



TEMECULA: Councilman helps raise autism awareness



TEMECULA -- There's a good reason Councilman Mike Naggar hasrecently become a vocal advocate for autism awareness.

His name is Liam Michael Naggar, and he is 3 1/2 years old. Liam was diagnosed last year with autism, a spectrum disorderthat affects the development of children in different ways, and,like many parents, Mike and Mylah Naggar were beset byquestions.

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Would Liam eat ice cream or ride a tricycle? Would he answerwhen his name was called?

In the months that passed since that diagnosis, the Naggars haveheard from other parents of children with autism. They've usedthose parents as resources -- and continue to do so -- and theyhave tailored the advice to their son.

And it's made a difference, Mike Naggar said recently, talkingabout the progress Liam is making, especially after they cut mostwheat and dairy products from his diet.

"It's tremendous ... we've learned to appreciate every littlemilestone," he said.

In the same way they benefited from the advice of other parents-- "We are still learning," Mike Naggar said -- the Naggars saidthey hope they can offer help and assistance to parents caring forchildren with autism.

Using his position as an elected leader, Naggar said he plansask the council at an upcoming meeting to open up the youth masterplan to address autism issues and youths with other specialneeds.

"I will also be asking that for the summer of 2010, we begin toincorporate autistic youth into the mayor's summer youth employmentprogram," he said.

During the April 14 council meeting, Mike Naggar shared hisfamily's experience during an address to an audience thatincluded a fellow parents of children with autism. The parents, somesitting in the council chambers holding photos of their children,were there, as was Supervisor Jeff Stone. The council designatedApril as Autism Awareness Month.

After Mayor Maryann Edwards made the proclamation, Naggar askedfor time to speak.

"My son's autistic," Mike Naggar said, choked with emotion. "IfI start to cry a little bit, it's not that I'm sad. It's pure joyto be honest with you."

Autism, most commonly described as a developmental disorderaffecting one's ability to communicate and form relationships, ischaracterized by a range of behaviors, including difficultyexpressing needs and socializing.

In recent years, the number of autism diagnoses has spiked and,according to data collected by the Centers for Disease Control andPrevention, about 1 in every 150 children is autistic. Other groupspat the number closer to 1 in 75.

The cause for the recent uptick in diagnoses is a matter ofintense debate and study.

During his comments, Naggar made special mention of YsabelBarnett Elementary School, one of many schools in Southwest Countythat has seen a sharp increase in the number of children withautism enrolled in its special education programs.

"Their special ed program is second to none, and we could nothave handled this without their help," he said.

While he struggled with the question of making his personal lifeeven more public, Naggar said that he was willing to talk about hisfamily's experience to help others the way his family has beenhelped.

"I could not have made it if other parents had not come forwardbefore me," he said.

Drawing on his family's faith, Naggar said he wants to team witharea parents and "turn this thing around" and make something thatcan be devastating into something miraculous.

Stone said it was important for leaders like Naggar to sharetheir stories because it helps other people in the community goingthrough a similar situation.

"It lets them know that they're not alone," he said.

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