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Dads, moms can make a difference

By Robert Lee Long

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One Dad decided to make a difference.

Eleven years ago, local homebuilder and developer Wayne Bartley was frustrated and perplexed.

His four-year-old son Justin had autism. The young boy's anger, tantrums and mysterious behavior was taking a toll on Bartley and his wife Carla.

Bartley took matters into his own hands and began to read everything he could on the behavioral disorder which affects 1 in 110 children and 1 in 70 boys.

He logged hundreds and even thousands of miles to attend autism seminars. He met with behavioral experts and child psychologists from around the country.

Bartley recruited many autism experts to become involved with the school district's autism intervention program, one of the top programs in the region, if not the nation.

A decade ago, Bartley, an avid golfer, got together with several of his friends and fellow golfers and founded the Autism Charity Golf Tournament benefiting autism intervention curriculum and instruction within the DeSoto County School system. The golf tourney, now in its 11th year, is Thursday at The Club at North Creek in Southaven.

Bartley is also the founder and organizer of the Autism Assistance Fund. The fund was established through the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi.

More children just like Justin will be diagnosed with autism this year than with AIDS, diabetes and cancer combined.

Autism is the fastest-growing serious developmental disability in the U.S.

The disorder costs the nation over \$35 billion per year, a figure expected to significantly increase in the next decade.

Autism receives less than 5 percent of the research funding of many less prevalent childhood diseases such as diabetes and leukemia.

Many children with the neurological disorder, which typically appears in the first three years of life, have problems speaking, interacting with others, sharing affection, and learning. Thanks to the tireless efforts of parents and advocates, public awareness of autism has grown tremendously since it was first identified in 1943, but it is gaining even more attention today than ever before.

Thanks to Bartley's efforts, the DeSoto County School District is able to provide behavioral instruction and instructors to help give children with autism the coping skills to live full and productive lives.

Justin is now 15 and attends Lewisburg High School. About five years ago he was able to finally tell his father he loved him.

That priceless gift, which so many of us take for granted, and words many of us as parents hear on a regular basis, will last Bartley for a lifetime. He wants other parents to be able to share in that special joy.

"We have been able to hire more personnel, provide more training for the staff and parents, and fund camp scholarships with money from previous tournaments," Bartley said. "The participation and contributions have made a significant difference in the lives of many families who have to live daily with the challenges of autism."

Bartley's example just goes to show, one dad, and one mom, can and do make a difference every day.

Robert Lee Long is community editor for the DeSoto Times-Tribune.

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