

Mission Statement

The Autism Society of Minnesota exists to enhance the lives of individuals with autism spectrum disorders. AuSM seeks to realize its mission through education, support, collaboration, and advocacy.

AuSM's Quest for Inclusion

Super Fest amazing day for athletes and caregivers

On Feb. 3, 2018, the day before Super Bowl LII, a group of more than 200 kids with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities came together for Super Fest, an inclusive football and cheerleading clinic held at the Eden Prairie Dome.

Developed by The Matthew Foundation and supported by committee involvement from the Autism Society of Minnesota and 13 additional local organizations, Super Fest culminated in a scrimmage and cheer performance.

For the Brisbane family, Super Fest meant so much more than being a part of Super Bowl LII excitement.

"While this day was amazing for all of us, it was especially meaningful to me as a mom," said Tricia Brisbane, mom of Drew and Charlie, Super Fest student athletes.

As the Super Fest event drew near, Charlie, age 8, looked forward to playing football with his big brother, Drew, age 11. Although only a few years separate Charlie and Drew, it is unlikely that Charlie will be on the same football team as his brother because Charlie has developmental delays that often prohibit him from participating in activities with same-age peers.

At the start of Super Fest, athletes and caregivers converged on the field together. Few parents followed the check-in instructions to sit on the bleachers while the athletes took the field.

"As parents of children with special needs, we all nodded and said, 'thank you,'" Brisbane said. "Many of us were extremely focused on our children and how they were adjusting to the crowd, the noise, and the palpable excitement that filled the air. Several parents did their best not to hover."

As beginning announcements were made, parents again were encouraged to leave the field. Brisbane said she witnessed a familiar reaction from most parents, a look that clearly said:

"WHAT? I am not leaving my child with special needs, my sometimes vulnerable child, on this field alone!"

Then, something amazing happened.



Brisbane's sons, Charlie and Drew, at Super Fest.

Over the next few minutes, Super Fest volunteers, high school athletes, retired professional football players, and community members gently and respectfully provided support to the athletes in a way that quickly eased the concerns of parents and caregivers.

"I couldn't believe the feeling of comfort that came over me," Brisbane said. "And as I looked around, I saw that it was happening to other parents as well."

Brisbane said the moment was unforgettable. "It is very seldom that I have the opportunity to encourage both of the boys equally and simultaneously. I don't think I have ever had the opportunity to watch Charlie run for a touchdown. I am the one who has had to catch the ball for him, grab his hand, and run with him. Today, I got to be *that* mom. I got to be there for my kids in a way that felt so amazingly normal."

Brisbane wants to build on the momentum of Super Fest, helping to create inclusive opportunities for all of those who are a part of the disability community.

"Every mom deserves to feel what I felt today," she said. "I pray for more truly inclusive opportunities like this in the future. From the bottom of my overflowing heart, thank you."



A word from AuSM Executive Director, Ellie Wilson

You are exceptional. You are a community that has shown talent and collaboration and voice. You inform. You inspire.

You motivate our mission.

With your support, AuSM strives to be exceptional, too. AuSM's hardworking and diligent staff and board team wants to accomplish so much. We want to be responsive to individuals, families, professionals, and partners by continuing to seek input from you, which guides us toward better quality of life for those on the spectrum. We want to offer trainings, workshops, and conference sessions that update and reflect on new and fundamental issues. We want to bring practical and useful tools and resources to self-advocates, caregivers, and providers. We want to offer classes, support groups, and camps that accept and celebrate diversity. We want to amplify your voices.

You are our connection.

Though this is only the beginning of my tenure as AuSM's Executive Director, I have been inspired by individuals in this community for more than a decade. From the moment I met my first AuSM Hand in Hand camper 13 years ago, I knew my path and purpose were set. Understanding and promoting a respectful, joyful, and valuable projection of autism is at the core of my personal and professional life. Nothing brings me greater fulfillment than a productive conversation, a glimpse into someone's talents, a new and unexpected partnership, a success story from a family, a training that resonates with an audience.

