



Julie Hipp and Sara Taussick, residents of East Wallingford, who work to improve autism awareness

Photo by Amy Parisi, Amy's Artistry

Residents Take Strides for Autism Community

On Sunday May 22nd the *ASRC CT Walk for Autism* will take place at the North Haven Fair Grounds. This event, which began in 1997, was the first of its kind in Connecticut, and supports residents living with autism. Its origin begins with a story of a mother, Lois Rosenwald, who set out to become an advocate for the autism community, after her son was diagnosed on the autism spectrum. A pioneer of the State's first autism advocacy organization, Autism Services & Resources Connecticut (ASRC), Lois continues to be a voice behind the cause.

Lois and her husband, Peter, reside in the town of Wallingford with their adored Shih Tzu, Gracie. Now empty nesters, the couple raised their son before moving to the area 20 years ago.

"We love the diversity of the town," Lois commented. "And it's friendly nature," she added about living in the community of Wallingford. A former student in the field of psychology, Lois obtained business experience as a previous owner to several Pearl Vision Centers throughout Connecticut.

Back in the late 1970s when Lois and Peter's son was born, there was much less known about autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and many providers weren't trained to spot the early signs. Although Lois instinctively knew early on that something was different in her son's social behavior and connections, it took years to get a diagnosis. "It was a very lonely time," as Lois recalled. Motivated to improve ASD awareness and access to



The Wallingford non-profit provides the tether to resources and services for those living with autism.

Photo by Amy Parisi, Amy's Artistry

available resources, Lois started ASRC in 1997, years after her son was diagnosed on the autism spectrum.

The non-profit organization provides lifelong access to opportunities for persons on the autism spectrum. The organization, which occupies a small space on North Plains Industrial Road in Wallingford, offers Connecticut families a better path to navigate available services and resources. "I didn't want any other mother to ever feel isolated and alone in this journey," Lois humbly disclosed. She credits ASRC's Director of Programs and Training, Sara Taussick, and ASRC's Board President, Julie Hipp, for their critical roles within the organization and overall contributions to the autism community.

In August 2017, Sara came on board with ASRC and offered an extensive background working with individuals on the autism spectrum. "I came across ASRC and found that they were looking for someone to run their social and recreational programs," Sara shared. "An interview with Lois was scheduled and we immediately hit it off." Sara is a licensed and board-certified art therapist and professional counselor. She's worked with the ASD population in a wide variety of settings from after-school programming to in-patient psychiatry. As Lois commented, "Sara is a tremendous asset to the overall organization."

An East Wallingford resident, Sara lives in the community with her husband, Jason, and daughter, Eva. Jason is a native of Wallingford and introduced Sara to the area when house hunting 10 years ago. They've since put down roots and started a family, and sincerely enjoy living in the town. "Wallingford has truly become my home," Sara stated. "It's a great mix of people and places and I'm happy to raise my daughter here." In addition to her work at the ASRC, Sara runs a private therapy practice that specializes in ASD.

ASRC's Board President, Julie Hipp, is a mother of an adult son on the spectrum and has devoted much of her life to the cause for autism. "She's been a critical piece of ASRC's growth," Lois said admiringly of her friend and colleague. Also an East Wallingford resident, Julie has roots in town, including her dad, who was a teacher at Lyman Hall High School. In addition to her dedication at the ASRC, Julie is the principal owner of an executive employment recruitment business, headquartered in Wallingford.

During a zoom conversation back in February, I had the opportunity to speak with both Lois and Sara, about the organization and the work they do within community for autism awareness. Dr. James Loomis PhD, a clinical psychologist from Glastonbury, who volunteers his professional services for the organization, also joined us on the call.



Lois Rosenwald, Wallingford resident, ASRC founder and advocate for the autism community.

Photo by Amy Parisi, Amy's Artistry

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as "a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges." Those with autism are most prominently challenged by social interactions, but otherwise have good cognitive ability. Hence, even though they may be interested in engaging with peers, they have trouble with talking, playing or even relating to others. Consequently, those

with the disorder tend to isolate themselves to avoid the social awkwardness.

Although ASD awareness has improved, the challenge, as Lois explained, is that without proper diagnosis and services, or providers that are properly trained to identify the disorder, many children go undiagnosed. Since the best treatment is early intervention, the ASRC works diligently to generate public awareness through its training, and serves as a central hub for resources available to families affected by the disorder. "The ASRC helps families navigate their journey by providing the tether to resources and services available throughout the State," Sara explained.

For the school years 2016-2017 and 2019-2020, the ASRC introduced a pilot peer mentor program in two Connecticut high schools. The mentor program puts social engagement into practice by pairing a student with ASD with a typical classmate. The program has shown to be an efficient and effective intervention approach that prepares teens with social skills through generalization. As Dr. Loomis explained, if given the opportunity to apply cued social skills in real life settings, someone with ASD can permanently develop and improve their social skillset. The ASRC would like to see the mentor program expand into other



ASRC CT Walk for Autism takes place on Sunday May 22, 2022

Photo Courtesy of Sara Taussick

high schools, including Wallingford. Lois expressed appreciation for Dr Loomis' involvement in the mentor program and for the time he volunteers to the organization.

According to the CDC, one in 44 children are identified on the autism spectrum. Those children eventually become adults, like Lois' son, who is now in his forties. In a town the size of Wallingford, for instance, that statistic equates to over one thousand adult residents living somewhere on the autism spectrum. Although early intervention is critical and impactful, adults with an ASD continue to face challenges with social, emotional and communication skills at home, at work, and within their communities. Yet, resources are currently only available to a small fraction of adults with an ASD, and the wait list continues to grow. "There are currently only 140 adults within the State who receive services administered through ASRC," Lois explained. "Once they leave high school any funded services they were once offered simply fall away."

When asked what motto she lives by, "To be kind," Lois quickly replied. "Everyone struggles in one way or another. I just try to be more kind." Lois, who currently sits on the board of directors of ASRC, continues to work feverishly to support Connecticut legislation that benefits adults and children with the disorder. Together, these women of Wallingford have taken strides to ensure that those with an ASD can achieve their greatest potential, and whenever possible, live full independent lives.

On Sunday May 22nd, ASRC holds its primary fundraiser, the ASRC CT Walk for Autism, at the North Haven Fair Grounds. All funds raised stay in Connecticut to support citizens living with autism. It's a fun way to support a great cause. To register for the walk as an individual or join/start a team visit <https://p2p.onecause.com/walkforautism2022>.



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