Speaking up: McClellans walk to raise awareness for autism

**By Kelly Anne Clinton**

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Scituate —

Gina McClellan said it seemed like her son Drew “wasn’t in the room anymore” when he reached the age of 14 months. A once alert and typically developing infant slowly began to not answer to his name, register the sounds around him, or respond to people in the room.  He was unresponsive to banging of pots and pans and any attempts the family made to get Drew to turn his head and look at them, and McClellan said she didn’t know what was wrong.

“We thought he was deaf.  It was heartbreaking…it was as if a light went out,” McClellan said. “He lost his interest in words and language altogether; he lost interest in everything.”

Neurological tests at 16 months old showed that Drew had autism.

“I didn’t know what autism was…and now that I know what it is, it’s just a matter of getting him the support he needs so he’ll have a bright future,” said McClellan.

In an effort to get more answers and information and also to spread awareness of the disorder, the McClellan family walks in the Walk Now for Autism Speaks, a family 5K on Sunday, Oct. 2.

This weekend, the McClellans are hosting a “yogathon” to raise money for the walk.  The yogathon begins at 1 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 18 at the Open Doors Yoga Studio in North Scituate and anyone can take part.

“We walk for Drew and we walk for the millions of families affected by autism. We’re just one family, but if we all participated, we could make a difference,” said McClellan.

“When Drew was diagnosed with autism at 16 months, they couldn’t tell us how or why he got autism,” she said. “We walk to raise money for research and for public awareness. Research is being done every day but we still don’t have the answers.”

With two children at home – their daughter Emma is a fourth grader at Hatherly Elementary School –McClellan said it can be difficult to have a child with autism because Drew has different needs. She said this summer they often took rides to places in town Drew wanted to see.

“He loves going to the lighthouse and he loves to see the boats going through the harbor and he loves to see the fire station,” she said.

These things may seem typical for a 5-year-old but McClellan said for Drew it is a different experience.

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“He loves to see those things, but he’s not going home and pretending he’s a firefighter. Children with autism don’t know how to pretend and how to play,” she said.

His older sister Emma chimed in to say that he loves to play with Legos and numbers.  In the midst of her description Drew was busy sticking alphabet stickers to the window in the living room.

“We really embrace all of his differences and we encourage them and we encourage him to be him,” McClellan said. But, it’s not always easy.

“Some times we’ll go to dinner and we’ll be stared at or go to the beach and he’ll take a toy from some one else’s basket,” said McClellan, who said she often puts an Autism Speaks t-shirt on her chair or wear it so that people understand he has autism. “A lot of people don’t understand autism, they just think you have an unruly child.”

Though the feeling of being misunderstood can be quelled thanks to programs in town that CORSE provides. McClellan is a co-chair of the non-profit organization that provides a range of opportunities so children with special needs can reach their full potential.

She said many of the programs the foundation puts together for the families are unique, like with the Maritime Adventures program, or just inclusive and fun when the foundation rented out Phin’s Restaurant down Scituate Harbor on a weekend afternoon.

“We filled the restaurant and we had music and it was great. Everyone was comfortable and among their peers,” said McClellan. “With CORSE we just have so many opportunities to be out in the community and Scituate is a great community to be in.”

This September, Drew’s parents have enrolled him at the May Institute in Randolph, a school for autistic children and children with neurological disorders. After school he comes home to therapy. Though McClellan said she is still looking for more ways to help her son and other families.

“The best possible outcome of all this would be to find answers. It’s a puzzle, there’s so many different pieces to it and if we can raise money and have answers then we’ll walk every year…the McClellans will just keep on walking,” she said.

 