I have been fortunate to experience each of these victories more times than I can count, and each experience fuels the next. You have developed my pride in this role, this organization, and this community. Your acceptance and appreciation make this community home for me and for each of AuSM's valuable members.

Let's keep this forward momentum! Stay involved with AuSM. Keep relishing in the beauty and complexity of this community by attending Steps of Hope, the state autism conference, or other community events. Attend a support group. Try a new class. Share your ideas, your talents, and your time. Mentor a family with a new diagnosis. Ask questions. Introduce us to someone new. Talk to your legislators. Donate.

AuSM is successful because you are involved. Thank you for your interest, your membership, your partnership in our mission.

Ellie Wilson, AuSM Executive Director



AuSM staff and board, Disability Day at the Capitol.

Responding to community needs

Bodies, Boundaries, and Healthy Relationships for females

Research has found that disabled individuals face higher rates of sexual assault and abuse, and AuSM has been propelled by this fact to inform police officers through trainings.

In addition to educating first responders, AuSM saw the need to provide information to people with autism as well. Bodies, Boundaries, and Healthy Relationships, a class that covers hygiene, dating, sex, consent, and harassment was developed.

"The primary registrants for the pilot session of this class were males on the spectrum," said Lucas Scott, AuSM Education Specialist. "After consulting with our Adult Women with ASD Support Group, we understood the need for subsequent sessions to include separate groups for males and females."

By tailoring one of the next sessions of Bodies, Boundaries, and Healthy Relationships specifically to women's needs, AuSM was able to create a space that felt comfortable for a population that didn't always feel right in co-ed classes.

One participant said the all-female session was very important to her. "I have had negative experiences in my life that I now realize, since my autism diagnosis, were at least partially due to the way my autistic brain works, despite my intelligence."

Another participant said, "I had sex education as a teenager and young adult, but it didn't address abuse, harassment, nor other self-protection information including Internet safety."

For many, the group discussion format centered around the female perspective was ideal. A participant noted that she now knows how to make safety plans for all situations.

2017 Highlights

Education, Support, Collaboration, and Advocacy

Membership: AuSM's membership is comprised of nearly 900 families and individuals throughout Minnesota, Wisconsin, South Dakota, North Dakota, Michigan, Illinois, Montana, Virginia, Florida, Maryland, and beyond.

Awareness: AuSM continues to develop sensory-friendly events with partners including Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Children's Theatre Company, malls, Stages Theatre Company, Minneapolis Park and Rec., the MN Vikings, and more.

Advocacy: AuSM gave our community a voice on multiple committees and panels including: the University of Minnesota LEND Program; Autism Taskforce, Governor's Council; Minnesota State Council on Disability; Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities; and the Coalition for Children.

Summer Camps: In 1977, AuSM began one of the nation's first summer camp programs. Since then, AuSM Summer Camps have grown to serve those with autism ages 6+. In 2017, AuSM held eight weeks of camp for 305 youth and adult campers, who were assisted by 268 camp staff.

A Note from a Hand in Hand Camper's Mom

My son Matthew attended Camp Hand in Hand in July. As he never had been away from home, I was extremely nervous to send him. Matthew does not have a lot of language, has extreme anxiety, and needs help with daily living activities. AuSM staff and Dustin, the Director of Camp Hand in Hand, reassured me that camp staff would take good care of Matthew.



Happy camper Matthew.

Matthew had a hard time separating from his dad who drove him to camp, but I am pleased to say Matthew did it and came home happy!

When we asked him about his favorite part of camp, he told us in his slightly unclear words, "boat ride". When we asked him if he wants to go back, he said, "yes"!

Words really don't express my sincere gratitude for what this has done for Matthew

and our family. Thank you to all who have a part in making this camp a success.

Michele Nicholson, Eagan, MN

Information and Resources: A free service for our community, AuSM's Information and Resources team answered more than 2,600 e-mails, calls, and in-person questions in 2017.

