

TUCSON GIVING

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Autism Society event this month includes virtual walk, resource fair, panel discussions

By Loni Nannini

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Over the past 14 years, the Autism Walk & Resource Fair evolved into the largest autism event in Southern Arizona, attracting more than 2,000 people annually.

This year, as a result of COVID-19 and the determination of staff and supporters, the event will become the region's largest virtual autism event — essentially a one-stop online shop for registrants.

"When we realized that it was not shaping up to be a time where we could gather in large groups for an in-person event, we knew we had to find a way to deliver the next best thing," said Brie Seward, executive director of the Autism Society of Southern Arizona.

"We decided to reimagine the in-person event in a virtual space ensuring that our attendees, exhibitors and sponsors could still benefit from connecting with more than 75 vital autism resources in the community," Seward said.

Seward said participants have the unique opportunity to log in to a website through which they experience the prerecorded opening ceremonies and live panel discussions in addition to the interactive resource fair.

The website at as-az.org also provides insight into life with autism spectrum disorder, which is the fastest growing — and most underfunded developmental disorder, according to the National Autism Association. The CDC estimates the prevalence of autism is one in 63 births in Arizona; an estimated 3.5 million-plus are living with the disorder.

"This website was designed with the autism journey in mind so that you can get to the resources you need based on where you are currently at in your life," Seward said.

The resource fair connects families with resources such as physicians, behavioral therapists and other providers; clinics and schools; state services; videos and brochures; and many other resources.

The live panel discussions feature both local and national experts and medical professionals speaking on topics such as "Support and Resources during COVID-19," "5 Tools to Help Keep You Calm," "The Role of the Parents in ABA Therapy" and much more, as well as live question-and-answer sessions designed to recreate the in-person experience that families have enjoyed in



DARIN WALLENTINE 2019

Supporters of the Autism Society of Southern Arizona seek to raise at least \$100,000 at the 14th annual Autism Virtual Walk & Interactive Resource Fair on Sept. 26. The walk, pictured last year, is now a virtual event that features a resource fair with more than 75 vendors that offer autism resources.

IF YOU GO

- **What:** 14th annual Autism Virtual Walk & Interactive Resource Fair to benefit the Autism Society of Southern Arizona
- **When:** Saturday, Sept. 26, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.
- **Where:** Register before the event online at 2020autism-walk.com or www.as-az.org
- **Cost:** \$20 per person for those 18 and older; \$5 for children ages four to 17. You must register by Sept. 25 to receive a password to access the Interactive Resource Fair.

Registration is now open for the virtual walk and interactive resource fair; anyone who registers by Tuesday, Sept. 1, will receive an Autism Walk T-shirt, which can be picked up at a drive-thru event from 9 a.m. to noon Sept. 19 and Sept. 20 at Intermountain Academy, 401 N. Bonita Ave. The virtual event begins with an opening ceremonies video and there will be access to virtual activities and to

more than 75 vendors at the Interactive Resource Fair, including government services, behavior training providers, respite care, support and networking for those who have autism and their families as well as professionals and others who work with those with autism. The virtual event also provides access to five online discussion panels.

At any point during the day or in the weeks before the event, participants are encouraged to walk, run or hike a mile at home, in their neighborhoods or at their favorite parks. You can also practice a favorite activity or hobby such as swimming, tennis, gardening, yoga, cooking or any other recreation and post photos of the activity to your favorite social media platform using #weareautism.

For more information on Autism Society of Southern Arizona programs and services, visit www.as-az.org or call 770-1541.

past years. "Everything is right at their fingertips, and that is one of the most important aspects of the event: We are

determined to make sure our families are connected to the resources they need because it can make a significant impact in outcome

for these families," Seward said.

Seward said one advantage of the virtual platform is that it actually allows participants a full day, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., to interact with experts and connect with resources.

She also said that in light of the difficulties created by the pandemic, the event has become even more vital to the autism community.

"It is more important than ever to deliver these resources right now," Seward said. "We are all experiencing new hardships. What we have learned is that now parents are caregivers, teachers and behavior therapists in this new world we are living in, and the stress levels on the parents are overwhelming."

