

Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 30! When my parents were fighting for Jessie, battling the Philadelphia School District, searching for answers, trying everything - people would ask my mom if she was going to write a book. She always answered "only if it has a happy ending..." Maybe it's because of that, maybe it's simply because I feel that everyone could benefit from knowing Jessie, knowing more about autism - but my secret (okay - not-so-secret) dream is to write that book. It might not have the happy ending that my mom was dreaming of, praying for all those years ago - but what we have certainly learned is that life doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful, and dreams don't have to come true the way we thought they did to be happy. Thank you so so so much to everyone who has read our posts this month. Thank you for getting to know the most incredible person I know. Thank you for every like, reaction, comment and question. Most of all, thanks for looking into our lives for the past month. This sweet girl with the giant smile in this picture has grown into a strong, silly, sometimes lonely, sometimes frustrated, awe-inspiring woman. With autism, it can become easy to see problems, unanswered questions, legalities, aggression, fear, finances... It is so important to remember most of all - this is someone's baby girl, their sister, their aunt... Never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved. I'm my parents' daughter, so I'm not running out of photos or things to say any time soon... But until next year - happy April! Love Erica & Jessie.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 29! Food is a big part of Jessie's life. It's one of the things she truly enjoys! She loves chicken fingers, french fries, popcorn, ice cream, pretzels, coffee, soda, cheetos, pizza... She's not quite as keen on vegetables - and don't ever try to trick her into eating a carrot... Because of Jessie's love of food, diet can be a struggle. She's tried different diets without wheat, gluten, dairy... None were incredibly life changing for her. Keeping Jessie's weight in check is still a struggle for my parents and they continue to work on keeping her exercise regular, and her diet in check. In fact about a year ago, they were buying and prepping her food in order for her to have the diet they wanted - even though her food is provided for her at the group home she lives in. Jessie's quality of life in all areas is so important and issues like this are reminders of the ways my family continues to advocate and champion for Jessie.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 28! I had watched an awesome video by a remarkable guy named Christopher Ulmer where he discussed how to form relationships with people who are different than you. He stated that the misconception is that you each go halfway to meet in the middle, but with someone who is different - they might not be starting in the same place as you and you have to go 100% - instead of just 50% to meet them. It's a beautiful thought and is certainly the truth for Jessie. Being friends with and loving Jessie is a 100% kind of love. It's not always rewarding in the way we think of our relationships. Many times we look at our relationships as successful when we are getting something out of them. We tend to ask "is this balanced? Am I giving as much as I'm getting? Does this friendship feel one sided?" With Jessie in a lot of ways, it isn't balanced, you aren't getting as much as you're giving and it is incredibly one sided. Your late night conversations aren't going to leave you with words of wisdom, you aren't going to receive a big bear hug that warms your heart leaving you feeling safe and comforted. You ARE going to leave your time with Jessie with a stronger appreciation of what matters. You will walk away seeing the good and beauty in simple things. You will appreciate seeing a person beyond the surface and get a better understanding of how people see you and what you wish they would see, and by understanding that - work towards making those qualities stronger, better and at the forefront of who you are. You will gain perspective. You will appreciate the moments of eye contact and physical contact more, never taking those little things for granted. You will cherish things like hearing the words "I love you" or "momma" in ways others don't, because you understand that those words aren't a given and that not everyone gets to hear them - they are the most beautiful and precious words. So yes, you'll go 100% in your relationship with Jessie, but it only means you end up with something far greater



