, and we saw the happiness on their faces," Linda said, "but we could never have predicted the great impact that we would have."

The result of her efforts was the nonprofit Autism Cares Foundation, which is now recognizing its 10th Anniversary with a Diamond Celebration, a dinner dance, and silent and live auctions, on April 21, at Spring Mill Manor in Ivyland, Bucks County. This is taking place during Autism Awareness Month in April.

Knowing the impact that she has had through the Autism Cares Foundation over the past 10 years brings tears to Linda's eyes.

"I am extremely humbled and honored by the feedback from the families and the community," says Linda. "I also believe that it takes a group of people with a common cause to bring out the best in people. We cannot do this without all of the support that we have received."

Starting with the Kuepper family and continuing with the hard work and generosity of personal donors, corporate sponsors, volunteers, and the greater community, the Autism Cares Foundation has provided more than 1,200 free activities for children, teens, and adults with autism and other special needs and their families.

Some of these activities include social outings, swimming, fitness programs, proms, music events, bounce parties, sensory-friendly movies, Glee Clubs, and much more. All told, the Autism Cares Foundation has touched the lives of thousands of families who have loved ones with autism and other special needs. Clearly, Linda's dream has gone way beyond her initial expectations.

"Every mother wants her child to be happy and healthy and have the world be their oyster," she says. "It was heartbreaking when we saw that Michael's

world was so small, and we had to do everything we could to open it up."

Frank, her husband of 28 years, is "so proud of what my wife has accomplished," he says. "Linda is the heart and soul of the Autism Cares Foundation, and her hard work and dedication to our family, and to so many other families, has truly made a positive lasting difference in so many lives."

As the children involved with Autism Cares Foundation, including Michael, now 20, get older, their needs have grown and changed.

Last year, Autism Cares Foundation launched its Adult Services Division, which offers Adult Day Habilitation, Home and Community Habilitation, and Supported Employment Programs for adults with autism and other special needs.

Looking back on the past 10 years, Linda believes that all of the time, energy, and hard work has been worth it.

"Frank and I started this, but, by doing this together as families and as a greater community, with care, kindness, love, and compassion, we know that we can change the world for our loved ones so they too lead fulfilling lives," she says.

"It fills my heart with joy to see how happy the participants are," Linda says. "My son has so many friends and a fuller life and what more could a mother want?"

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