Counseling and Consulting Services: AuSM's team increased by two therapists and handled more than 3,000 appointments in 2017. Staff also facilitated free support groups to meet the needs of more than 60 monthly parents, children, family members, and individuals.

AuSM Skillshops: These monthly mini-workshops explore specific subject areas related to autism. In 2017, AuSM continued to expand the reach and accessibility of the AuSM Skillshops by holding them at partner locations throughout the Twin Cities.

Social Skills Classes: AuSM's interest-based social skills classes involve partnerships with community organizations including Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, Three Rivers Parks District, Mia, the Minnesota Zoo, Stages Theatre Company, ComedySportz, the Great Lakes Aquarium, and the Lake Superior Zoo. More than 200 youth and young adults participated in AuSM's Social Skills classes in 2017.

Autism Direct Support Certification and Training: AuSM provided nearly 100 state-wide trainings on autism and related topics in 2017, including training for educators, multiple first responder and law enforcement groups, and professionals at Children's Hospitals of Minnesota. Several disability service providers had full departments participate in AuSM's Autism Direct Support Certification Program, an in-depth course that provides practical solutions for working with people on the spectrum. More than 2,220 people learned through AuSM's trainings in 2017.

Community Building: Fundraisers organized by AuSM and other organizations help increase awareness and resource sharing. Steps of Hope, the AuSM Golf Classic, the AuSM Swing Fling, Ride for Hope, Joey's Ride, Hip Hop 4 Autism, and others raised funds in 2017 to support AuSM programs and services for our local community.

Annual State Conference and Gala: AuSM's state conference includes multiple tracks for caregivers, educators, professionals, and individuals on the spectrum. The 2017 conference welcomed a record-breaking 1,000+ participants who enjoyed keynote presentations by Temple Grandin, PhD and Steve Silberman, author of *NeuroTribes*. 2017 also featured AuSM's third gala, *Oh, the AuSM Places We'll Go!*, an event that brought the community together for fantastic food, games, and a celebration of those serving as true inspirations to those touched by autism.

Volunteers: Many who are a part of or support our awesome community volunteer to help during classes, events, camps, fundraisers, and more. Volunteers are essential in helping AuSM meet community and individual needs. We are grateful for all who support AuSM through sharing of time, talent, and treasure.

AuSM is Minnesota's First Autism Resource™

Developing social skills supports positive relationships

AuSM's social skills classes foster friendships for a lifetime

When you're on the spectrum, making connections with peers can be a challenge. It's not surprising that "making new friends" is a common goal we hear from parents when they register their loved ones for AuSM social skills classes.

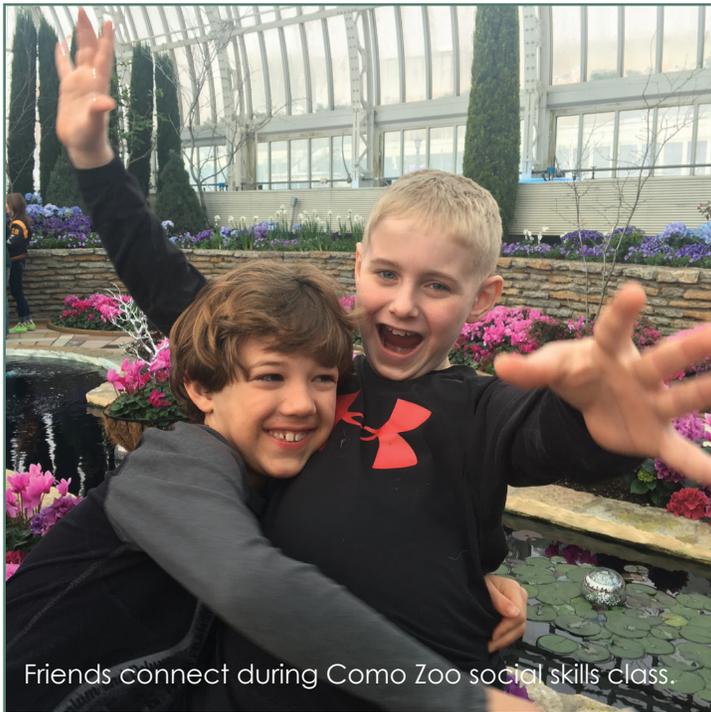
Meeting this goal can be a life-changer for participants.