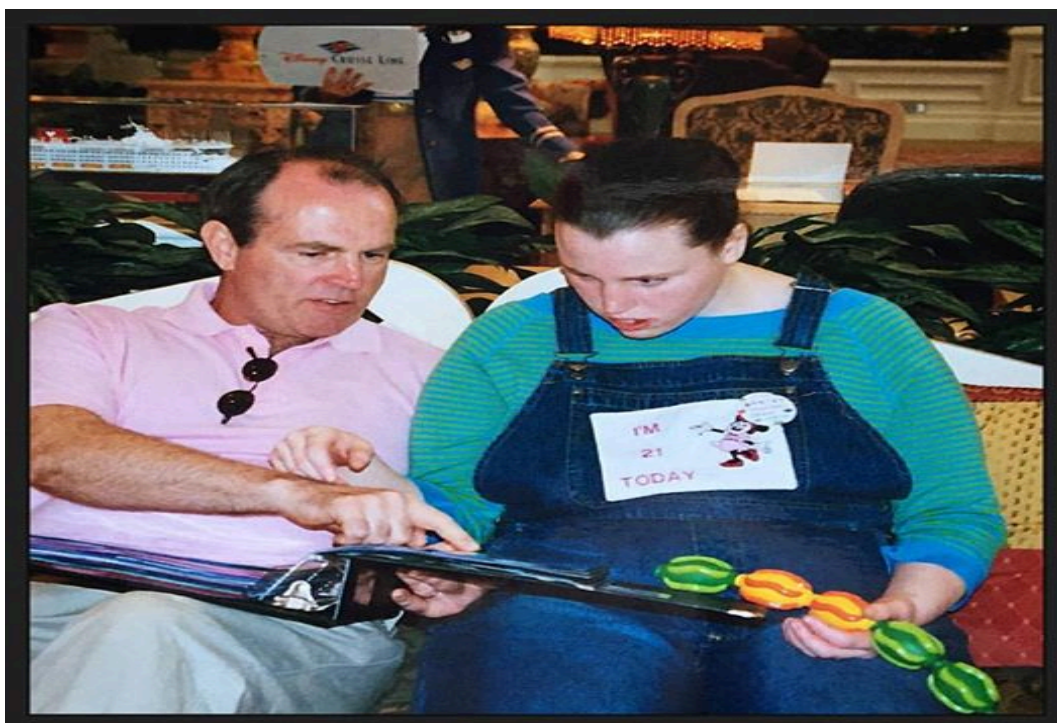
Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 27! Here is toddler Jessie - probably somewhere around the time that my parents noticed things were different. Because Jessie and I are very close in age, they had a pretty recent comparison of when milestones seemed delayed or even just different. My mom was also keeping records of those milestones and took note when the babbling Jessie had been doing stopped. Because autism wasn't very common at the time, and because of things like Jessie's connection to us or going up and down a set of stairs different ways, it took a while for her to receive an official diagnosis of autism. But I always admire my parents for searching for answers - especially since even then we weren't far from the "refrigerator mother" theory. Did you know that there was a time when people thought autism was a result of "refrigerator mothers" - meaning that mothers were so cold and unfeeling to their children they caused them to become autistic? While my mother alone could discredit this theory, I am always struck by how heartbreaking this could have been to anyone searching for answers



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 26! This is another picture from Jessie's 21st birthday in Disney, but what I wanted to share was not the sweet sign for her overalls that Aunt @cvendetta made for her, or the precious moment between father and daughter that was captured - what I wanted to share was the toy Jessie is holding onto in the picture. These pop-beads remain one of Jessie's favorite toys. She enjoys putting them together and pulling them apart, but mostly enjoys using them for self-stimming. Stimming or self-stimulation is common in people with autism and is the repetition of physical movement, sound or moving objects (like shaking these pop beads). Jessie's self-stims include some rocking, some hand flapping, and can sometimes include self-injurious behaviors like head-banging. She can self-stim if she's feeling anxious, excited or impatient. I have a very clear memory of being in a WENDY'S when I was young, sitting with Jessie and waiting for my mom or dad to come back with our food and Jessie was stimming- when a group of teenagers began imitating her and making noises like her... I'm not sure they were prepared for the lesson (lecture) on Jessie's autism and stimming they got from little 8 year old Erica, but it's one of my first real memories of being an advocate for my sister



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month -

day 25! It has been enlightening, challenging and inspiring growing up with Jessie - but it's also been silly and fun. I can remember when I was young, sitting with Jessie, and in hushed tones saying to her "come on... I know you can talk - I promise, I won't tell anyone." Part of that was hope, but much of that was feeling so close to Jess, feeling such a strong connection, sensing in some moments that she really was just about to open her mouth and tell me all the things she's been thinking for years... I was convinced in some moments she was fooling the world - because there were times when I would look at her and see so much - so much wisdom, truth and insight... But she just looked back at me, each time (and I'm sure in her head thought "this crazy fool" and I hope that was followed by "thanks for not giving up



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 24! Autism is a big part of our lives. In a lot of ways it does define it, but it doesn't lessen it. Jessie isn't just autism - she is much more. She loves chocolate ice cream (as is so beautifully captured in this photo), she enjoys swimming, she rides horses, loves watching movies (and frequently watches multiple movies on multiple devices... at the same time...) - specifically she loves Kidsongs and Disney movies, enjoys animals, loves chicken fingers and french fries (in fact, the other night, she managed to steal some of Stella's chicken when they were having dinner together). She does NOT like having a stray hair stuck to her, babies crying, waiting, having her nails clipped... Like anyone else, there are things about her that make perfect sense and things that only make sense to her. But this look, in this picture... Makes total sense!



