



Foundation Provides Hope For Autistic Children

By Stephanie Hutson
Staff Writer

People say hope springs out of tragedy, but it is often unrecognizable to those in the middle of heartbreak. The Brent Woodall Foundation for Exceptional Children, created by a woman experiencing her own personal loss, has given hope and new life to autistic children in Coppell, the United States and overseas.

Tracy Pierce Woodall started the foundation in 2003 in memory of her husband, Brent, who was lost in the attacks on Sept. 11. Tracy and Brent had just begun to develop their plan for a foundation aimed at helping children and families dealing with autism when 9/11 changed everything.

Five weeks pregnant when her husband died, Tracy was devastated, but the birth of her daughter, Pierce, inspired her to fulfill her dream of helping autistic children. Four years later, Tracy's foundation is helping children from across the United States and is expanding internationally.

Autism is a neurological disorder that is estimated to affect one in 250 children. Tracy describes it as a processing problem that may result in difficulties with social skills, language, behavior problems and difficulty making friends.

Tracy is an experienced practitioner of Applied Behavioral Analysis. Typically developing children learn language, to play, and social skills from their environment, but children with autism learn much less from the environment. They are often capable of learning, but it takes a structured setting to do so, and ABA helps set up an environment that enables autistic children to learn.

In some cases, a child with autism may have a high, specialized skill in one area, but be unable to communicate.

"Children may repeat cartoons or something they see on TV, but they can't have a conversation or request things they need," Tracy said.

According to Tracy, the disease manifests itself in each child differently, and each child needs individualized treatment. Providing families and affected children with treatment specific to their needs is Tracy's passion.

"Every child is very different, and we are committed to making a program individualized to them," Tracy said. "We work on family training, too, not just with the individual child, so they can be better advocates for their children." Even in group-based classes, the goal is individual treatment.

"We don't have 30 parents in a room and teach them the same skills, because everyone's needs are different," Tracy said. "Each child has his own goal and those goals are addressed individually."

According to Tracy, a majority of the children she helps come to the foundation with severe language problems. They are either not talking, the language they use is not functional or the children have behavior issues.

"The way a parent would address a tantrum in a normal child is different than they would in a child that has autism," Tracy said. "We try to teach the parents what the child is trying to say and how to deal with it."

Beyond her work in Coppell and across the U.S., Tracy opened a therapeutic center in July 2001 supporting orphaned children with disabilities in Romania. Her

overseas outreach programs have since spread to locations in Guatemala, Bulgaria and Russia.

“It doesn’t take a lot of money to open a therapeutic center in a third world country,” Tracy said. “I would love to have a center here, but the cost just isn’t the same.” The Brent Woodall Foundation held its first Walkabout for Autism in 2005 and is planning the second annual fundraiser for 8 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Sept. 9. The family fun day includes a bounce house, a clown, refreshments, a silent auction, raffles, music by 96.7 The Twister radio station and a five-mile fundraising walk.

“It is our primary fundraising program for the foundation all year, and the money goes to supporting our program,” Tracy said. “But also, we get a lot of people who have never seen a child with autism, and it is an opportunity for them to interact with each other.”

The foundation offers services to families free of charge, regardless of economic background, and Tracy offices out of her home in order to insure that the most money possible goes directly to the children’s benefit.

“A majority of the work we do can be done at a parent’s home or a neutral location,” Tracy said. “We want to make sure we use our donations responsibly, so instead of leasing a space, which can be very expensive, everything goes right back into helping families.”

The Coppel Family YMCA, the Spanish Schoolhouse and other local organizations have donated space for some of the foundation’s group programs, but schedules are hectic and children often end up receiving therapy in Tracy’s home. “We have been very fortunate people in the community have given us space,” Tracy said.

Tracy began a pilot program this summer aimed at helping children specifically with their language and social skills. The group of children from Coppel and surrounding communities meet daily, but Tracy hopes to find a place that will lend space for the program once a week.

“It turned out better than we ever imagined – it’s going really well,” Tracy said.

If a consistent meeting place can be found, the foundation hopes to expand the newest program to include younger children, at an age when therapy does the most good. Long term, Tracy wants to open a therapeutic center in Coppel.

“It is going to take time for the funding so we don’t have to take it from families,” Tracy said. “We don’t want to make it any harder on them.”

To further assist families, the foundation has a small grant program, funded by the annual Walkabout for Autism, which provides money for families to attend seminars or buy materials they normally wouldn’t be able to afford.

“We don’t want anyone to be restricted because of funding,” Tracy said.

In addition to the walk, the foundation is planning a casino night for the spring. For more information on the foundation, visit www.woodallkids.org.

