

The United States of Autism

A film by Richard Everts

Rating: Not Yet Rated Running Time: full length (TBA)

The Tommy Foundation

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Director's Synopsis

If ever there were a story that embodies the heart of America, it's the story found in families and individuals affected by autism.

As people often fret about America, one can't help but hear the daily drumbeat of how folks have their best days behind them. To many so-called authorities, the situations faced by individuals and families dealing with autism are hopeless, as they seek to define for others what is "normal." Many parents attempt to navigate a system that is corrupt and/or inept and lose hope while their support systems crumble, leaving them to go it alone. Yet, in the face of such obstacles, some manage to rise above the fray. What drives them? Who are these people and how are they changing their communities?



So I decided to take a trip across America, covering 11,000 miles in 40 days to find the answers for my family and son. With interviews that include the widest spectrum of backgrounds – each conducted in the participants' original language of either English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean or Arabic- the film weaves a broad and compelling tapestry across the spectrum of American life in all its faiths, disparities, colors, and cultures. What I learn along the way will change not only my life, but the lives of those I meet, forever. It's a story about the best days that still lie ahead for our nation, the families, and the people who give America its heart.

-Richard Everts

How the Project Came About

An Idea

Sugey Cruz-Everts, the mother of a special needs child, began writing a book that explored how various cultures deal with autism. As a first generation Hispanic, Sugey knew from experience - as well through families from different cultures around the nation - that autism presented a different struggle for every family. While working on this project she discussed with her husband, Richard Everts, the idea of producing a documentary to complement the book. Their initial idea was to talk with just 4-5 affected families in the Northeast. Little did they know what would transpire a few months later.

The Pepsi Refresh Project



In December of 2009, one of the Foundation's board members suggested that we look into a recently-announced funding program, the [Pepsi Refresh Project](#), scheduled to launch that coming February. Pepsi had announced that it was going to forego advertising during the Superbowl and would instead use that money to help fund several charities, with the awards to be determined by the public via a monthly online competition. The ideas that garnered the most votes could win anything from \$5,000 to \$250,000 for their project. Ten awards were offered in each of four categories, with the \$250,000 prize available to two awardees.

We decided quickly to enter our project in the January competition for the \$50,000 award. That month we came in 14th place nationally. Though this just missing qualifying for an award, our strong showing meant that we automatically qualified to re-enter the competition for March. With the momentum we had developed at the end of the previous month, we started March in 1st place and maintained a position in the top ten through the end of the month. On April 1st, at 12:01 am, the competition concluded with our proposal in 8th place; we had earned the first Pepsi Refresh Project grant for autism in the nation.

Putting Everything Together

Following the contest, we an arduous process in order to ensure Pepsi that we were indeed legitimate and that we could manage a project of this scope. Once completed, we turned quickly to post applications right away on our Facebook pages, website, and twitter feed in order to solicit participation from the widest range of people. By the time of our application deadline, we received had more than enough applications to schedule interviews across the United States in our quest to capture this great story. Within six weeks of receiving our grant money, we had planned the 11,000 mile trip; this included creating an itinerary, booking lodging, scheduling production and a myriad of other things most film projects have months to prepare. On June 22nd, we shot our first footage. You can follow the rest of the trip on [our blog](#), which recorded the events of each day of our 40 day trek.

Where We're Going

Changing the Conversation: A Film to Change People's Lives

Where we went from there, simply put, is out to America to begin to change the conversation about where the autism movement is heading. It's time to start pulling together and promoting our message as the AIDS movement did in the 80s and 90s. Our film had no political agenda besides bi-partisanship within our ranks. You're not going to see growing Facebook attacks or ND'ers and Biomedes attacking each other. Our families of current vaccine versus green vaccine initiatives move forward together, unaware about how similar they were all along. Things are going to have to change, and we hope that our film helps shows the way.

After all, if there's one thing this journey has taught us, it's that everyone wants a better life for their child, regardless of where they are on the spectrum.

About The Filmmakers

Richard Everts (Director and Executive Producer)



Richard is Co-Founder and Vice President of Technology and Communications for the Tommy Foundation, an award winning non-profit that works with families affected by autism in the Northeast. Certified in hypnosis, METT FACE recognition, Final Cut Pro and Visual FX, a MENSA member, and father of a child on the spectrum, he brings a broad range of experiences and insights to the movie. Rich received his B.A. in Philosophy at Franklin & Marshall College.

