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Ashton's death highlights dangers of autism

By Martha J. Toomey, Director, Mary's Family

It's graduation time. School awards are being given out at elementary schools and life's passages are being celebrated. But what if life is not the Hallmark moment you planned for?

This past Sunday Vicky and Wade Freidline had to bury their 4-year-old son because he ran away from their grasp. Why did he run away? Little Ashton had autism, a disability that can make a child non-verbal and as if they were living in their own world. Ashton ran away and did not stop, because he knew no fear and did not know to stop when his name was called. Ashton was strong, healthy and handsome. But he did not understand how to control his young body.

Children with special needs demand an extra level of safety, an extra set of locks and an extra tall fence. Children with autism scare their parents because they are so hard to keep safe.

So what is Vicky Freidline's message to the community? "Please, save the other children. I don't want any other child with autism to die. Save the other children."

Did you know that autism is not defined as the kind of "disability" that would qualify for benefits? Did you know that autism is the most common of the pervasive developmental disorders, affecting an estimated one in 166 births? As many as 1.5 million Americans today are believed to have some type of autism; statistics from the U.S. Department of Education and other governmental agencies show that autism is growing at an alarming rate of 10-17 percent per year.

The Autism Society of America estimates that autism could reach four million Americans in the next decade. Autism does not discriminate; it affects all racial, ethnic, social, income, lifestyle and educational levels.

It affects football star Doug Flutie and it affected the Freidline family here in Fauquier. It can affect any child within any family. It affects so many of our children in Mary's Family.

Although autism is consistent throughout the world, it is four times more prevalent in males than females.

Sheriffs, EMTs and other members of the search team maintained a valiant search for Ashton. Ashton is not the first child, or the first child with autism, to run away. But Ashton's tragedy reminds us how fragile and precious life is and how children with special needs such as autism need more from our society.

Children who are "different" are still bullied at school, called "retard," "geek," or worse. They are often neglected by a system that is overloaded and under-funded. I am often furious when I talk to other parents and find out how their children are treated. Invitations to birthday parties, graduation parties

and other fun events do not come to “different” children. Children with special needs continue to be brutally marginalized by our society.

One of our Mary’s Family children with autism graduated from Liberty High School this past weekend. He’s moving to a group home in Staunton and is starting a brand-new life. But his mom and dad have struggled for his entire life to get him services. Their lives have been defined by their son’s special needs. Their son’s life passage is fraught with danger. They will always worry that their child’s disability puts him in danger’s path.

Children all over the country are getting their end-of-school-year awards. Perfect attendance, citizenship and honor roll awards are being given out. Most of the children who come to Mary’s Family are not going to get any of these awards. They miss school because they go to doctors appointments. They cannot participate in a lot of the school-based functions. Their grades are circled, meaning they are special education grades.

But for three years my Liberty High School friend has made volunteer lunches at respite. He puts together dozens of sandwiches, cools down the bottled water and makes sure we have all washed our hands before eating. Doesn’t he deserve a citizenship award, for being a beloved member of the community, and for giving back to others?

Don’t all our children deserve credit for what they have successfully accomplished?

Virginia ranks last in services to families who have children with medical challenges, disabilities and special needs. No other state in the nation offers less to Vicky and Wade, and all the other families with children who need help. As much as we want to help children all over the world, have you looked at how children are treated right here in our own neighborhood?

We need to honor Vicky’s wish and make sure no other children die.

On Wednesday, as you read this issue of the paper, a fence is being built in Vicky and Wade’s backyard, so they do not have to worry about their two other sons. But we cannot build a fence around the world. What are you doing today to make sure all the other children with special needs are safe?

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