During the first session of this winter's Global Adventures at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, AuSM education specialist Robyn DeCourcy witnessed the beginning of one of these friendships.

DeCourcy describes the moment: "We were waiting for other kids to arrive in the Como lobby and I noticed two of our students happily chatting about their favorite animals and conservation efforts. I asked their parents if the students knew each other before the class, and was surprised to hear they had just met and made an instant social connection."

Sharing a common interest is a valuable strategy for making a positive peer connection. AuSM social skills classes aid this strategy as common interests are built into the class focus. The Global Adventures students came together with special interests in the zoo, animals, and caring for the environment.

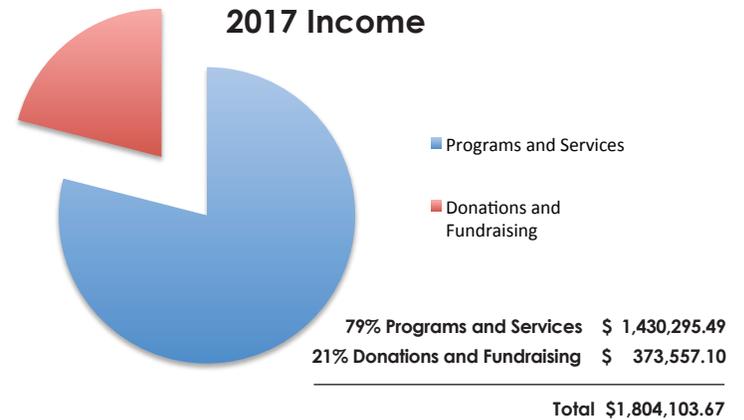
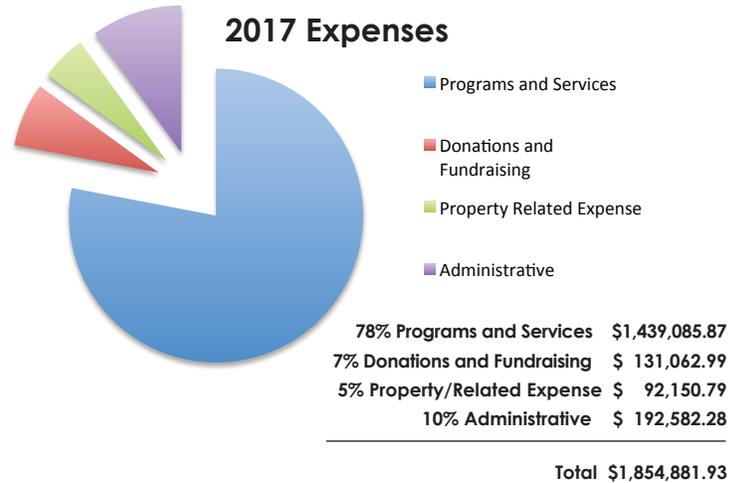
"Both boys are extremely smart and above-average conversationalists, but they struggle sometimes to share attention and to stay on topic," DeCourcy said. "It was amazing to see the students come together in a place that was judgment-free and helped them connect. I can't wait to see this friendship grow."



Friends connect during Como Zoo social skills class.

AuSM 2017 FINANCIAL REPORT

AuSM is dedicated to transparency, accountability, and financial health. AuSM recently participated in the Better Business Bureau's Standards for Charity Accountability process and became accredited. 100% of donations to AuSM support our local autism community. AuSM expenses breakdown: 78% programs and services; 7% donations and fundraising; 5% property/related expense; and 10% administrative.



2017 AuSM Board of Directors

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