Dan Sokola (Executive Producer)



Publicist/Manager for a nationally known Autism Advocate for the past 3 years. Dan has also worked on many major motion pictures and independent feature film projects.

Rene S. Duran (Director of Cinematography)



As a documentary filmmaker who works in television post production in Los Angeles, Rene was co-producer, cinematographer and writer on STREET DOGS OF SOUTH CENTRAL, the film was picked up for distribution by Lionsgate and scheduled to air on Animal Planet and the Oprah Winfrey network in 2011. He has also worked on television shows such as NANNY 911, HELL'S KITCHEN, THE BACHELOR and BIG IDEAS FOR A SMALL PLANET.

Sugey Cruz-Everts (Autism Advisor)



Sugey is the Co-Founder and President of the Tommy Foundation, an award winning non-profit that works with families affected by autism in the Northeast. She also serves as the Hispanic Coordinator for the Pennsylvania Chapter of the Parent Education Network. She has advised hundreds of families, professionals, students, and individuals in the autism community towards reaching their goals as well as being a mother to a child on the spectrum. She graduated from Franklin & Marshall College in three years before earning her JD from Temple Law.

Cassie Lees (Camera Operator)



As a winner of the John B. Ovrutsky '74 Media Studies Award and Magna Cum Laude graduate of Franklin & Marshall College, Cassie won the Grand Jury Prize for best film at the recent 2010 F&M student film festival for her short "The Edge". Her other entry "Mistaken" won best cinematography. She is also a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society.

Rosleny Ubinus (Production Assistant)



Rosleny is a volunteer for the Tommy Foundation, an award winning non-profit that works with families affected by autism in the Northeast. She received the Collegiate Leadership Summit Scholarship to attend Franklin & Marshall College on a full scholarship.

The Families & Individuals

Tunde Brazlik is a Sunni Muslim with one child, **Amin**, on the spectrum. Confronting the intricate social pressures of immigrant families and autism, she, with her daughter Safiyya, maintains one of the only autism blogs for the muslim community and presents a bold and loving example to everyone she meets.

Lorette Brewster is a single African-American mom whose son, **Deemy**, just started speaking in his teen years. Disabled herself and unable to continue her profession as a nurse, her other unaffected children, Deemy's twin Kerel, Lexi, and **Deanna**, give testament to the strength of the family to overcome all obstacles.

Liz and Chris Carotto have three boys, **James**, **Joel**, and **Drew**, each at a different point on the autism spectrum. Extremely active in their community, Liz is the president of Autism Spectrum Connections and operates the unique outreach program at Saturday's Market, the largest flea market in Pennsylvania.

Evelyn and Clay Cox have two children, **Parker**, who is on the spectrum, and Akaila who is unaffected. The health aspects of autism affected Evelyn's health as much as Parker's, and the challenges of both nearly overwhelmed the family physically and financially. As members of the Mormon church, they have found a wonderful support system through their community.

Sharon DaVanport is a single mom with two younger children, **Ty**, who is on the spectrum and a daughter Kylee who is unaffected. Herself diagnosed with Aspergers, she is the Executive Director of the Autism Women's Network and was recently invited as one of three self-advocates to the White House for World Autism Awareness Day.

Barbara and Cesar Figueroa have three children, **Erick** who is affected and Alexis who is not, as well as Fabiola who is not. Without any services in their home territory of Puerto Rico, they quit their high-paying jobs, uprooted their entire family and spent their entire savings, to receive better services in the United States for their son.

Raymond and Helen Gallup have one son, **Eric**, who is on the spectrum. Now an adult, he resides in a residential facility after severe aggression threatened the lives of themselves and their daughter Julie. Independent fundraisers of Drs. Wakefield, Singh and Oleske, they continue to advocate for vaccine safety and review.

The families (Continued)

Shelley and Major Mark Huhtanen have two children, **Broden** who is on the spectrum, and Hayden, who is unaffected. A military family always on the move, Mark has deployed to Mosul and Baghdad while Shelley advocates as chair of the Exceptional Family Members Program for the largest Army installation in the United States.

