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Mother fights for special needs kids in memory of son killed in accident

By Venice Buhain

The Olympian

Therese Holliday doesn't deny that life with her 9-year-old son, Wyatt, could be a struggle.

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resident has founded a nonprofit group to create connections and resources for families that have children with special needs.

Holliday has become part of a network of 150 local families who are trying to help each other navigate the world of special needs.

Holliday created the Wyatt Holliday Foundation in her son's memory, with the intention of helping families pay for expensive diagnoses and therapies, such as speech and language pathology.

As part of the foundation, Holliday organized the Exceptional Families Network.

The network connects families of children with special needs and provides them with leads to doctors, advice and sometimes an extra person for parents dealing with school districts' individualized education plans for special education.

Wyatt had Asperger syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism. Holliday would spend hours explaining to Wyatt why he needed to do his homework, eat his breakfast, get dressed, make eye contact.

"That was a huge chunk of my life," said Holliday, 42.

Almost three years after Wyatt's death in a car wreck, Holliday is trying to help other families cope with their struggles. The Tumwater

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Toni L. Bailey/The Olympian

Therese Holliday holds a picture of her son, Wyatt, who died in a car accident in 2003. Wyatt had Asperger syndrome, which prompted Holliday to start the Wyatt Holliday Foundation, a group that helps children with mental and physical challenges.

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About 150 families, mostly in Thurston County, have hooked up with the Exceptional Families Network, Holliday said.

Parents dealing with their children's disabilities often have a need to find each other for support and advice, said Mike Freeman, a member of Bridges, an Olympia special education advocacy group.

"The system is isolating," Freeman said.

It's frustrating for parents to juggle welfare, school districts, job training, Social Security and other agencies who can provide resources for their children, he said. The different agencies often don't share information because of privacy concerns.

"They're driven to reach out, trying to find someone who can help them make sense of the fractured systems they've encountered," said Freeman, who uses his own family's experience through the system to advise other parents.

Sometimes a parent just wants to know they aren't alone, said Katie Woodland, mother of an autistic child and a member of Bridges and the Exceptional Families Network.

"It's nice to know another parent has been through the same thing," she said.

Both Freeman and Woodland have referred people to Holliday, and vice versa, they said.

"She's good at finding people who people can attach to" when needing help, Woodland said.

Parents are starting to shed the secrecy around children with disabilities, Woodland said. "Now we find ways to find each other."

Life with syndrome

Wyatt was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome when he was 4. Children with the syndrome develop speech and often are very intelligent but have difficulty managing their emotions, behaving appropriately and interpreting social interactions.

Wyatt's diagnosis came after several frustrating years for Holliday and her husband, Blake, both Web designers living in California. Although Wyatt went mute at 18 months, doctors told them their firstborn child appeared to be normal. That never convinced the Hollidays.

"It took until he was 5 to get him to speak," she said.

Despite Wyatt's high intelligence, his behavior needed managing, his mother said.

"I got up at seven. I'd help him eat. I'd help him get dressed, Then I'd take him to school," Holliday said. "When he got home, doing homework was a huge issue."

During that time, the Hollidays divorced, leaving Therese as a single mother raising Wyatt and his younger brother, Cody. She has since remarried.

The daily routine was exhausting, she said.

Their routine ended Aug. 19, 2003. During one of Blake Holliday's visits with his sons, a tractor-trailer slammed into the back of their car in a sudden traffic jam on Interstate 5 near Tumwater. Wyatt and his father died instantly. Cody, then 7, was pulled from the burning wreck by passer-by Gary A. Davis.

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"All of a sudden all of that was gone," Holliday said of her routine. "A lot of that was my identity."

As she tried to recover from the shock of the accident, she remembered the good times with Wyatt. But she also remembered the times when she really could have used a helping hand.

"In reminiscing about my little boy, I remembered some of the hard times, especially as a single parent," she said. "Nobody, nobody was willing to help me.

"I thought, that is so unfair that families have to go through this," she said.

New connection

Holliday took her Internet skills and started the e-mail lists and the Web site. She also organizes the group through Meetup.com, a national Web site that connects local people with similar interests.

The group brings in guest speakers to talk directly to parents.

Speakers have included a special education attorney, a pediatrician who spoke about autism, and a craniosacral therapist who practices "light touch" body manipulation.

The speakers sometimes have "alternative" perspectives because some children find relief with nontraditional therapies, Holliday said.

"The goal is to get information to parents," she said. "If some children were helped by something, parents need to know about that."

Holliday, who does all the technical work on the Web site, hopes to provide families with computers and make the programs available online or on DVD to parents in rural areas.

"While your child is sleeping in the other room, and you can't get child care, you can still get the information," she said. "One big problem that our families have is that it's hard to find child care for our children."

Videoconferencing and e-mail can't replace the personal connection of a conversation, she said. Many people connect through phone calls and during the group's workshops.

The network is ready to expand to other counties in Washington, when parents are willing to take on some of the organizational responsibilities.

After two years of incorporation, the Foundation also qualifies for many of the grants that could directly help children, she said. She has recruited a grant writer and other volunteers to help.

"We're not just sending out e-mails," she said.

Woodland, of Bridges, said that Holliday's network is useful for the number of connections made in the two years and her Web site, which makes her easier for parents to find.

"She's on the Internet and you can find her," Woodland said. "Many parents, that's what they do, is they go to the Internet."

Woodland said Holliday's work was admirable.

"She's channeled those difficult things into something wonderful," she said.

On the Web

Listed are some of the local networks for people with disabilities and their families.

The Wyatt Holliday Foundation and Exceptional Families Network:
www.wyattshouse.org

Parent to Parent Support Program of Thurston County: www.parenttoparent-thurston.org

Advocates for the Rights of Citizens with Developmental Disabilities: www.arcwa.org

United Cerebral Palsy of South Puget Sound: www.ucp-sps.org/

Autism Society of Washington: www.autismsocietyofwa.org/

Center for Children with Special Needs (Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center): www.cshcn.org

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