

Jackie Moen with her husband, Ken, and sons Peter (left), and Calvin



Jackie Moen: When her twin sons were diagnosed with autism, this mom decided to take action

When Jackie Moen's twin sons Peter and Calvin, now 5, were diagnosed with autism, her life was turned upside down. But as she educated herself about the condition, she was moved to help other families by providing resources and a support system for children with autism, their parents and siblings. Moen is concentrating her efforts on education by founding Common Threads Family Resource Center in Madison. She is the executive director of the planned preschool for children with autism, which is due to open its doors after Labor Day.

Autism, a life-long developmental disability, causes abnormalities in an individual's communication, socialization and behavior, often including a lack of eye contact and a focus on repetitive behavior. Because of the varying type and severity of symptoms in each individual, the term

autism spectrum disorder is often used to describe the condition.

"The idea for Common Threads came out of my head. I had a torrent of motherly love for a little boy [Peter] who, on most days, couldn't tolerate my touch. I had to channel that energy," says Moen who, along with her husband Ken, have four older children.

According to Moen, Peter is classically autistic and is nonverbal. Calvin's challenges are less noticeable to the public and he's considered higher functioning.

Moen found that her idea, although much needed, had yet to find a home in Madison. Moen says she's been fortunate to be able to stay home with her children as they grow, but knows many families don't have that option. At the same time, she became aware of children who were asked to leave child care centers because the environments were unable to deal with

the child's behavior and provide him or her with the support needed.

"I wanted to create a place for families like mine that addressed needs not being met. There's no other preschool [here] that really understands our kids," says Moen.

Focusing on something positive

Common Threads began to take shape when Calvin started to regress from his developmental stage. Like his brother, Peter also developed on track until shortly before his second birthday, when he began to lose words he'd already learned. Moen says that because her sons began regressing at such a young age, the family was frightened.

"The gravity of what we're dealing with still continues to mount," says Moen.

Prior to her sons' diagnoses, Moen had little knowledge of autism but that didn't stop her from diving in and learning as much as she could.

"In my case, it was either go mad or dream of something better, something helpful," she says. "I chose the latter. I don't have a Ph.D. in non-profit. I'm just a parent who knows about the problem."

Ken Moen came up with the name for his wife's brainchild. The couple believes that all families share a common thread and even more threads are shared between families who have been touched by autism.

"Our mission is to enhance the development of children with autism spectrum disorders and provide their families with support and direction," says Moen.

Fulfilling the dream

Common Threads will provide specialized care for children with autism. The facility plans to have art and music therapists on staff as well as a sensory room. Short-term respite for parents will also be offered.

Cindy Glaeden-Knott is heading up the team of designers and interior design efforts for Common Threads, all of which have been donated by the Wisconsin Chapter for the American Society of Interior Designers. She's worked closely with Moen to achieve her vision for the facility.

"Jackie's energy seems endless and she's very focused on fulfilling her dream," says Glaeden-Knott.

"This facility will provide a safe and nurturing environment for children with autism and their families," Moen stresses.

Moen says recent statistics estimate that one in 150 children falls in the autism spectrum and urges compassion for children and families rather than judgment.

"Autism has had a profound impact on every aspect of my life and much of it has been positive," says Moen. "I now see [people] with more compassion."

Moen also hopes to bring a better understanding of disorders on the autism spectrum to the larger community.

"I want people to know that our kids are challenged, their siblings are challenged, and we, as their parents, are challenged." Despite that, Moen adds, "Although our hands are full, so are our hearts." 🌸

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