



Joe King

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Fore autism. For hope.

Your child has autism. When Joe King, one of Grace Hill's 2022 Impact Hero finalists, first heard those words in 2012, he was heartbroken. And even though he and his former wife had small clues along the way alerting them to the fact something was "different," it was a diagnosis they weren't fully prepared to hear.

"Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech, and nonverbal communication. According to the Centers for Disease Control, autism affects an estimated 1 in 44 children in the United States today."¹

But here's what most people don't understand: "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." It's a quote made famous by Dr. Stephen Shore, an autism advocate and person with ASD, and his words became a starting point for Joe as he embarked on this new parenting path.

Joe realized there would be challenges to face, and he steeled himself for the task. However, as he began navigating the realities of his son's disorder, Joe quickly realized something more needed to be done.

It's not an untold story for those navigating challenges — of many kinds — and with it comes

a vicious cycle of frustrations, unmet needs, gaps in advocacy, educational disconnects, and more.

But rather than sit and wait for things to change, Joe decided to act.

Frustration Finds Inspiration

Joe's son Hayden was diagnosed with ASD when he was two. And shortly thereafter, in 2014, the 501(c)3 nonprofit Golf Fore Autism (www.foreautism.org) was born. At the time, Hayden was just three years old, but Joe felt compelled to step boldly into the void to increase educational opportunities for those on the autism spectrum.

As Joe shares, "I created the nonprofit mostly based on frustration by the lack of awareness and understanding shown by the public. Also, I realized that opportunities existed for my son, but I was never made aware of them, not even by the educators."

The idea behind Golf Fore Autism is a simple one. Joe uses sports — something familiar and fun — to bring advocacy, awareness, and resources to an important issue. And it's a formula that works.

¹ <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism>



Three pillars continue to guide their steps:

- ★ Knowledge is our most important tool for helping those with autism.
- ★ Awareness will lead to knowledge.
- ★ Public events bring awareness by way of a memorable event.

Since that first golf tournament in April 2015, Joe and his Golf Fore Autism team have grown their reach, bringing in additional sponsorships and fundraising dollars to widen their impact. But most importantly, it's become a way to educate their community about ASD and unite them to the cause.

As one supporter shared, "Golf Fore Autism has created a community of kindness, where the good in people is celebrated, and an open mind for awareness is created."

Not Without Cost

According to AutismSpeaks.org, "Early intervention affords the best opportunity to support healthy development and deliver benefits across the lifespan [which] can improve learning, communication and social skills, as well as underlying brain development."

"Golf Fore Autism does so much to raise money, awareness, and hope...not only for those with autism but for their families and caregivers, as well."

But while there have been advances in therapy and treatment options for people with ASD, those options are sometimes not always readily available or easily accessible to families, particularly those with financial need.

"On average, autism costs an estimated \$60,000 a year through childhood, with the bulk of the costs in special services and lost wages related to increased demands on one or both parents. Costs increase with the occurrence of intellectual disability...medical expenditures for children and adolescents with ASD were 4.1 to 6.2 times greater than for those without autism."²

And in that way and others, Golf Fore Autism has become a bridge, helping families navigate resources and available opportunities while also providing scholarships to lessen the financial burden of outside therapies.

For example, Golf Fore Autism has awarded \$10,000 to Brain Balance, a brain and body wellness program with "exercises and activities uniquely designed to help strengthen and build new connections by using a combination of physical, sensory, and cognitive activities." Those funds are specifically designated for low-income families.

Providing Hope

Hope. In the midst of it all, perhaps that's the greatest gift Joe shares. Because what began

² <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-statistics-asd>



as an annual golf tournament during Autism Awareness Month has become so much more; for some, it's a lifeline, a reminder that they're not walking this road alone.

In fact, the services Golf Fore Autism provides are far-reaching! Here's a glimpse into the many ways his nonprofit supports children with ASD, their families, and the community at large:

- ★ Scholarships to provide therapies not offered in the school setting.
- ★ Sensory bags to schools to help develop a sense of touch and motor skills.
- ★ Connects educators to training on how to work with children with ASD.
- ★ Spreads awareness about resources available for children with ASD.
- ★ Financial donations to local schools to expand available resources.
- ★ Educates local fire stations and police departments on how to best respond when a person with ASD is at a scene.

Refined by the Fire

Joe has a full-time job and is co-parenting two growing teenage boys. Having a child with ASD adds increased pressure — mentally, emotionally, and financially — to his already busy days. Yet, he continues to show up and say “yes” to helping others, pressing forward in his mission to serve.

Joe created Golf Fore Autism as a means to an end. For families like his with a child on the autism spectrum, he saw a need and then worked hard to meet it. Are there hard days? Sure. But he continues to look forward, never back.

Every hug, note of thanks, card from a classroom, or sold-out event encourages and reminds him of his “why.” Because in that, he knows he's doing what he's been called to do.

Launching a nonprofit starts with passion and grows with commitment and resource stewardship. Although Joe no longer lives in northeast Ohio, where Golf Fore Autism first began, his involvement remains hands-on, working diligently to expand their programming,





“Joe is not only a hero to me but to so many people that benefit from his efforts. If only this world had more people like Joe.”

coordinating ongoing efforts, and facilitating some of the educational programming.

For others who might be considering the launch of a nonprofit, he offers these words of wisdom:

“Time is always challenging. Our career must come first, as this is just the reality of it. When organizing events, I have some late nights, but it is worth it. Think of [it] as part of an offering plate. Also, always remind yourself [that] God has a plan for each of us. I don’t believe my son was given to me by accident. I needed him; I found my purpose through him. We all have a purpose.”

Fore autism. For hope. For the benefit of others.

As Joe’s life work plays on, it reminds us, once again, that heroes aren’t just found in the movies; sometimes, they work quietly behind the scenes swinging a golf club, working tirelessly so that others will have an easier path.

Golf Fore Autism has a creative tagline that echoes his resolve: Until the link is found. And true to those words, Joe keeps returning, persisting, advocating, and empowering — indeed, until the link is found.

About Joe:

After 17 years in industrial management, Joe made a move to multifamily, where he’s been since 2016. Joe joined the Fairfield team a little over four years ago and currently serves as a Superintendent of Construction Management, a position he’s held since February 2022.

Joe has two boys, Bryan (14) and Hayden (12), and three pets, including two bearded dragons, a cat named Luna, and a Malamute named Loki. As a family, they love fishing, swimming, and snorkeling, and they take every opportunity they have to spend time on the water.

Of course, golf is another favorite pastime — no surprise, given it’s the focus of his nonprofit Golf Fore Autism. “I might not be the best golfer,” says Joe. “but it’s a peaceful sport.”

Written by Trisha Sheffield, Grace Hill Content Marketer

Grace Hill’s Impact Hero Awards Program recognizes individuals who make a difference in their local community.