



Linda Kuepper

Transforming the Lives of Those With Special Needs



By Debra Wallace Forman

From the first moment a bundle of joy is placed in the arms of a loving mother, she wants a happy and healthy life for her child that is filled with mastering major milestones—and Linda Kuepper was no exception.

Linda's dreams for her younger son, Michael, were met by an overwhelming number of stumbling blocks when he was diagnosed with autism before his third birthday, and she and her husband Frank had to navigate many difficulties.

"Every mother wants her child to be happy and healthy and have the world be their oyster," Linda 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."

The questions were many: Would he have friends? What kind of school would he attend? Would he hit his milestones? What types of therapy would he need? What about his life after graduation?

The answers came but not without many challenges. Instead of being weighed down by all of these questions and concerns, Linda and Frank took action by creating the nonprofit **Autism Cares Foundation**.

Their goal in 2007 was to provide age-appropriate social opportunities, special events, and learning experiences for children, teens and adults

with autism in a safe and caring environment, where each of them would thrive, despite any of their challenges.

Now, with the community's needs constantly growing, Autism Cares Foundation (ACF), located in Southampton, has expanded its services to include people with many other special needs—a staggering reach of 4,700 individuals a year.

In addition, this formidable woman has spread the foundation's mission of acceptance, kindness and love for all children and adults, especially those with autism and other special needs.

"Initially, we wanted to help our little boy find his place and know that he wasn't left out of his community," explains Linda, now 59. "When we started ACF, we couldn't have imagined that we would have come this far."

Her deepest hope "is that we are able to do this for many years to come," she says. "We know that what we provide is only made possible through the generous donations and the kind participation and support of our major fund-raisers."

One of those major fund-raisers is **Autism Cares Foundation CARES Gala**, an elegant dinner dance held on **Saturday, April 27, at Spring Mill Manor, in Ivyland, Bucks County**.

Among the highlights of the evening are silent and live auctions that feature everything from fine wine and lavish themed baskets

to sought-after vacations and sports memorabilia.

The much-anticipated Gala—in conjunction with Autism Awareness Month—attracts community and business leaders, dignitaries and local families, all of whom are awed by Linda's tenacity and caring heart.

Past donations have helped enrich the lives of 1,000 families in the tri-state area. These children, teens and adults with autism and other special needs were able to participate in more than 1,200 FREE activities during the past 11 years.

Among these activities are sensory-friendly movies, bounce and trampoline parties, swimming, fitness programs, proms, holiday-themed parties, LEGO play, field trips to theme parks, technology, GLEE Club, music events and more.

Often when Linda attends these events, her eyes fill with tears when parents tell her that they don't know where they would have turned during the past several years if it wasn't for the love and support of Linda, her family, and the ACF.

Linda and Autism Cares Foundation recognized that, as the children, including Michael, now 20, get older, their needs have grown and changed, which has resulted in a greater necessity for a wide range of adult services.

Once the loved ones with autism and other special needs graduate from high school (after age 21), their

daily purpose, routine and access to a myriad of services stop. Suddenly, there are very few options available to them.

Instead of spending their days isolated at home with their tablets and computers, Autism Cares Foundation recently launched its Adult Service Division that offers Adult Day Habilitation and Home and Community Habilitation, for adults with autism and other special needs.

"As parents, we worry about our teens and adults with autism having productive and fulfilling lives," said Linda. "This means helping with socialization and enhancing a wide variety of skills that often lead to long-lasting connections."

As the demand for these services continues to soar, Autism Cares Foundation is diligently working to eliminate the waiting lists and expand its job skills, job training and supported employment.

Linda says that Autism Cares Foundation receives daily phone calls from parents who are concerned about what will

happen to their loved ones with autism and other special needs once they reach age 21 and most of their programs and services come to a screeching halt.

As a result, "we feel there is a necessity to expand our Adult Services program," she explains. "We need to expand all of our adult programs, including job skills and job training and helping them to find employment. We hear the concerns, and we are in the process of locating a second building to accommodate the needs of the additional families."

The aim is that the program will lead to regular employment, which in turn boosts self-esteem, leading to happier, more meaningful lives.

"Linda is the heart and soul of ACF, and I am so proud of her hard work and dedication to all of our families," says Frank. "She has truly made a lasting positive difference in so many lives, and we look forward to nurturing these families for many years to come."



To request further information, donate, sponsor or attend the Gala, please check www.autismcaresfoundation.org.

Or call 215-942-2273.