

Virginia Institute of Autism (Independent/Unaffiliated Charity)

CVC Code: 03884

A Journey with Autism

6/11/15, Kristin Twiford, ktwiford@viaschool.org

You're sitting in a pediatrician's office with your toddler on your lap. Your doctor says, "You just need to accept that your child will never be normal."

What would you do? Who would you turn to? Where would you look for answers? How would this moment change your life? Cheryl Lloyd lived this moment.

When her daughter, Aliyah, was diagnosed with autism, everything changed. "It affects every area of your life. It turns your world upside down," said Cheryl.

As Cheryl dove into the fight to help her daughter, two of her sons were diagnosed with autism. This developmental disorder was robbing her children of their ability to communicate, and Cheryl became their only advocate.

By day, Cheryl cared for her children and fought for better services. By night, she searched for answers. "It affects your relationships because you start to become more distant... because no one can understand it," she said.

Then, a breakthrough. Cheryl discovered a beacon of hope – the Virginia Institute of Autism ([www.viaschool.org](http://www.viaschool.org)).

"They had answers to the questions," she explained, "and I was going to get to VIA at some point." She started running VIA's 5Ks just to meet other families who understood.

After 8 challenging years and a move to Central Virginia, Cheryl took Aliyah to VIA for the first time. At the end of their visit, Aliyah didn't want to leave. She had finally found an environment where she felt safe and relaxed.

Within just five weeks, Aliyah's family saw a change at home. "She was more engaged, she was happier. She didn't hesitate, she was comfortable," Cheryl said.

Now that Aliyah has learned to communicate at VIA, she has closer relationships with her family members. "She's more interactive with her brothers," Cheryl explained. "They're calmer around her." The family spends more time together now, because Aliyah rarely has outbursts anymore.

Aliyah's happiness is contagious. "The whole atmosphere in the home is different. I'm not as stressed as I used to be, and even the kids notice that," said Cheryl. "It's quite impactful."

Aliyah's connection to VIA has helped her family and friends access services they never knew existed. Her brother, Nathaniel, is now enrolled in VIA's social skills group. He's making friends for the first time. Her mom, Cheryl, is sharing the information she gets through VIA's Family Resource Navigator and educational workshops with other autism parents in her community.



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One in 68 children is diagnosed with autism. That means 1 out of every 68 families has a moment when they realize nothing will ever be the same. Cheryl is glad to have a place where families like hers can turn.

"It gives me peace of mind," she says, "and that's something that's really rare when you have a child with special needs, to know that they're in the care of someone that's really going to take great care of them and support them and guide them, and make them laugh and make them want to come back, while they're learning! It's immeasurable."