

Get to Know your Community

My family and I have always been the type of people who stick to themselves. I guess you can call us homebodies. We never had an interest in attending any type of event or joining any programs in our town. We were more than content with our regular routine. We work Monday- Friday and enjoy the occasional beach day or hike on the weekends. Every 3-4 weeks we visit extended family members. Rinse and repeat.

That all changed last year, when we had a parent teacher meeting. Kaleb's teacher told us that Kaleb seems to be looking for more socialization. She shared with us that Kaleb would regularly set up his chair by the front door of the classroom and sit to say hello to anybody that walked by. She said he became very popular because of this and that everyone loved coming by the class to talk to Kaleb for a few minutes. You see, Kaleb is 6 years old, minimally verbal and has Autism. He is in a self-contained class with 4 other students who are non-verbal. It hadn't dawned on me that Kaleb's interactions with people that are either adults or with non-verbal children until the teacher shared her concerns with us. Later that evening I thought about our conversation with her. The more I thought about it the more I became overwhelmed with sadness. I thought to myself yes, Kaleb might not be on a typical little league team or a swim team but that doesn't mean he can't participate in anything. Kaleb deserves more. I realized that I had to do something. I had to change something and so I did. I didn't know exactly where to look or where to go so I started right in our community. I looked up activities for special needs in my area. There was so much more than I expected. I was surprised to see how many things were actually available to us. I even found that they have a surfing program for kids like Kaleb. It was amazing to see that the families and children with special needs had a community of their own.



So, our journey to get Kaleb involved in his community began. I found a program called Buddy ball. It's a program designed for people of all ages who have special needs. Truth be told we were so hesitant to go to that first practice that we almost canceled it all together. We were not sure what to expect, or if there would even be any children his age. Let me not forget to mention my struggle with my social anxiety, but we pushed thru managed to attend and stay to the very end. I'm so happy we did because we met so many families from different backgrounds and with different diagnosis. Everyone with their own unique stories, experiences and advice. When Kaleb had a meltdown no one even batted an eye. As a matter of fact one of the coaches came up to us and told us not to worry or force Kaleb to do anything that he didn't want to do and that he can participate in any way he was comfortable. So that's what we did we cheered for every batter that got up to home plate. Kaleb was happy and included. He was so excited to cheer for

anyone who was up to bat. He cheered for everyone as if they had hit a game winning home run. I remember getting into the car and looking over at my husband who was sitting with the biggest smile on his face and said to him "we found our people". On our way home Kaleb kept saying "Baseball yes" "Happy yes". Which is Kaleb's way of saying he enjoyed baseball.

Since then we've participated in so many different programs in our community. We realized by just getting out there and meeting people it has given us so much opportunity. Not only for Kaleb but our whole family. We now have him enrolled in swim and music classes. Both which are not even special needs programs but because I had the courage to ask if they offered anything for children like Kaleb both businesses were happily able to make the accommodations for Kaleb. We've even gotten extremely close to another family we met and had a BBQ to kick off the summer. This past 4th of July we spent time with another family we met from our special needs community to see the fireworks together.



All in all everyone has been so open and welcoming to us. Almost every business and/or program that we have reached out to has been so kind and have even made accommodations for Kaleb to be able to participate. We've become part of an online community for families who have children with Autism where we have been able to meet families like ours who deal with the same if not similar issues. We attend events that the group hosts and have even gotten involved with fundraising. Life has been so different than our previous years. We always seem to have something planned in our calendars. Life has been busy, but also exciting and fun. It has been nice for Kaleb to be able to make friends and socialize more. He feels included and proud to be part of something. We too feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.

If you or your family are anything like mine I encourage you to step out of your comfort zone. Connect with others, join an online group, register for a program like Special Olympics or Buddy ball in your area. Look into what events and activities your county has to offer. Just remember your child deserves to be part of their community and your community deserves to know your child.