

The Valiant Family



PHOTO BY SPECIAL SHOTS UNLIMITED

| COUNTERWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DARA, TINO, MICHAEL, GENARE, GINO AND MASSIMO VALIANT OF JAMESBURG, NJ |

DECEMBER 2008

DEAR AUTISM NEW JERSEY FAMILY AND FRIENDS:

My wife, Dara, and I have a large, close family. She is one of six; I'm the oldest of three. Together we have four beautiful boys: Michael (17), Massimo (15), Genare (13) and Tino (2). Our family was blessed with the unexpected addition of our youngest son, Tino, two years ago. Today, Tino is the age our son, Genare, was when he was first diagnosed with autism. Each developmental milestone he passes is cause for celebration, yet a reminder of how prevalent autism is in our lives and the journey we started more than a decade ago.

Genare was diagnosed with autism in 1996 at the age of two. Like other families, we vividly remember our first call to Autism New Jersey (formerly COSAC). It was the day our family expanded to include members of New Jersey's autism community. On that day, we learned to adjust our expectations for Genare, but not to eliminate them. Autism New Jersey gave us hope, allowed us to cry, encouraged our dreams and provided us with the information we'd need to forge ahead.

At a time when there was little information about autism spectrum disorders, Autism New Jersey was there for us with a list of doctors, a guide to services and other tools to help us plan for the future. More than a decade ago, Genare was one of a small group of New Jersey children with an autism diagnosis and the disorder was neither widely understood nor accepted. Today, the landscape has changed. However, Autism New Jersey remains a statewide resource for reliable, evidence-based information and compassionate support.

The support we gained from Autism New Jersey was a lifeline for our family. We're action-oriented problem solvers by nature. During Dara's first call with Autism New Jersey's help line, we realized it was OK to grieve for the loss of the future we first envisioned for our son. While we knew we had to adjust our expectations, we were given a sense of hope. As devastated as we were by the diagnosis, rather than feel despair, we were taught to channel our emotion into action. At the time, we knew of only a few other families that were facing what we now faced. The Autism New Jersey-sponsored Support Group meetings that Dara attended were inspirational. Here were other families who were experiencing exactly what we were. The connections Dara made and information she received led us to workshops, seminars and conferences that gave us the gifts of knowledge and empowerment.

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My sense of community came from a different, but equally therapeutic, source, the Autism New Jersey (formerly COSAC) Golf Committee. At my first meeting, I found dads with whom I could identify. I found new brothers who understood my simple frustrations and complicated fears. It may sound silly, but here I found other dads who also had to repair a VCR for the “umpteenth” time because their son had endlessly rewound a Disney tape. It was camaraderie in the truest sense. Autism New Jersey provided us with that forum to collectively vent, troubleshoot and dream of a better future for our children.

Today, Genare’s neatly typed “Christmas Wish List” is prominently displayed on our refrigerator. It contains exactly twenty items, mostly specific games for the Nintendo, X-Box and Sega. Over the years, Dara and I have crafted our own wish list with goals that have evolved over time. Our first wish was simply to have Genare ride the school bus by his third birthday. At five, we had hoped he would be able to sit down with his peers to do circle time. Successful potty training followed, as did other goals that were important to our family: to sit down at the dinner table with his family; to go with us to church; to be able to sit quietly at his brother Michael’s communion.

Our biggest goal now might be the most difficult to attain: secure a productive, independent future for Genare into adulthood. It is a goal our entire family is committed to pursuing. It is a goal that Autism New Jersey, through its advocacy efforts, clearly has in its sights. Last year, Dara and I, along with our eldest son, Michael, were able to meet with Senator Robert Menendez as he unveiled new proposed legislation. It was Michael who succinctly posed the question: “What are they going to do when Genare turns 21? Turn the lights out on him?”

We know that question doesn’t have an easy answer. However, we do know that Autism New Jersey will not turn out the lights on us and other families that need its support to ensure a better future for their children. The agency cannot do it without your help. Like a family, we lean on each other in difficult times. I encourage you to join my extended family — the Autism New Jersey family — today. Get involved. Communicate and raise awareness about our collective needs. Most importantly, donate to the Autism New Jersey Fund.

As a self-employed business owner, I understand that for many of us, these are financially difficult and uncertain times. Autism New Jersey has made a real difference in our lives. Your gift, regardless of the size, matters now more than ever and will help sustain an organization that is like family to us and so many others in New Jersey.

Thank you.



Genare and Dara Valiant and Family

About Autism New Jersey

COSAC is now AUTISM NEW JERSEY: We've changed our name, but our mission remains the same. We are the dependable resource to which parents and professionals can turn for information, advocacy, support and training. Autism New Jersey is grounded in science, strengthened by knowledge and devoted to creating a society of compassion and inclusion for all those touched by autism. With more than four decades of expertise, Autism New Jersey provides assistance at all stages of an individual's life, from first diagnosis to early intervention to school programs to transition strategies for teens and options for adults. The Autism New Jersey Fund is our annual fund drive, which provides valuable support for our efforts on behalf of families like the Valiants.

In the coming months, we will be unveiling a new logo that represents our commitment to the families and professional we serve. It will embody a sense of empowerment and compassion for all those ready to transform the lives of individuals with autism for the better.

For more information about our services or autism spectrum disorders, contact our Information and Referral line at 1.800.4.AUTISM or visit www.autismnj.org.

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