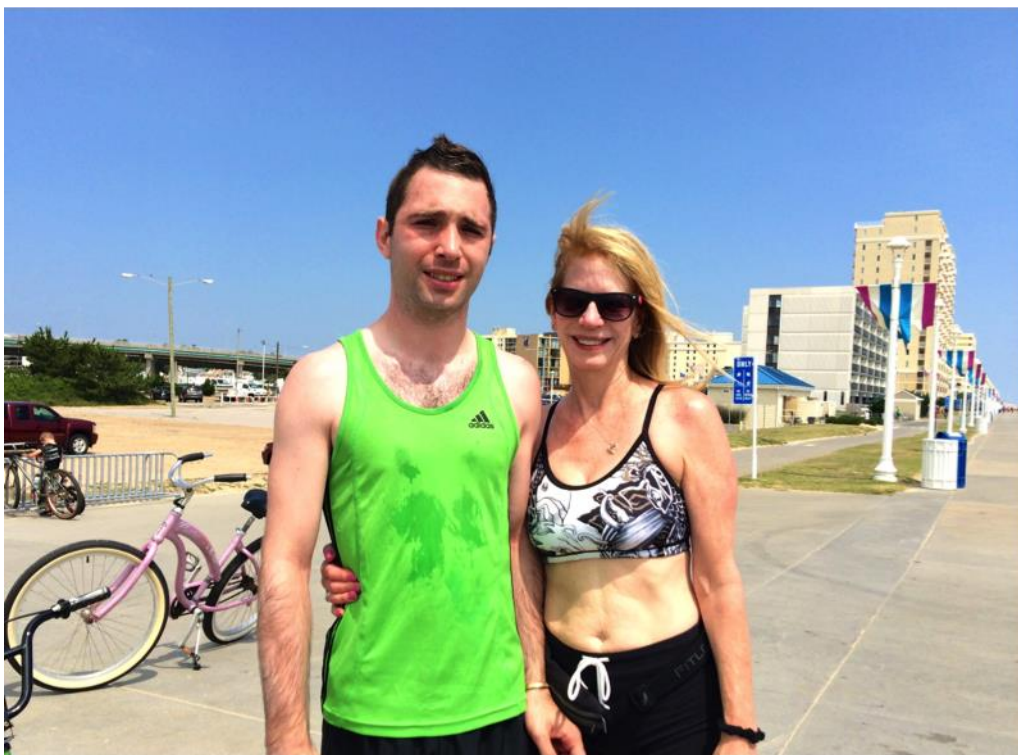


The Imprint a Stranger Left on my Family



This post is from Robyn Schneider, mother of Alex and Jamie, identical twins with autism. Robyn has devoted her life to researching, educating, advocating, and working endlessly toward improving the lives of her sons as well as those of other children and adults with autism. Alex (24) is in a contest to be featured on the front cover of *Runners World*, an international running magazine. You can vote for Alex once a day until the contest ends on August 15th [here](#).

At 15, Alex and his twin brother Jamie began to run in mainstream races and marathons with the help of dedicated guides from Achilles International and the Rolling Thunder Club. Passionate about running in their own separate ways, Alex, the fast one, races with the elites. Jamie, the slower one, runs at a leisurely pace listening to his iPod with his dad or me. So when we plan a family vacation, our choice is based on two prerequisites: a place to run and a bike.

Alex has a coach and several elite runners that run races with him. But on vacations, I ride my bike next to him and I can watch him glow in the rhythm of his most comfortable “forever pace” of a seven-minute mile.

Vacationing in Virginia Beach offers a three-mile boardwalk with a separate bike path for rollerblading, biking or surrey rentals. Jamie and Dad started out first. I hopped on my bike and Alex was ready to go. As he started his run, I watched in amazement the transformation that occurred; from my profoundly autistic son with severe anxiety to one at such inner peace.

He was in a total state of focus, transcending the limits of his abilities as he flew by rollerbladers, bikers, runners and walkers with little concern about these obstacles in his path. He has learned to navigate around them and will not stop unless I say, “stop”. I pedaled with every bit of strength to keep up, barely able to politely yell out to those in our way, “Runner coming through! Passing on your left!” He will slow down when instructed, but we kept this fast pace because I know it’s what makes him the happiest. The sparkle in his eyes and his beautiful smile; this was my high for the day.

When we reached the end of the boardwalk, we stopped to drink and sat down on a bench. Sitting close together, I rubbed his back and wiped his face. As I took out my phone to take some pictures of him, he stood up, eagerly posed and smiled. Minutes later he began to wave his arms and vocalize unintelligibly, unable to communicate what he wanted. I knew he was ready to run again. As I offered

him another drink before starting back out, I noticed a woman staring at Alex. I stared back, waiting for her to look at me. I was ready to defend him, defend autism, as I have for years, and waited for any disparaging remark she may utter. Instead she came over to me and asked if I would like her to take our picture together.

She had been riding behind us the entire stretch of the boardwalk and was watching Alex run. She said she was in awe of his running ability and after observing us together, felt compelled to let me know how inspired she was. Minutes later, Jamie and his dad ran over to us, having just completed the first lap of the boardwalk run. She then offered to take a family photo; one for us, and one for her, to remember our family and this day.

Thankful for this moment in time, I realized how powerful these chance encounters are. They help to create an awareness of the many facets of autism and how people view individuals and their families living with autism. Neither Alex nor Jamie has any idea how they impacted the life of this stranger. But the imprint they left was one small way of saying, "Thank you for appreciating me."

