

Why fit in when you were born to stand out?

-Dr. Seuss.

1. Tell me, us The Collaborative Community Mission team about Liam?

- a. Maria – Liam is a 12-year-old boy who is in 6th grade. He is the most sincere, kindest, innocent child I know. He has two sisters, one who happens to be his twin and they absolutely adore him. He is a high functioning autistic who finds great joy in talking with adults but struggles with social skills and friendships with children his age. Regardless of his struggles, who Liam is, and what he stands for, the world could benefit from more souls like him. He is one of a kind.

2. When you look at the community around you, what has your family's experience been like navigating resources available for Liam?

- a. Maria – Honestly, 10 years ago it was terrible. My heart breaks for those parents who are just starting this journey with a child who has any type of Diagnosis. It was very hard to find therapy because the process was so extensive. Here in Virginia to qualify for services your child must be severely disabled, or you must be “broke”/poor, to even get on a list and receive a case manager. The fact that many of these services are income based make it that more difficult to obtain the resources needed. No one should have to go broke when they are trying to do right by not only their child, but their family. I pray that the system gets better for these children, because every child deserves a chance, an opportunity.

3. Speaking to some of your experiences you just described, can you talk about what it was like getting your child's diagnosis's?

- a. Maria- Pure heartbreak for me. I was devastated. I let me husband take the lead. I am from Ecuador and in my culture our way of handling things is just saying “It will be fine, he is fine.” Once my denial left me, I accepted AND embraced my sons' autism, I jumped on board with husband. It was time to start our journey and provide everything needed to set Liam up for success. We noticed early on when Liam was around 2, that he was different. He was delayed in speech, walking and crawling. We suspected something had to be going on and once the doctor confirmed, it was time to get to work. We tried several different therapies, but sensory interaction therapy seemed to help the most. We even tried Stem Cell therapy. He is doing so well. We really are blessed.

4. When you look at families in your community who are struggling to find and receive the resources they need, how do you feel?

- a. Maria – Hopeless because I can relate. You look at all these children who are in grave need of assistance, and they must jump through hoops just to get the help they need. It is heartbreaking. No child should have to suffer, or wait long periods of time to get

therapies, resources, a case manager, whatever it may be. It shouldn't be like this. They didn't ask for this, we should be helping them as much and as often as we can.

5. If you could give advice or say something to medical staff and their teams, what would it be?

- a. **Maria** – That it is tough to find out when your child has autism, or any diagnosis for that matter. You are by yourself in that room, devastated and alone. It is as if you are just a number. We don't want to be treated like just a number when we find out unexpected news. Instead we want to know that our diagnosis is manageable, we aren't alone, we want to hear words of encouragement. As a mom you see your child for who they are, not for the diagnosis that the medical team has delivered and not just a number. We are human.

6. Liam, if you could tell the world about you and your experiences, what would you want them to know?

- a. **Liam** – I just want them to know that I feel like I am dreaming. I am a cloud drifting across the sky looking down on people having good experiences.
 - i. **Liam, what could people, children, young adults, teachers/professionals do to help children like you who have Autism have a better experience?**
 - 1. **Liam** – To include me and to know that people don't have to have something in common to be friends. What really matters is that the person is good and does not bully.

7. Liam, talk to us about the sensory bag. How did you feel when you received it, do you think it is helpful? Would you recommend it to other families?

- a. **Liam** – Yes, I love it! I felt like it was my birthday gift, I was so excited. I don't like loud sounds, so the headphones are perfect. The other stuff helps me stem and helps my imagination. It allows me to have a good experience.

8. Lastly, what would you tell other families who have children with Autism?

- a. **Maria** – Consider Autism a gift. It isn't the end of the world. Their pureness, innocence and sincerity are life changing. The world needs this right now, the world needs more Liam's. We are blessed to have Liam as our son. Our family is so lucky. Every child deserves unconditional love and a fighting chance.

Final Word from Maria & Liam:

- Find a community of people you can relate to, it is helpful. It allows you to be around people who understand what you are feeling and going through. Everything happens for a reason. This entire experience has made us stronger, we are a team. Children are a gift, and all we can do as parents is let them feel our love.

