

HEALTH

Thousands flock to a quieter, dimmer Six Flags for Autism Day

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Published 11:42 a.m. ET May 4, 2018 | Updated 8:19 p.m. ET May 4, 2018

JACKSON — Gina Krieger and Sarah Strate follow the same routine every weekday.

At 9 a.m., they arrive at the Quest Autism Program in Midland Park for a day of work and instruction. They vacuum, do some housework. By 10 a.m., they're either packing condiments at Moe's Southwest Grill in Paramus or Mahwah or helping out at Becton Dickinson, a medical supply company in Franklin Lakes.

They return to Quest after work to practice skills they'll need to live independently. They practice texting in case they get lost and need to tell a caregiver their location. They cook. They clean up. They work some more.

On Thursday, the girls played hooky.

Gina, a 21-year-old adrenaline junky from Washington Township, rode rollercoasters. Sarah, a mellow 22-year-old from Palisades Park, went on tamer rides.

It was the first time in their 15-year friendship the two stepped into Six Flags Great Adventure without needing to hold on to their mothers, feel the crush of a crowd or hear the blare of microphones and music.

They, and thousands of others celebrating the park's first Autism Day, were finally in their element.

"It's such a gift," said Barbara Strate, Sarah's mother and the founder of the New Jersey support group MOSAIC (Mothers' Onward Search for Autism Intervention and Causation). "We parents can walk in with our children and not look behind our backs and not think twice. We're just there like anybody else and it's a wonderful feeling."

Story continues below gallery.

The park can be unbearable for an autistic person on a typical day. The people, the lines, the music, the games, the buzzers overwhelm their senses, said Kevin Gersh, founder of the Gersh Academy for Students on the Autism Spectrum.

“It’s just too much,” Gersh said. “One family said the longest they’ve ever lasted is one hour.”

Others can’t make it beyond the entrance gates.

Autism Day was created to give families a rare respite, said Gersh.

The academy partnered with the Custom Education Foundation, an autism support nonprofit, to transform the park into a sensory-friendly environment. They turned down the lights and music, set up tents for decompression, recruited other autism organizations and professionals and in a first, shut down the park to the general public.

Gersh said he guaranteed Six Flags at least 2,000 attendees. The event drew nearly 5,000 people.

“This just shows the need,” Gersh said.

Nearly 3 percent of children in New Jersey are on the autism spectrum, according to a report released last week by the federal Centers for Disease Control. Diagnoses in the state have tripled in 14 years, affecting boys at four times the rate of girls.

The New Jersey Autism Registry, created by the Department of Health in 2009, lists nearly 28,000 children.

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The neurological disorder, which interferes with social interaction and communication, manifests differently in every person.

“There’s a common saying, ‘If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism,’” said Strate.

Gina and Sarah are that expression personified. Gina craves the thrill of flying through the air and loves puzzle games. Sarah likes to stay tethered to the ground, finding comfort in the old episodes of “Barney & Friends” playing on a loop on her phone.

Their friendship is unconventional. They don’t look or interact with each other much but when they walk, they gravitate toward each other.

“They know they’re supposed to be together, they look for each other.” Strate said. “We accept it on their terms. If this is what it is, this is what it is. This is what makes them happy.”

Like any good friend, Gina did things she didn’t particularly like to make Sarah happy on Thursday.

She sat beside her on Air Jumbo, a slow rotating ride the park rated as “mild” on both a thrill and sensory level. She tolerated Fender Benders, a bumper car ride that Sarah operated with a big smile on her face.

Lisa Krieger, Gina’s mother, said it was the first time she was able to step back and let Gina enjoy an amusement park with minimal supervision.

“I don’t have to worry about someone stopping her or her getting in front of somebody, she sometimes doesn’t understand all the rules,” Krieger said. “When she got off the Joker, she jumped ahead of the family in front and ran out. That family didn’t even look up. Whereas if it was a typical day, it would be harder, less forgiving.”

For a day, Gina and Sarah were given the anonymity that most people take for granted, their mothers said.

Strate used to frequently take Sarah to Sesame Place and Six Flags Hurricane Harbor until Sarah got older and taller and looked painfully out of place.

“I looked around and all her peers were there with their peers, they weren’t there with their mothers and it started to feel more awkward,” Strate said. “My child with autism, even though she’s a young adult and this should be the best part of her life, is at the mercy of her mother, who keeps getting older and older.”

There are few opportunities like Autism Day for autistic adults, Strate said. Most programs and events are catered to children.

When Gina and Sarah were growing up, much of the world was closed off to them. Krieger said she had to fight for every service and activity, including Gina’s communion.

“You get tired as a parent of pushing your way through but it’s either that or she doesn’t get the services that she needs or she doesn’t get to enjoy what every other kid gets to enjoy,” Krieger said. “She should be included in the community like everybody else. What’s nice here today is they included everybody.”

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