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Disability Pride Month 2025: Understanding autism through N.J. families

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By [Ande Richards](#) | [NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

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Shannon Thorden (right) with her boyfriend, Bob Weidmann. Shannon and Bob met at New Concepts for Living, a day program for individuals with disabilities. Karen Thorden

Shannon Thorden says she's "always happy." She loves her job at Stop & Shop, where she works on Sundays, and has a new boyfriend named Bob.

"He makes me happy," she said. "He's such a gentleman. He helps me get in and out of the van. When we go on a trip, like in the afternoon, after lunch, to play Monopoly."

Thorden, 31, is one of thousands of people in New Jersey diagnosed with autism, a neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, social interaction, and behavioral issues that can significantly limit daily life.

Recently, she and two other Garden State families on the autism spectrum shared their lived experiences, highlighting the diversity, misconceptions, and evolving understanding of what it means to be autistic in today's world.

Shannon

Shannon lives in Dumont, New Jersey, with her mother, Karen Thorden, and has long struggled with social interactions, a common characteristic of ASD.

“When Shannon was 3 and in daycare, she was very aggressive toward other children,” said Karen Thorden, 72. “By kindergarten, it got worse, but we managed. By second grade, I had to place her in special education.”

Doctors recommended medication and institutionalization, which Karen Thorden said she refused. At one point, a teacher put Shannon in a harness and placed her in an isolation room, her mom said.

“The first step was getting her on the right medication,” Karen Thorden said. “She was on the wrong medication for a long time and would get so violent, I had to bring her to the hospital. They’d find her a bed wherever one was available – whether that was near where we lived or not – but there was no real help.”

Karen Thorden said she and her support team found effective treatment and a day program that worked for Shannon when she was 16.

“She has therapy and attends New Concepts for Living,” Thorden said of the adult center, where Shannon goes five times a week. “She’s been to so many programs... “She’s learned the right way to be social.”

Twice retired, Thorden now works early mornings as a school bus aide. She says Shannon will always need help, so she is focused on finding the right place for her to live when she’s no longer here to care for her.



Tommy Marcketta shows off a medal he received for swimming in the Special Olympics. Elizabeth Marcketta

Tommy

Like Shannon, Tommy Marcketta, of Hillsborough, is on the autism spectrum, but he says he's just like everyone else – a person with dreams, hopes, and friends – though some things look different for him.

“I still need support, just not as much as some others might,” said Tommy, 17. “I have difficulties with some things that other people don’t, but I’m also just as good, if not better, at other things,” he added, pointing proudly to his swimming skills.

Tommy, a junior at Hillsborough High School, swims with a Special Olympics team based in Bridgewater and for his school’s swim team. Still, social cues are one of his biggest challenges.

“People say one thing and mean another. I often don’t pick up on that,” he said. He also sometimes argues without realizing it. “I share my opinion, someone disagrees, and I share another opinion. I think it’s conversation, but people think it’s arguing.”

Sensory issues are another difficulty for him. Certain sounds, like Styrofoam squeaks, feel physically painful.

“My brain thinks it’s pain,” he said. “I physically react. I wince and curl up and try to get away from the sound. I can’t really do much else. I essentially become non-functional in that environment.”

Unlike Shannon, Tommy will be able to live independently and is learning to advocate for himself.

“People downplay the negatives and talk about hyper focus, but it’s important to know what challenges we face so others can help,” he said.

Matthew

For parents like Elle Jardim, 61, of Basking Ridge, understanding these challenges is deeply personal. Her son, Matthew Stern, 20, is on the autism spectrum and attends Education, Careers and Life-long Community, a private school for people with disabilities, in Chatham.

Jardim said Matthew struggles with verbal communication, often resorting to writing his responses instead of speaking. He also has behavioral challenges, including hitting her and difficulties with social interactions.

Autism is labeled a disorder because of its challenges, but many individuals also have unique abilities.

Jardim recognized Matthew's exceptional musical talent. She says he can sing and play anything he's heard on the piano. She tried enrolling him in various music programs but faced challenges.

At a Berklee College of Music program, Matthew was asked to leave after hitting Jardim in the school office one morning and having difficulty respecting personal boundaries, particularly with female students.

Jardim eventually found Jazz House Kids, a nonprofit in Montclair that educates children through Jazz. However, Matthew was kicked out during his first weeklong tryout but was later readmitted and is now thriving there.

Jardim says the program has been transformative for him. He's performed at Lincoln Center and the Montclair Jazz Festival, among other places in New Jersey and New York.

"First and foremost, the joy it has brought him – he just smiles from ear to ear," she said. "It completely opened his world. He gets to play music with other people, something he never had the opportunity to do before. I've seen him rise to the occasion. He still has those behaviors, but you've never seen them on performance day."

Shannon's mom, Karen Thorden, said the journey through the world of autism is challenging, but there are people and organizations that can make the road easier.

"Get as much help as you can," she said, "and don't give up on your child."



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