

## **April is Autism Awareness Month**

Autism awareness and acceptance means different things to different people. This makes sense because autism is a spectrum diagnosis which means that if you have met one person with autism, then you have met one person with autism. There are those who have an autism diagnosis who lack expressive language skills and may have violent physical outbursts. There are also individuals with a diagnosis who are very high functioning who most people would never guess have autism. April is the month when people in the autism community ask the rest of the world to lean in and understand that no matter what their abilities and challenges may be, they just want to be loved and respected.

I have been blessed to have lived for 53 of my 55 years with a brother who was diagnosed with autism. As a very young child, my parents and I knew that Sean would have a different future than I would. Unfortunately, in the early 1970s in St. Louis there was not an abundance of experts or services for individuals who needed assistance with meeting developmental milestones. My parents sought therapists and school support. Mainstreaming in classrooms, which is when children with disabilities interact in classes with students without disabilities, was just in its infancy. Despite not having much in the way of support from the community to assist with my brother's development, we always treated him as an equal member of our family. We went on vacation as a foursome. We ate meals as a foursome. Maybe our togetherness had a positive impact on him.

Sean is the inspiration for my firm. I founded Oak Wealth Advisors in 2008 to provide families with loved ones with a disability with education, resources, and wealth management that allows them to focus on their families' greatest needs. Our mission is to allow individuals to flourish and for families to live their lives to the fullest extent possible.

Fast forward to the current decade, and I could not be prouder of my brother. He has worked for more than twenty years at the St. Louis County Public Library where he has won multiple awards. He enjoys his work and makes a positive contribution. He has joined a bowling team with some individuals that compete in the Special Olympics, and he bowls every week. He loves the sport, and it provides him with a weekly activity that he enjoys and a group of individuals who look forward to being with him.

Sean loves golf and has a collection of scorecards from around the world that now numbers around 20,000 different courses. People he has never met who hear of his collection send him scorecards from new courses and in many cases from courses for

which he already has cards. As impressive as the size of his collection is, more amazing is that he seemingly knows the length of every hole on every course. I haven't been able to test him on every hole length, but he has never missed one when I have challenged him. He has a memory skill for numbers that is elite. What I have seen him do with his recall of specific numbers has caused me to question how much more I and others could be doing. Only a small percentage of individuals with an autism diagnosis have Sean's memory skills. However, how many people with autism or other diagnoses can do much more than we expect if they are just given the opportunity?

Autism did not become an official diagnosis until 1980 and the way it is diagnosed has continued to evolve. Using 2020 data, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported in 2023 that 1 in 36 children have autism. Boys are four times more likely to be diagnosed than girls. It should be emphasized that the diagnosis now applies to almost 3% of all youth. The diagnosis rate has likely been rising due to greater awareness among medical professionals and the breadth of characteristics which, if present, can lead to an autism diagnosis. Going forward, the focus should be on the needs of these individuals for acceptance and opportunities to be members of the community.

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*This article was written by Michael Walther, Founder and President of Oak Wealth Advisors, on behalf of the NAPFA DEI Initiative. Learn more at [www.napfa.org/DEI](http://www.napfa.org/DEI).*