

## Meet Louis Hock and family



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# Coming of Age

BY STEPHANIE CONNER

Children grow up so fast. And like any mother, Dana Hock wanted to buy more time with her child—but for her, it wasn't for the usual reasons. She wasn't trying to preserve innocence or savor the pre-teenage years with her son, Louis. She was coping with knowing that her child, who had been diagnosed with autism at age 2 1/2, was about to legally outgrow the Arizona school system.

He is, after all, an adult.

And as more children with autism grow up, there will naturally be more adults with autism. For Dana and her husband, Richard, however, they've been forced to the front lines.

When Louis was diagnosed, the incidence of autism was 1 in 10,000 children. Today, that number is 1 in 150. Without many resources available to them at the time, the Hocks became trailblazers. In fact, today, Dana, a family nurse practitioner and former board member for the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center (SARRC), is working with SARRC to develop a vocational program for adults with autism so that other parents don't endure the same struggles she and her husband did.

## The journey

Not long after Louis was diagnosed, the Hock family—Dana, Richard, daughters Adrienne and Stephanie, Louis and his twin brother, Richard Jr.—left Utah for Arizona, which had more advanced resources for children with autism.

Even still, the Hocks found themselves in a position of educating the school district on how to best meet Louis's needs. But that couldn't last forever.

As age 22 approached, Dana knew she had to find somewhere else for Louis—"Louie" to the family—to go. She traveled to North Carolina, Cleveland and through Arizona to find the best day program for her son.

"We were looking at programs for years," Richard says. "Every time Dana would leave one, she'd come out crying, saying, 'Louie's not going there.'"

It took years of research, tears and patience, but Dana found a place she feels good about. "If not for this program," she says, "he'd be home all day."

## TEACCH tactics

For Louis, who is completely nonverbal, part of the solution is using an innovative approach developed in the 1970s, called TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped CHildren). When the Hocks learned about the program, they helped introduce it into the Scottsdale Unified School District when Louis was a student there and again, took it to his current day program. The program focuses on individualized assessment and the culture of autism. "You need an individualized program for kids with autism," Dana says. "It's a program that changes as they change."

As happy as she is to have found Louis's current day program and be able to continue his work with TEACCH, Dana knows something bigger and better is around the corner.

"I had hoped that SARRC's vocational center for adults would be open by the time Louis was 22," she says. Vocational programs, Dana explains, let adults with autism use their hands. "Louie's happy to do things," she says. "These kids can do a lot with the right support."

"Louis will have an option to go to a program where they understand autism," she adds. "It's different than having a corner. He'll have a whole building."

## A family affair

Through it all, the family remains the backbone. For the Hocks, whose extended family lives in other states, they rely on each other. "Autism is pretty tough on families," Dana says, adding that they're blessed that Louis's siblings all offer to help. "They enjoy their brother," she adds. "He's not a burden."

And while Louis's autism is a big part of their lives, the family says it isn't defined by his autism. "It was always normal to me," says 24-year-old



Stephanie. "As a family, there was never anything that we couldn't do because of him. We would include him as much as we could." But if his sensory reactions meant he couldn't do something, that didn't limit the other siblings' experiences.

"Richard notes that some families are simply paralyzed by an autism diagnosis. "But it hasn't buried us," he says. "Louis has all of us. We know he'll be fine." 🍀