

Erica Lynne Scanlon Miss New Jersey



| LEFT: THE SCANLON FAMILY (L TO R MARILYN, JESSICA, ERICA AND JIM) OUTSIDE THEIR PITMAN, NJ HOME. RIGHT: JESSICA (L) WITH HER BIG SISTER, ERICA. |

NOVEMBER 2004

DEAR COSAC FAMILY AND FRIENDS:

I became a spokesperson for autism the day I understood that my sister, Jessica, was different. Jessie was diagnosed with autism in 1985, a time when this baffling disorder was not recognized by many adults, professionals, or my peers. Only a year and a half older than Jessica, I was often “her voice,” frequently explaining her unusual behavior to other people.

Jessie is non-verbal; communicating her desires and needs is difficult. Equally challenging is her behavior, which at times is aggressive. Yet, as severely disabled as she is, she will always be my little sister and my inspiration; I will always be her advocate and best friend.

One of my favorite quotes is from Annette Funicello, who said, “Life doesn’t have to be perfect to be wonderful.” Jessie is proof of that sentiment for she is indeed wonderful. She loves riding bikes with my dad, walking our family dog, Angel, and eating chocolate ice cream. She has helped to make me the person I am today.

Granted, there have been many obstacles along the way, some behavioral, some financial, some emotional. While they have put a strain on my family, my parents, Jim and Marilyn, have always seen Jessie's potential, never giving up on her ability to learn and lead a full and productive life.

As a family, we have had to sacrifice a great deal for my sister. For instance, my parents did not treat themselves to a vacation for more than twenty years. They endured many sleepless nights and days of stress. Like many families of children with autism, worries are plentiful. We remain grateful to COSAC for helping us during the challenging times when the future seemed bleak.

In 2003, I decided to compete in the Miss Brigantine Resort Scholarship Pageant, not to fulfill a childhood dream or to earn scholarship funding, but for Jessie and the chance to use the title to spread the word about autism and the need for services. I was thrilled to win the scholarship, and the subsequent Miss New Jersey title. While losing would not have prevented me from speaking out about autism, the crown now affords me a powerful microphone to do so. I wholly embrace this additional opportunity on behalf of every family like mine.

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The COSAC FUND

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COSAC/1450 Parkside Avenue, Suite 22, Ewing, NJ 08638/609.883.8100/609.883.5509 fax/1.800.4.AUTISM (in NJ)

Together, we can make a difference.

In a sense, I would not be Miss New Jersey if it wasn't for COSAC. My family resided in Philadelphia until Jessie was seven. My parents struggled for many years to find an appropriate placement for Jessie within our school district. Our frustrations led us to COSAC for help. COSAC led us to New Jersey, where we moved in pursuit of better services for my sister.

Jessie turned 20 in March and my family now faces the challenges inherent in entering New Jersey's adult service system. We must navigate the confusing maze of service options that seem more daunting than the struggles we faced locating a school placement. Once again, COSAC is there for us, and other New Jersey families. Through its newly created Adult Resources Department, COSAC is poised to help my parents secure the best services and support possible for Jessie as she transitions into adulthood.

My parents have worked tirelessly to ensure the best life for my sister and me. In Jessie's case, that meant not giving up on her abilities – ever. COSAC has stood by us, and encourages us as we fight for the best possible future for my sister. The agency continually endeavors to ensure that all individuals with autism receive appropriate services and support so they can achieve their fullest potential.

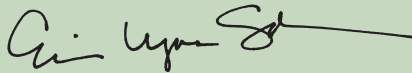
Because of the significant role COSAC has played in our lives, I was driven to give back to help others with autism and their families. During my college breaks, I organized three "Night on Broadway" benefit concerts and directed the proceeds to COSAC. Of greatest importance was the opportunity to raise awareness of the puzzle of autism and the need for services for those diagnosed with autism. I relish the opportunity to continue my work as an Autism Advocate and was proud when COSAC named me its 2004 Autism Awareness Ambassador of the Year, an honor more important to me than any pageant title.

Yes, I will wear the Miss New Jersey crown for a year, but I will be Jessie's sister and advocate for a lifetime. To be an effective advocate requires a strong voice and the ability to connect with other people. It is ironic that these are things Jessie and many other individuals with autism cannot do on their own. For nearly 40 years, COSAC has been the voice for New Jersey's autism community, helping families like mine deal with the innumerable challenges we face.

Please join me and my family in supporting COSAC by making a tax-deductible contribution to The 2004 COSAC Fund. Your donation will go far toward helping COSAC provide its invaluable services to families like mine and others in need of assistance in all stages of their lives.

Together, we can make a difference. Together, our voices can be heard.

Thank you for your support.



Erica Lynne Scanlon



What is Autism?

AUTISM IS A DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY characterized by atypical, repetitive behaviors and deficits in social and communication skills. Current estimates from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggest that the number of those affected by an autism spectrum disorder is anywhere from 1 to 500 individuals, to as many as 1 in 166 individuals. Autism is usually diagnosed during the first three years of life and is four to five times more prevalent in boys than in girls. It knows no racial, ethnic or social boundaries. Today's research suggests that autism is a genetic disorder that is possibly triggered by environmental factors. There is no known cure for autism at this time, but early diagnosis and intervention can be effective.

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COSAC is a nonprofit organization that is registered with the State of New Jersey's Attorney General's office.