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 23! When my parents received Jessie's diagnosis, they felt alone. They felt confused and unsure of where to turn. We lived in Philadelphia at the time, but it was actually an organization in NJ that was a lifeline for them. @autismnewjersey (at the time COSAC) gave them answers, advice and a listening ear. The superior service in NJ is why we moved from Philadelphia - so in some ways my year as Miss NJ is thanks to them! Tonight, though I was unable to join them, Moorestown High School hosted the 4th "A Cappella for Autism" an event to sponsor Autism New Jersey. I was so excited to help the lovely Mads with some staging for their numbers. I'm so happy to see them sharing their talents to help make a difference! There is so much to be done for autism - searching for the cause, for the cure... But in the meantime, there are families who are struggling to make it through the month, week, day. There are still families who feel like my parents did many years ago. The support, community and education that Autism NJ provides (in addition to some awesome attention to siblings - thanks ELS1!) is one of the reasons I was so proud and honored to spend so much of my Miss NJ year working with them! And why I'm so grateful to MHS Interact for choosing such a fantastic organization to benefit! (Thanks to Greg & Stella for capturing a moment from their performance!!!)



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 22! It's opening night for MAN OF LAMANCHA! Here's a photo of Jessie - show ready for Halloween. There have been a few very memorable moments where you can tell Jessie feels beautiful. It's so precious. I remember we had other costume plans (ones that I had decided, starring me... phew, talk about a handful), but Jessie wanted to wear this, and I remember how proud she was, how sweet she looked, how taken with herself she was. Hands down the hardest thing for me to deal with is the guilt in the unfairness of how things seem. I wonder, still, to this day, why it couldn't have been a bit more balanced. The awesome gifts, wonderful experiences, unforgettable moments that I have had - couldn't we split those up, divide the joy? There is and will never be a rehearsal, opening night or closing performance where I don't take a moment to thank Jessie for her inspiration, embrace the opportunity and pray that in some way, she feels the excitement, shares the joy and knows that she is bowing with me.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 21! Today I got this bracelet in the mail - it was a gift from my precious Miss America sister, @mariasmith2 . There are some people who enter into your life for a very short while and make an impact greater than many you spend years and years with. She's amazing, the kind of mother, wife, person I aspire to be. And it's because of the Miss America Organization that we hold these special places in each other's lives and because of #MAO that I had the chance to wear a crown for a year, using it as a microphone to bring awareness to autism and to my beautiful sister. This bracelet is part of #stellaanddot 's autism awareness campaign, and Maria so graciously sent it to Jersey from Kentucky! I will forever credit my sister Jessie with the amazing opportunity to compete at Miss America - for without her, I wouldn't have had anything worth saying.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 20! We've always been a "dog family". And part of the reason for that is the remarkable relationships that Jessie has had with each of our dogs. There is something - is it scientific, is it a shared silent communication, or common interests (food, play, love... simple things), or is it their ability to read and know people in a way that most of us don't?



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 19! This is an old photo... Sweet toddler Jessie rocking on a precious horse built by my Pop Pop that had held my mom, my uncle and me too! When this photo was taken, days like today never entered anyone's mind. Today - as a result of some unfortunate timing and car problems mixed with tech week, my dad was driving me down to Pitman, but on the way we were stopping to meet Jessie for a doctor's appointment. It was a meeting with a GYN. This may not be the most glamorous post, and I'll admit that it's one of the more embarrassing - but as my parents were in the waiting room while Jessie started to melt down (since waiting a half hour for a scheduled appointment is beyond frustrating for all of us - add severe autism to the equation!), I thought "here's another example of something we just don't think about. Who is really thinking about these kind of appointments for people with autism?" The challenge of finding a doctor - one you trust, one who will care for a patient who can't communicate, who has the safety and well-being of your daughter as a priority. As I watched my parents counting with Jessie in the waiting room, I was once again humbled by the very clear and almost tangible presence of love and protection they have for her.



Erica Harr with Greg Harr.

Autism Awareness Month - day 18! I am so thankful to share this picture. Yesterday my dad, Jessie, Greg and Stella went to [#huddleupforautism](#) at the Linc! It's remarkable that there are so many events designated for families with autism - it's a wonderful way to feel connected and to experience a very special kind of community. But what makes sharing this picture special to me is that even though I was at rehearsal, Greg wanted to share time with his sister. When most people are dating or deciding to get married, there are many things they are thinking about. But an added thought to most of my relationships - friends included - was how they related to and loved not just me, but my sister. Greg's love and admiration for Jessie has been clear from the start. Jessie is lucky to have him as a brother, and though she may not show it in "typical" ways, she loves him so very much.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 17! Was very humbled, excited and thankful for this lovely article in today's Courier Post! We are heading into tech week for MAN OF LAMANCHA and I was so honored that Tammy Paolino helped me in my quest to bring awareness to autism, my sister and all people who are so special and dear to my heart through this feature on our upcoming show! During our sitzprobe today as we were listening to "Impossible Dream," I looked over at my castmate, Krystina, and said "this is my favorite line in the song" as John began to sing "and the world will be better for this, that one man scorned and covered with scars." It's so beautiful and so true. Daily Jessie reminds me that one person can make a difference. I truly believe the world is better because of Jessie. She has inspired and taught and opened the eyes of remarkable people who have gone on to inspire and teach and open the eyes of countless others. Thanks @courierpost for the chance to make Jessie's voice a little louder.

