



## North Fayette staff welcomes Autism Caring Center's life-saving skills



ABBY MACKEY  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

JUN 19, 2022

6:00 AM

Kelly Cain heard a tragic story in September 2021. She couldn't get it out of her head. It could have been her, and in many ways, it already was.

Feda Almaliti, a 43-year-old mother from the San Francisco Bay Area and vice president of the National Council on Severe Autism, perished in a house fire alongside her 17-year-old autistic son, Muhammed, when he, overwhelmed, refused to leave the home as it was engulfed in flames.

When their bodies were found, Ms. Almaliti and her son were found embracing one another.

**good partnership**

Ms. Cain talked to her 19-year-old autistic son, Clayton, about fire safety that night. "Do you know not to touch a door handle when there's a fire?" she asked. He did not.

“He’s too busy learning how to talk and behave to pay attention to fire safety in school,” she said. “That’s when I knew. We had to have the fire department come here.”

“Here” is the [Autism Caring Center](#), which Ms. Cain co-founded in 2017 to help families advocate for their loved ones and to educate community members, hoping to make the world a friendlier place for autistic individuals.

Although she’s trained teachers, librarians, staff at Pittsburgh Botanical Gardens and the Washington Wild Things and more, she’s in new and welcome territory as she educates every department within North Fayette Township, from first responders to camp counselors.

And if she gets her way, this will be just the first example of such comprehensive training.

### **‘Autism Island’**

Clayton was diagnosed with autism at age 3. Ms. Cain vividly remembers the details of that day, including the book she was handed listing therapists, advocates and psychiatrists with little further explanation.

Among other challenges, her son didn’t speak until age 8, leaving her family emotionally isolated.

“I call it Autism Island,” she said. “You know there are other people out there, but you can’t find them. We felt alone, and we didn’t want to feel that anymore.”

She joined forces with another mom and started the Autism Caring Center to provide the resources they couldn’t find.

They hosted social and crafting events at local libraries. After experiencing the exorbitant cost of educational advocates, they provided similar support for free, knowing that, in families like hers, one parent must stay at home.

“You get that diagnosis, your income changes, your bills don’t,” she said. “We know that most of our families are not double-income, and if they are, they’re using that money for therapy or groceries.”

Although COVID-19 restrictions brought much of its work to a halt, the organization, which is now led only by Ms. Cain, came back bigger in

October 2021 with a brick-and-mortar location in Oakdale.

Parents can bring their children there to play while they drink a cup of coffee and connect with other families. They can ask for resources rather than sifting through a book of providers. Visits with Santa and social events are free from judgment.

And that's where Ms. Cain first addressed the relationship between first responders and the autistic community.

She invited North Fayette firefighters to teach about fire safety in a non-threatening environment, allowing them, their uniforms, fire trucks and tools to be seen as helpful rather than scary. And separate from the demands and social norms of school, members of the autistic community were able to hear information that might save their lives.

But Ms. Cain also knew those families had plenty to teach first responders and community helpers.

### **Spot on**

Ms. Cain, formerly Kelly Muller, spent 13 years sitting next to J.R. Mangan as they attended classes in the West Allegheny School District.

Around 2010, Ms. Cain initiated the Providing Assistance, Love & Support for special needs children social program, or P.A.L.S., through North Fayette, although it also serves surrounding areas. And in August 2021, her longtime classmate became township manager, and she approached him about autism training for township employees.

She gave her 45-minute presentation at a board of supervisors meeting in late 2021, where township engineers, attorneys, police officers and more were present.

When she was finished, Chief of Police Donald Cokus, who is the father of a 7-year-old with autism, looked at the board and said, "She's spot on, 100%."

Based on that presentation, Ms. Cain was asked to repeat it at later dates for the firefighters, camp counselors, police officers, road crew and other township staff.

### **Show me**

Ms. Cain's presentations explain autism, who it affects and that, no, there isn't a good explanation as to why it occurs. But those facts aren't what grab her audience.

"It really opened our eyes," Mr. Mangan said. "Her training gives you an idea of what it's like to be autistic."

Ms. Cain tells participants that autistic individuals can take additional time to process information. Then she also shows them.

She asks the group a question before setting a stopwatch for 10 seconds. They can only answer when the watch sounds, which is a particularly meaningful exercise for police officers.

"If we were to show up on the scene of suspicious activity, and there was a person who was not answering our questions, sometimes you feel that maybe they're being resistant in some way," Mr. Cokus said. "But there may not be any resistance at all. It may be someone who's autistic that needs a little bit of time to process the question you're asking them."

She shows a video of a city street with all of the sights and sounds amplified as an autistic person might experience them, which drives home lessons like why firefighters should silence sirens near the homes of autistic individuals, when safe, or why camp counselors might witness emotional meltdowns when there's too much noise or activity.

She teaches that the muscle tone of autistic individuals might be more or less than expected, important information should a first responder ever have to carry one away from danger. She recommends yes-or-no questions to help overcome the communication differences.

And particularly for firefighters, she talks about looking in uncommon areas of the home during emergencies. Assistant Fire Chief Brandon Wharton says firefighters typically look in closets and under and behind beds, but Ms. Cain advocates for peeking in areas like kitchen cabinets, as these may be the person's "safe spaces" used to decrease sensory input.

### **They're out there**

One in 44 people are on the autism spectrum, according to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Extrapolating

that ratio, there are approximately 366 autistic North Fayette residents, considering its population of just more than 16,100.

Many North Fayette first responders don't recall interacting with an autistic person on a call, but that may be a consequence of the system.



Mr. Wharton points out that first responders have no way to know there's an autistic individual on a call unless dispatchers are made aware of it. And on fire calls, he or Chief Gary Hamilton will arrive before the firefighters, potentially allowing them to gain this important information from bystanders, but that's only if they're privy to it.

Ms. Cain hopes to create more direct connections between autistic community members and first responders and staff in the future so their locations in the community are well known, which may be addressed when Mr. Wharton invites her back for another round of training with the fire department's newer members.

But much like the inception of the Autism Caring Center, Ms. Cain hopes to expand her reach. She's already extended the training to Hanover Fire Department and hopes to someday provide training to store owners and community members so no autistic person or their family must "tiptoe through the world or walk on eggshells."

"I'm just really proud of the people who've done the training," Ms. Cain said. "It's heartwarming to me that they want to know about the local autism community, and they want to see how they can help.

"They're really setting the standard here for other townships."

*Abby Mackey: [amackey@post-gazette.com](mailto:amackey@post-gazette.com), Twitter [@AnthroAbbyRN](https://twitter.com/AnthroAbbyRN) and IG [@abbymackeywrites](https://www.instagram.com/abbymackeywrites).*

*First Published June 19, 2022, 6:00am*

---

We hope you enjoyed this free article.  
Get unlimited story access for only 99¢.

**Subscribe**

Limited time offer.

---