



Matthew and Jason Cherry.

Raising Autism:™ A Family Affair

THE CHERRY FAMILY knows autism. In 1996, Cathy and Michael Cherry traveled to Russia to meet Matthew for the first time. They quickly found themselves interacting with a 3-year-old whose actions could only be described as chaotic. Once in the states and old enough for a diagnosis around age 3, Matthew was shown to have autism spectrum disorder (ASD), bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and fetal alcohol syndrome. Later, with two other children in the household, Jason, the middle child, and Samantha, the youngest, the Cherry family began a lifelong journey to understand autism and to raise a family with compassion, patience, and, most importantly, humor.

We recently sat down with Cathy, principal of Purposeful Architecture and Purple Cherry Architects, and her middle son, Jason, now 18 and the exclusive professional race car driver of the Autism Society of America (ASA), to find out a bit more about their journey and to share

their advice on navigating family life with a child with special needs.

Disability is a household event

According to Cathy, one of the greatest challenges to life with a child on the autism spectrum or any other special need, is realizing that it impacts everyone in the house. Says Cathy, "You don't just raise a child with autism; you raise a family through autism." By the time Matthew was in second and third grade, home life was tumultuous. It was a highly structured environment in school, but not at home, and things only got worse as Matthew hit puberty. In sixth grade, Matthew began attending The Hannah More School in Reisterstown, Md., part of the Sheppard Pratt Health System, where he progressed and did well in the school setting for about five years.

Through this process, the family has learned that you must look at home and school settings together. Children with special needs require more time to transition to adulthood. Ensuring that

they have both life and social skills is key to establishing their independence.

The Cherrys have also learned not to feel guilty about actively finding respite for the entire family, however they have to go about accomplishing this. Often, the family would break apart mealtime, sometimes feeding Matthew at a different time to avoid conflict. According to Jason, the family "has not been afraid to take breaks and to operate atypically as a family. We've looked past the commotion and frustration inherent to Raising Autism™ to find the humor in life."

Parents have no frame of reference when their first born is a child with special needs

When Matthew was about 13 years old, he became more physically aggressive and had very poor judgment, especially as it came to safety. Cathy understood that Matthew never wanted to intentionally harm other children, but he had such poor judgment that she had concerns for the safety of the whole family. Then conflict started happening among the siblings.

"As a parent, when your first-born child has special needs, you have no frame of reference for what behaviors and social skills may be typically developing," says Cathy. "Without any prior parenting experience, I could not determine what was autism, what was adolescence, and what was just being a boy." Not until her second son, Jason, was 8 did she finally gain a better understanding of what was neurotypical development. During these early years, as Cathy was learning how to manage Matthew's challenges, her younger two children experienced events that were scary to them. When Matthew pulled a knife on his aide, it created a year-long fear in Jason, then about 7, which manifested as anger and defense.

Samantha, who was much younger, would deflect her feelings in response to the fear. Jason went to private counseling to learn how to cope with his anger. And Cathy learned that she needed to take Matthew's audience away when he was becoming aggressive. "Sometimes I turned off the lights in the house and other times, I honestly had to place him outside on the lawn to remove

everything that they're going through, the good and the bad, so that they can receive the maximum support they need.

When Matthew was 17, the family knew it was time to seek residential treatment for him. He would throw huge fits, running across the room and slamming his entire body into the window. He'd throw himself into shower doors. Cathy says, "We fixed the wall 10

to marry her expertise in architecture with her experience working with individuals with special needs. She can truly understand goals and provide compassionate solutions to impact these environments. "It's what's important to me now," she says.

Jason chose to use his career as a race car driver as a springboard to support ASA. Says Jason, "When I was growing up with Matt as my brother, I was embarrassed to have friends come over the house, and so I would ride my dirt bike a lot." I then got into auto racing and began pro road racing. With 50,000 to 150,000 people in attendance at each race, and millions of viewers watching at home, Jason wondered, "What can I do with all of this attention? I saw an opportunity to speak as a sibling of autism, so I partnered with the Autism Society." As the exclusive professional race car driver of ASA, Jason works with its local affiliates to host families with special needs at each of his races. He is working to form an ASA sibling board for the next generation of leaders who will eventually represent their autistic siblings.

Today, the relationship among all three siblings is healed. A video on Jason's YouTube channel shows true love and friendship between the brothers. Jason's best advice to other siblings is to "be patient, give it time, things will come full circle. In the moment, you don't think anything will go right — I thought that for years. Looking back on it, I can attribute a lot of my success to my brother and to dealing with the challenges and adversity." ●

Jason Cherry can be reached through his website, jasoncherryracing.com, or through his Facebook page. To learn more about Cathy Cherry's Purposeful Architecture firm, visit purposefularchitecture.com.

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him from a space where he could harm himself and others," explains Cathy.

Humor is the best remedy

It took years for the younger siblings to get past their anger and resentment. But once they did, and once Matthew started maturing, the family was left with humor to help piece the relationships back together. Matthew is usually the one generating the humor, sometimes on purpose and other times by accident. Cathy and Jason remember one time when Matthew was stung by a bee because he picked it up. When they asked him why he would ever do something like that, his response: "Because I wanted to see if I was worthy of holding a bee." Says Cathy, "Developing such a great sense of humor has empowered all of us with a level of patience that we would not have developed otherwise."

Full disclosure is vital

One of the biggest mistakes parents make, in Cathy's opinion, is to hide the realities of how difficult the situation is and to make it seem that everything is wonderful. For the Cherry family, it's been very important to fully disclose

times. He was hospitalized three times. When it happens too much, you're overwhelmed." And every member of their support team needed to know what was happening at home.

Now that Matthew is in a residential environment, he composes himself better and is more comfortable. He can be home for two or three days at a time, and the family is able to enjoy that time together. According to Cathy, "When he got into residential treatment, it allowed the whole family time to begin healing."

Be proactive

With the siblings now 15, 18, and 23, the family, especially Cathy and Jason, has used the knowledge and patience they've learned from raising and growing up with Matthew, to help others with special needs. As principal of Purple Cherry Architects, Cathy started receiving calls to work on special needs projects. She began creating living, learning, and vocational environments locally, but knew she could do more. This led to the development of Purposeful Architecture, a nonprofit arm of her firm dedicated to creating spaces where children and adults with special needs can thrive. Purposeful Architecture allows Cathy