"Our job is to meet them where they are at and to provide guidance during this time. We want to give them tools to empower them and help them withstand this pandemic and keep their families thriving."

To that end, the Autism Society also began offering virtual programming early on in the pandemic, including support groups and parent training programs

to assist with behaviors associated with autism in partnership with UA Cooperative Extension Program. It recently introduced an online social skills program in partnership with Jenny's Speech and Learning Clinic and plans to continue adding more virtual Stepping Stones Triple P parent training programs in the future.

Support for the programming is also provided by Maxine Mathews, an information and referral specialist who manages the Autism Society's Navigating Autism Program.

The program offers customized assistance including formulation of a plan after an autism diagnosis; therapy options and providers; legal considerations; adult resources; individualized education programs and more.

Mathews has personal experience in dealing with resources through her 15-year-old son, Torin, who is on the spectrum.

She understands the wide range of needs encountered by those on the spectrum and their families.

"Every child with autism is different. The resources

that meet my son's needs might not be the same for the next child. We need to hear all the voices of all of the children and their families and even adults who have autism. My goal is to respond to every person in the way that they need help," said Mathews, who is also managing the virtual resource fair.

Promoting awareness about this individually tailored approach and the multitude of education and advocacy services offered by the Autism Society remains a primary objective of the virtual event. Additionally, it serves to build camaraderie in the autism community.

"Lots of families feel isolated when they receive a diagnosis, and through the Virtual Walk and Interactive Resource Fair, they will see the autism community is accepting and large and loving," Mathews said. "It is something that connects them with others."

"What we are doing for autism is not just promoting awareness, but also acceptance."

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BEN'S BELLS

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

- **What:** Ben's Bells promotes kindness and community involvement. Each week a person who makes Tucson better is "belled."
- **Last week's recipient:** Rene Luera
- **Nominated by:** Bonnie Darby
- **Why:** For his service to a local neighborhood. Darby wrote that Luera is her Waste Management recycle truck driver. She wrote that she had just moved into the neighborhood and had an overwhelming number of empty boxes that she needed to get rid of. "I did not have a large vehicle to move the boxes to the recycle center so I began putting them into my recycling bin — as many as I could each week," Darby wrote. "One Thursday, I was putting my boxes out and Rene was driving by with his truck. I told him about my issue and he quickly offered to help me deposit the other boxes into his truck so I could



BONNIE DERBY

Bellee Rene Luera, a Waste Management recycle truck driver, was nominated for his service to a local neighborhood.

use my recycle bin for other items besides my million plus boxes. When he got out of the truck to help me, he had a water bottle in his hand that another neighborhood customer had just given him for being so helpful. So I know he is making an impact on everyone he serves in my area. He tackles his job with great energy, always with a

smile on his face and always with kindness," she wrote in her nomination letter. Darby said the whole neighborhood knows Luera as a hardworking, incredibly thoughtful person who shows pride in everything he does.

• **For more information:** Go to tucne.ws/bellee to submit a name. Go to bensbells.org or call 622-1379.

Avra Valley Fire District receives \$5,000 grant for new equipment

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The Avra Valley Fire District received a \$5,000 grant from the Bayer Fund, which will be used to purchase new wildland fire protective gear and equipment.

The equipment will greatly aid the district's firefighters, who handle many calls in rural areas on the northwest side and also respond to wildland fires in the Western United States, said Chief Ray Klein.

The new clothing and equipment are part of the National Fire Protection Association's safety standards and will help the Avra Valley Fire District maintain the organization's standards.

The fire district was es-



BAYER FUND / AVRA VALLEY FIRE

The Bayer Fund donated \$5,000 to the Avra Valley Fire District.

established in 1977 and its four stations provide fire coverage to a 260-square-mile radius for fire protection and a 325-square-mile radius for ambulance

coverage in Pima and Pinal counties.

The district handles about 2,200 emergency calls each year.

In 2019, the Bayer Fund awarded more than \$14 million to more than 3,200 charitable and nonprofit organizations to help address needs in food and nutrition, STEM education and community development.

Over the last five years, nonprofits across the United States have received \$79 million from the fund.

The Bayer Fund is the nonprofit philanthropic arm of Bayer, the international life sciences company. Bayer operates a research greenhouse on the northwest side.