

CLASSIC WOMAN AWARDS

From Linda J. Walder's biggest fear and deepest grief comes her greatest achievement. As the mother of a son, Daniel Jordan Fiddle, who was born into the first generation of children widely diagnosed with autism, she worried greatly about his future. There were few—if any—programs that would be available to him as an adult. So when he died unexpectedly in 2000 at age 9, she channeled her sorrow into an organization (formally launched in 2002) that helps adults living with autism. It funds and develops practical, deeply needed programs—such as peer support groups for autistic adults 50 and older and respite for families—that can be adapted nationwide.

Highlights of Linda's work include seeing adults with autism “create art, learn to train the family dog, get job training, live and work on a farmstead, learn life skills through horseback riding, attend camping weekends, attend college with more confidence—and the list goes on.”

Trained as an attorney, Linda has been dubbed a “social entrepreneur” because she sees needs and finds collaborative and creative ways to fill them. An example is that of Paul, a 37-year-old man living with autism who loved theater but didn't fit into his local theater scene. Linda helped develop a program where a diverse mix of adults occupying various places on the autism spectrum worked on creating scenes, improvising, and writing, culminating in a heartwarming performance. Paul told her afterward that the experience changed his life by giving him a place to express himself and share his dreams.

Linda—who is grateful for donations and contributions of any size—quotes Mother Teresa: “Every drop of rain matters to the ocean.” Her all-volunteer foundation has raised more than \$1.5 million—100% of which goes toward programs, resource development, and advocacy efforts. The latest? Two programs established this year. The first is The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Adult Autism Research Fund at Yale, the first research fund in the U.S. dedicated solely to adults with autism. The second is The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Transition and Adult Programs at the University of Miami's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, geared toward developing model programs.

Linda herself is a model of focus and optimism. “I don't believe in giving up. I believe in getting up.” It's apt, then, that her advice to anyone beginning a nonprofit is this: “Determine your vision and mission, and stick to it.” ■

“Le Clerc” chair from Hickory Chair.
Silver jewelry from Lagos.

Linda J.
Walder

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