

African-American families share autism experiences in new video series

May 28 2015, by Rachel Ewing



Sometimes, a personal story is what it takes to connect people to help they need and to overcome hidden struggles.

That's the aim of a new video series premiering this month, titled "Autism for African-American Families, Parts 1 & 2," produced by social worker Karen Krivit with a team of Drexel television management students.

The videos are directed at helping families, especially African-American families, understand and overcome the emotional challenges of finding out their child is on the autism spectrum. They chronicle the experiences of five African-American families in Philadelphia as they learn about and address their child's autism diagnosis. The families tackle controversial issues of race, pride, stigma and shame while ultimately moving to support, acceptance and celebration of their children on the spectrum.

"I counsel families in their homes and meet incredible families and hear heart-wrenching stories," said Krivit, a longtime social worker in Philadelphia. "But those stories can't follow me when I leave."

Krivit has teamed up with Drexel students to produce these and two other films. They aim to help families overcome potential barriers to seeking diagnosis and services for their children on the spectrum—particularly in populations that are underserved when it comes to autism awareness, diagnosis and services.

"I jumped at the opportunity. I thought it was an amazing cause," said Briana White, a master's student in television management in Drexel's Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts & Design, who began working with Krivit as the videos' production manager earlier in 2015. "I've learned a lot about autism through this process, and meeting kids and parents and seeing their patience and sympathy has been amazing."

The videos' specific focus on helping underserved families is a response to a vital need: Autism spectrum disorders affect one in 68 children in

the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Yet diagnosis rates are lower in many minority groups—about one in 88 African-American children—and the longer children go undiagnosed, the longer they go without services that could help them thrive.

The collaboration between Krivit and two successive teams of Drexel students began last year, when she reached out to colleagues at the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute for help with her video plans; they introduced her to the Paul F. Harron Graduate Program in Television Management in Drexel's Westphal College of Media Arts & Design. Program Director Al Tedesco enthusiastically welcomed the project as an opportunity for his students to engage with communities in need. The first video produced through that collaboration, focused on educating Asian families about autism and other developmental delays, has been made widely available in multiple Asian languages and was the first resource of its kind.

Krivit and the team of Drexel students including White, Ariel Evans, Lily Mao and Clay Stiles are continuing to develop their next film, focused on Latino families. The project recently received support from new seed grant funding from the Philadelphia Autism Project, which identified the goal of helping underserved and underrepresented populations with [autism spectrum disorders](#) as a priority for funding throughout the city.

"These films get at the heart of people's emotions," said Francesca Merritt, outreach support coordinator for the ASERT Collaborative and the Philadelphia Autism Project within the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute. "Nobody talks about that. They talk about what [autism](#) is, the research, what you can do. What I'm going through as a parent regardless of heritage or background is similar to other people in this area, and I connect to these stories."

Krivit said she hopes viewers can connect with both the universal experiences of many families and with the specific needs and issues affecting minority racial and cultural groups.

More information: The videos will be available online via the Philadelphia Autism Project website: phillyautismproject.org/

Provided by Drexel University

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