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FAYETTE COUNTY BUSINESSES AIMING TO IMPROVE EXPERIENCE FOR AUTISTIC TRAVELERS

Uniontown, PA – Traveling can come with headaches, even for those who enjoy it. For those with Autism Spectrum Disorder, it can be even more difficult. Disruptions in routine, noisy venues, and crowds are just a few of the things that can present a challenge for the autistic individual.

But now, a new program aimed at reducing those challenges has been introduced to Fayette County businesses this April, just in time for Autism Awareness Month.

Becky Large knows the struggles of traveling with autism all too well. Large's oldest son is on the spectrum, and Large said going new places can be so stressful for many autistic people and their families that "you just opt not to leave the house."

In 2015, Large said, "My in-laws took us on this horrific family vacation to Hawaii for two weeks." The trip, she said, was fraught with triggers and difficulties for her son, and in turn, the family.

The unpleasant experience drove home for Large a need for change in the way the tourism and hospitality industries interact with autistic travelers. She created the Autism Travel Club to help make vacations and other journeys easier and more pleasant for autistic travelers and their families.

"We provide support and services for our people and their families," Large said.

She said the stress of traveling can often cause meltdowns, which then leads to public judgement. The Autism Travel Club provides training for staff members at participating hotels, resorts, restaurants and other types of tourist spots to increase awareness and help create a more comfortable experience for guests on the spectrum.

The goal, Large said, is to "modify the environment and reduce or limit friction. The whole family can come out and have a nice meal in a restaurant or just a supportive vacation."

Large began her efforts in the Surfside Beach and Myrtle Beach areas in South Carolina, where her family had relocated in 2012.

"It was so successful, families who came here wanted to take it home with them," she said.

The club recently extended its reach into the Laurel Highlands, thanks in part to Laura Argenbright, Senior Director of Creative Strategy and Marketing at GO Laurel Highlands.

“I was a panelist, a speaker, at a diversity and tourism matters conference in Philadelphia in 2023,” Argenbright remembered. “Becky was also a panelist. We connected there and spoke. I thought that it would be a good program for the Laurel Highlands.”

Large jumped at the chance to bring her travel club north.

“The Laurel Highlands is such a beautiful region, and it’s just really sprawling,” Large said. “I have the opportunity to give our families somewhere else to go and play.”

Argenbright said the travel club has now been made available to GO Laurel Highlands partners, “and any organization, really.”

Multiple Fayette County businesses already have begun participating in the program, including Benners Meadow Run Campground in Farmington; the Hilton Garden Inn in Uniontown; and Whitewater Adventurers in Ohio.

Muriel Nuttall, Executive Director of the Fayette Chamber of Commerce added, “We are so proud to see our Fayette County businesses participating in the Autism Travel Club initiative. Creating welcoming spaces for all families, including those with sensory and accessibility needs, reflects the true spirit of our community. By embracing this opportunity, we are not only opening our doors wider — we are strengthening Fayette County’s reputation as a place where everyone can feel at home.”

Another popular Fayette County attraction that has embraced the Autism Travel Club is Touchstone Center for Crafts in Farmington. Communications director Dean Simpson said he has completed the training, and the staff is in the process of doing so.

Simpson said he learned about the program during the 2024 GO Laurel Highlands partner summit, where Large spoke of the club and its origins. Simpson happened to be sitting with two people with autistic family members.

“It was a different experience for me because here I am, sitting next to two people whose kids are on the autism spectrum, and I could just feel the relief that they felt that here is a program for them,” he said.

Simpson said he felt the travel club would be good for Touchstone for two reasons.

“First, we have had interns who are on the spectrum,” he said. “Second, we have a Teen Week every year. We’ve had several teens come, and their parents usually will call in advance and discuss their concerns.

“We’ve had a really good experience with that because we can see what the arts can do. Maybe we weren’t always prepared. It’s just good overall customer service – teaching people to be kind and look for things in advance.”

Argenbright said the advantages of the Autism Travel Club are, first, that it’s a resource that is available to anyone, anywhere via the internet, and second, that it’s an “easy entry” for businesses and organizations into autism awareness, with no major changes required.

“You just train your employees to be more aware and be more helpful,” she said.

Large said the club began with 12 families, “and now, we’re up to 3,000 around the country.”

She also created the Autism Traveler App, which lists participating businesses and organizations, as well as information on any special services or discounts.

“I call it the Triple-A of autism travel,” she said.

For more information on the Autism Travel Club, visit <https://autismtravel.club/> or email Large at becky@autismtravel.club.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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