

Autism and military families

Nonprofit will begin new branch Saturday for service members whose children have autism.



Jerry and Laura Marroquin with their 7-year-old twins Jessica and Justin at their home in Costa Mesa on Wednesday. Justin was diagnosed with autism early on and the family used intervention methods to overcome it. (Scott Smeltzer, Daily Pilot / July 28, 2010)

By Sarah Peters, sarah.peters@latimes.com

Five years ago, Justin Marroquin, now 7, was diagnosed with autism, which explained some personality quirks like moodiness, attention and social issues.

Like most families in their situation — an estimated 1 in 110 children are diagnosed with disorders on the autism spectrum — his parents, Laura and Jerry Marroquin, at first had to face the shattering possibility that their son would never lead a normal life.

Nevertheless, the Marroquins are grateful today. That's because the diagnosis was made early, and helpful treatment soon followed during Justin's core developmental years.

"We might have never caught up on some of the basic skills," Laura Marroquin said of getting her son treatment, which consisted of a combination of therapy and holistic medicine at an early age. "Doctors have said that a child's developmental stage falls off after about age 5. That doesn't mean that you couldn't treat a 12-year-old, but you likely wouldn't get the degree of progress that we've seen in Justin."

Justin's mother became involved with a national nonprofit group called ACT Today! For Military Families (ACT standing for Autism Care and Treatment) soon after he was diagnosed.

As the director of marketing and development, Laura Marroquin on Saturday will help launch a new phase of the organization dedicated to aiding military families whose children have autism.

Marroquin said military families in particular face obstacles when seeking treatment for their autistic children.

"To be blunt about it, [military families] have to jump through hoops," said Dan Marcheano, owner of The Arches, one of the caterers for Saturday's event. "That's no way to live your life and that shows no respect."

Oftentimes, the military parent will be away for service, while the parent holding down the home front tries to navigate a complex system of bureaucratic paperwork and medical forms, he explained.

And the possibility of being transferred while in the middle of this process — and then having to start all over again — is a real fear for many in the service.

ACT Today! is attempting to provide some relief to military families with autistic children through grants for medical care and treatment, Marcheano said.

The weekend event will feature a wine tasting, fundraising, efforts to raise awareness about the issue and attract future sponsors.

In addition to food from Arches, the event will include offerings from the Newport Rib Company, Bluewater Grill, Soprano's, Haute Cakes Caffe and wine from Young's Market Company.

The nonprofit hopes to raise \$50,000 this weekend. However, this is the first of many events to be scheduled nationally with a goal of raising \$1 million to benefit military families.

While Justin's classmates don't know about his condition — and few would suspect that the giggling, energetic young boy who proudly proclaimed that he works hard and does well in school had motor and communication troubles just a few short years ago — the Marroquins want to see the same chance given to their son for other families.

"We were given hope about recovery very early on," Laura said. "It was a guiding light. A lot of families are not given the same thing."

If You Go

What: The launch of ACT Today! For Military Families

When: 7 p.m. Saturday

Where: 2006 Marlin Way, Newport Beach.

Cost: Tickets are available at the door for \$100.

Information: <http://www.acttodayformilitaryfamilies.org>