

scene CHANGE-MAKER

# Heart and Hand

WITH FESTIVE PROGRAMS DESIGNED WITH INCLUSIVITY IN MIND, A NEW NONPROFIT THAT SUPPORTS CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM IS RAISING AWARENESS AND LIFTING HOLIDAY SPIRITS.

BY KELSIE BARTON

Kristen Teodoro with son Hudson, who inspired the new nonprofit Hudson's Helping Hands



“For us the holidays mean tradition, comfort and family. The excitement that surrounds decorating, playing the classic holiday music we all know and love, attending the local holiday festivities and, now, enjoying the wonder of it all through our children’s eyes,” says local mom of two Kristen Teodoro, whose Hudson’s Helping Hands ([hudsonshelpinghands.org](http://hudsonshelpinghands.org))—the nonprofit she and her husband, Augie, started earlier this year—is making a difference for kids with special needs across the East End this Christmas.

When the couple’s 5-year-old son, Hudson, was diagnosed with autism at 18 months old, it wasn’t long before they realized there was no real local outreach for families like theirs. “We felt alone,” Teodoro reveals. “As time went by, the need for this sort of support

and autism ‘community’ became even more apparent.”

Cue the COVID-19 pandemic, which served as a tipping point for the parents. “I was tired of watching my son regress at home with virtual learning and lack of in-person therapy,” Teodoro says. “So I had a simple idea: to create a weekly program that would give our children, both on and off the spectrum, some structure back. To create a safe place that promotes socializing, respect, acceptance and learning for all children.” Her plan quickly gained traction, and now the nonprofit offers regular integrated learning experiences led by a certified instructor each week.

Unlike many public events, which Teodoro points out can be “overwhelming, unsafe, overcrowded and a sensory-overload minefield for children on the autism spectrum,” HHH’s upcoming Sensory Santa event Dec.

5 at the Children’s Museum of the East End prioritizes inclusivity. “We have a really great special education teacher to be Santa! So he will have experience with connecting and engaging with the kids and making them comfortable,” she says. Parents can expect sensory Christmas crafts, food trucks and even a 12-person trackless train that will take families on a fun ride through a miniature light show. Plus, “kids wearing pajamas are a

must!” she adds.

Families interested in making a donation during this season of giving are encouraged to visit the nonprofit’s website, but there are other ways to help too, whether it be “spreading the word, or volunteering and helping throw the net of ‘inclusion’ just a little further out into our community,” Teodoro says. “I want to build a community and let other parents know that they are not alone.”

PHOTOS BY AUGIE TEODORO