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For Mesa family, autism has posed a challenge

BY MOLLY ARRIAGA
Tribune Guest Writer

Our daughter, Alexandra, enjoys spending time on the computer and her iPad. She loves musicals, watching videos on YouTube and holds a special place in her heart for the Gilmore Girls.

She loves her cheer class at USA Fitness in Gilbert and enjoys attending church on Sundays. And while that might sound pretty typical for a 17-year-old, high school sophomore, our lives are anything but typical.

Alex was diagnosed with autism in 2012. The initial diagnosis consisted of big words like pervasive development disorder, developmental dyspraxia, sensory integration disorder and speech apraxia.

The years leading up to her diagnosis presented more questions than answers and frankly, it was wonderful to finally be able to put a name to it. Finding resources to support the diagnosis proved challenging, but we were determined to do what we had to do.

Our biggest challenges involved getting Alex out of bed and ready for school and encouraging her to try everyday morning tasks we knew she was capable of handling.

Every day was a struggle. A behavioral therapy called ABA Therapy was recommended, so we put ourselves on the wait list. Three years later, we were still waiting.

And then we discovered the Southwest Autism Center of Excellence (SACE), a collaborative effort of Southwest Behavioral & Health Services and Southwest Human Development, in 2017.

A psychologist who worked at SACE heard about Alex and reached out to offer counsel and support.

It changed our lives forever.

Joan, a psychologist with SACE, taught us to focus on Alex's strengths. A visual learner, Alex excelled at working with and completing tasks on a picture schedule. A consistent and slow "hand-over-hand" approach coupled with a lot of praise soon had us on our way.

Motivation by praise and assuring Alex could tackle and accomplish hard things helped our daughter's confidence bloom. Alex now enjoys doing things independently and gets annoyed when I try to



Alexandra Arriaga, second from right, poses with her parents and sister during a happy moment at home. Alex, who has been diagnosed as autistic, and her family found help with her condition through the Southwest Autism Center of Excellence.

help her. We still have to make sure things are done correctly, but what a difference from a year ago.

Since communication with the school can be difficult, as public schools often lack the resources needed to work with and champion someone like Alex, the fact that SACE directly interacts with her school is a real blessing. The SACE psychologist also provides access to resources for times outside of school and on the weekends.

Alex's inability to communicate her needs and wants can be a challenge. Sometimes she comes home from school with watery eyes, holding an ice bag or dressed

in a completely different set of clothes.

She can't communicate what she feels or when something hurts. It's hard and like any parent would feel, my heart struggles. Because of the helpful techniques and support provided by SACE, we looked into verbal therapy and are now working with Alex, motivating her to use her words.

The treatment plan really seems to be working, and I look forward to the day when she can verbally share her feelings.

Today, Alex basks in the applause her team receives when they perform on center court. Her confidence is at an all-time high and we have a team of people to



Alexandra Arriaga enjoys many of the things that other 17-year-olds enjoy despite the challenges of autism.

thank for it. She has learned to trust and work with other kids and has really come out of her shell.

Alex enjoys going to her Life Skills class. It's a social group of kids her age that teach the independent living skills they may need at home and in the community. She also enjoys going to church on Sundays. I'm so thankful for the people that have taken the time to know and accept Alex.

Having a child with different abilities is a special gift. She is aware of her surroundings and is a great judge of character. She has taught us simple things like unconditional love, faith, hope, patience and how not to take life for granted. She lives simply, doesn't ask for anything and is happy most of the time.

Our goal for Alex's future is simple. We want her to be accepted and self-sufficient to the best of her abilities. We want her to graduate from high school and secure a job so she can contribute. Most of all, we want her to be safe, happy and loved.

There are still some things we can't do that most families do on a regular basis. We can't just get up and go or do things spontaneously. Every event takes careful planning and letting Alex know ahead of

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time what is planned for the day.

We haven't been on vacation on a plane since Alex was born, which is why we are participating in Wings for Autism this month. It's a wonderful program that offers young people with autism spectrum disorders and other intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD), and their families, a unique "airport rehearsal" designed to ease the uncertainties and discomfort they may feel when traveling by airplane.

If you have a child with autism, it's important to know that you are not alone. There are resources and services available to help you. SACE has been an amazing resource for our family.

- Molly Arriaga and her family live in Mesa.

Where to turn for support...

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that 1 in 71 children in Arizona are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a biologically-based neurodevelopmental disorder. It is defined as delayed social communication skills, social interactions, and restricted, repetitive behaviors (RRB).

October marks the first-year anniversary of the Southwest Autism Center of Excellence (SACE), a collaborative effort of Southwest Behavioral & Health Services and Southwest Human Development as part of Mercy Care's Mercy 360 Community Initiative.

SACE's philosophy of serving Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) members

throughout their life span promotes high quality community-based services that are tailored to each member and family – delivering services in the most appropriate setting, in a timely fashion and in accordance with best practices, while respecting the members and family's cultural heritage.

The centers coordinate care and services across multiple systems to ensure families receive effective and efficient care. These services include:

- Diagnostic screening for ASD and developmental screening
- Comprehensive team assessments
- Evidenced-based, intervention services to address medical, developmental, and mental health/behavior-

al needs associated with or impacted by ASD

There are four ASD Centers of Excellence across the Valley to assist families faced with Autism spectrum disorders.

- **Southwest Human Development** (Birth to 5): 2850 N. 24th St., Phoenix, AZ 85008
- **Southwest Behavioral & Health Services** (6 Through Adulthood): 11221 N. 28th Drive, Building E, Phoenix, AZ 85029
- **Southwest Behavioral & Health Services** (6 Through Adulthood): 1255 W. Baseline Road, #138, Mesa, AZ 85202
- **Touchstone Health Services:** 3602 E. Greenway Road, Suite 102, Phoenix, AZ 85032