

Bringing a Voice to Autism

By Matt Beardmore

When her son, Landon, was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Cricket Barrientos could not find a comprehensive resource to help her overcome all the hurdles that come with raising a child with ASD. So the long-time restaurateur did what she does best – she created a solution, founding Sounds of Autism, a Goodyear, Arizona-based nonprofit that “brings a voice to a silent epidemic.”

Barrientos’ first memory of Landon showing signs of autism happened on his second birthday when, unable to fit two Winnie-the-Pooh and Eeyore cards into the perfectly straight line he had created with them on the living room floor of their Chicago home, he had a tantrum.

“I just thought he was being a boy,” Barrientos said. “I didn’t realize the line and the pattern he was creating.”

Barrientos was later told by Landon’s daycare staff they thought he had an eating disorder because he would stuff his mouth with food and spit it out before eating it again. But the problem was not an eating disorder, it was a sensory processing issue common among those with ASD.

It was not until Landon was 6 years old that Barrientos and Landon’s stepfather, Kevin Crotty, a police officer with the City of Phoenix and now the president of Sounds of Autism, received the ASD diagnosis.

“This is the issue – a lot of times schools don’t want to tell you about your child showing signs of autism because at 3 years old you qualify for free resources and you could get those for their entire life,” said Barrientos, who along with her husband, self-funded Sounds of Autism from 2011-2021 before they started to raise funds. “There are organizations out there making millions telling us why autism is an issue, but we still don’t have a solution.”

Tapping into 30 years’ experience in the restaurant industry where she developed business plans and trained hundreds of leaders, Barrientos created Sounds of Autism’s “CORE

4” Survival Skills Programs that “bridge the gaps between Families of Autism, Community Leaders, First Responders and Educators.” Within each phase of Barrientos’ four-phased approach (Survival, Compassion and Empathy, Workforce Development, and Independent Living Solutions), there are a number of support programs that involve collaborations with early intervention organizations, law enforcement and other first responders, and others throughout the community that support “the Autism Journey from Prenatal until the Final Farewell of Life.”

A few years ago, Barrientos said Sounds of Autism had 850 community partners within Arizona. The nonprofit’s reach has since expanded with Dr. Anila Khan spreading Sounds of Autism’s message to those in Pakistan. There is also an Illinois Chapter in development that will be spearheaded by a Chicago-area mom who has three children on the autism spectrum.

Closer to home, Barrientos is particularly proud of the Workforce Development phase as she spends 3-4 days per week with Landon and other Sounds of Autism adult students in two warehouses in Avondale, teaching life, job, and safety skills that are designed to “meet the goals of independent adult living and sustainable jobs.”

While Barrientos and her husband are unsure if Landon, now 21, is ready to live independently, as there are still questions about how he would respond in cases of emergency, the growth he has shown over the years has made them both very proud. He is, as Barrientos says, “the most kind, gentle giant you’ll ever meet,” and he just recently gained the confidence to start introducing himself as a “co-founder of Sounds of Autism.”

“He has become the co-founder,” Barrientos said. “He is the reason and the purpose.”

To learn more about Sounds of Autism, please visit <https://www.soundsofautism.org>.