Michele and Ralph Iallonardi have three boys, **Jackson** who is the oldest, and **Bennett** and **Luca** who are twins, each at a different point on the autism spectrum. You might remember their family from the Autism Speaks video “Autism Every Day“. Today, Michele serves on the board for the Nassau/Suffolk Autism Society of America, and they have a few surprises that their life has taken in the last few years since the video came out.

Raun Kaufman is the CEO of the Autism Treatment Center of America and formerly on the autism spectrum. He considers himself to be completely cured. The NBC movie “Son-Rise” was created about his life.

Jinyoung Lee and Yongtai An have two children, **Elvin**, who is on the spectrum, and Alex who is not. Permanent residents of the United States, they speak Korean and Chinese in their home while negotiating the world of autism for their children.

Carrie and Luis Lopez have three children, **Tony**, who is on the spectrum, and Michael. Their daughter, Emily, created the Lemonade for Autism movement at the age of 5 in Los Angeles and now raises money for autism and the HollyRod Foundation throughout Malibu, Beverly Hills, and other parts of LA.

Holly and David Neibauer have twin daughters, **Robyn**, who is on the spectrum, and Kathryn, who is partially deaf. A former college professor turned ABA specialist, Holly now advocates for early intervention throughout the state while her husband teaches. Holly and David have known each other since 2nd grade.

Joseph and Rowena Quianzon have three children between the ages of 2 and 6. Their middle child, **Noah**, is affected. After receiving their diagnosis they have totally transformed their life using the The Son-Rise Program of the Autism Treatment Center of America. Joseph fund-raises for autism with his Reggae band and also keeps a blog called Father Warrior.

The families (Continued)

Alex Plank is the founder and maintainer of WrongPlanet.net, the largest website for the neuro-diversity movement for individuals affected by autism with over 35,000 members. An avid mountain-biker and filmmaker, he lectures around the nation on the topic and has been featured in numerous media interviews.

Ileana Reyes is a single Hispanic mom with one son, **Izzy**, on the spectrum. Balancing the needs of her other two children Dominic and Daniela with Izzy's, she advocates for families who have children on the higher end of the spectrum and the unique difficulties they confront for the family unit.

Wayne and Robyne Rohde have twin boys, Nicholas and Austin, and **Nicholas** is the only child affected on the spectrum. Political activists, they have been pushing autism insurance reform in the state of Oklahoma for years despite heavy opposition, and Nick's Law is named after their son.

Trish and Gary Washburn have two children, **Buddy**, who is on the spectrum, and **Cecilia-Jane** who may be affected. Trish serves on four separate government organizations for disabilities and is working with State Senators on passing the NY Autism Insurance bill, all the while balancing the needs of her children.

Tim and Cheri Welsh have one son, **Tanner**, who is on the Spectrum. A tireless advocate, Tim is one of the most active autism posters on Twitter where he tweets under the name TannersDad. He remembers the very spot and date he heard the last words come from his son's mouth.

Linda and Mark Wessels have one child, **Samuel**, who is on the spectrum. Sitting in the political hotspot of the United States, Iowa, they have asked over half a dozen candidates personally on their views on autism, with Sam asking Senator McCain one during a Town Hall in the 2008 election. Sam himself has a platform for autism as well that he would like the world to know.

Crystal Worley is a single mom with two children, **Sasha**, who is on the spectrum, and Fallon who is unaffected. Overcoming her own incredible health issues while raising her family with the help of her 75 year old grandmother, she founded the first autism skateboarding foundation that helps children nationwide.

About The Tommy Foundation



Started in 2005 by two parents of a child on the severe end of the autism spectrum, The Tommy Foundation has grown from a small dream in Lancaster, Pennsylvania to now an award winning foundation with connections all across the United States.

Winners of a March 2010 Pepsi Refresh Project grant of \$50,000, the Tommy Foundation are producers of the film "The United States of Autism," as well as leaders in the promotion of METT face recognition (as seen on Fox TV's show "Lie to Me") for individuals on the autism spectrum.

We aim to embrace individuals on the spectrum who classify themselves as neuro-diverse, as well as individuals who can not speak for themselves and their families, as well as everyone in between. It is a tightrope to balance the interests of so many groups, yet we find that everyone can agree that we are all looking to help our children and selves reach

our greatest potential. This is what we mean by "Embracing families affected by autism".