This is her quest ... Former Miss New Jersey's latest role parallels her autism advocacy

BY PAOLINO

is a line in the middle of the musical "Man of La Mancha" actress Erica Scanlon Harr in

Laurel actress, who was Miss New Jersey in 2004, has a profound autistic sister, Jessie, is her main inspiration. Harr is Jessie's No. 1 champion.

a classic novel, "Man of La Mancha" is a play-within-a-play that tells Don Quixote, the "mad" knight after windmills he mistakes giants, risking all for chivalry love. It is acted out by novelist Miguel de Cervantes as prisoners, a diversion in a Spanish Inquisition for fore-

monastery in the script that gives Harr, recently starring in the show at Broadway Theatre in Pitman near home, is spoken by the is in on a family plot to force his illusions. "There is no madman or the maddest of the world," the Padre says, the line - set in what she of the best musicals ever once romantic and dark, relevant, funny yet deeply

"La Mancha" is one of my fa- she says. "It's a beautiful ter. It's one of the most arduous concepts that exists. The play concept - it's based on a little piece of literature, madman or the maddest love that line so much. That of the people that have a in my heart. I have a real (people with) special

was competing first for the Jersey, and later, the Miss Harr's platform was au- and awareness.

truth in that statement, the 'craziest' people are, and I identified very that. My sister is non-ver- very aggressive. People her as 'less than,' when I had more influence and than any teacher I've

the musical's main

chaste maiden. He insists on calling her Dulcinea, and his passionate delusions eventually convince her to adopt his view of herself and rise above her past.

It is an acting challenge, and the iconic score does nothing to make it easier. "It's just so funny and complex and the time signatures, and I'm not sure I have ever seen that in a musical

the actress stud-

If you go

"Man of La Mancha" opens Friday, April 22 at 8 p.m. The show runs weekends through May 15 at the Broadway Theatre in Pitman. Tickets are \$28. Visit glennbroadwaytheatre.com or call (856) 384-8381.

and "The Sound of Music."

She is the mom Stella Jean, age 17 months, and lives with her husband, Michael Laurel. Greg Harr is a library and sociology teacher at Moorestown High School, and together, they run

Harr is sharing the stage in "La Mancha" with John D. Smitherman, producing artistic director of the Broadway Theatre Southern NJ, and is also the producer of the show, and also the producer of the show.

PHOTO PROVIDED

Erica Scanlon Harr and John D. Smitherman star as Aldonza and Don Quixote in "Man of La Mancha." The show runs through May 15 at the Broadway Theatre in Pitman.

Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 16! A follow up to yesterday's birthday post. There have been some truly wonderful birthdays. Without a doubt the most wonderful and magical birthday was when we took Jessie to Disney World for her 21st birthday. It was the most special and magical Disney experience I've ever had. Part of it was because Jessie knew that the trip was all about her - and she loved that! She got to ride rides, see characters from movies she loves and eat awesome delicious Disney food - which is one of the things Jessie truly enjoys most - food! But what made it special, what made it unforgettable was the cast members. From the moment we checked into our resort, to every single meal we ate, each ride we went on, each character we met... There were kind people going out of their way to make it special. I can remember each detail of that trip - the sweet cast members on The Great Movie Ride who gave her a birthday card, beautiful picture frames and balloons and cards from Mickey and Minnie that were waiting in our hotel room for us one night, the gracious cast members who let Jessie ride twice in a row on rides, the special attention characters gave to Jessie when they met her - making such a fuss when they would read her button or her birthday sign, and especially a moment where we were watching a parade and Jessie started to get upset because they had closed the ice cream cart for the parade but she wanted a Mickey bar so badly - and this gracious, kind and compassionate cast member opened up the cart and gifted Jessie a Mickey bar - or this photo - when the beautiful cast member who saw Jessie's sign and took a moment to make sure Mickey told Jessie "Happy Birthday!" on the phone. The trip had hair pulling, it had self-stimming, it had some screaming - but it had so many more moments that were beautiful, happy and special. The number of times people stared was far outnumbered by the number of times Jessie was treated like a princess. These memories are so precious - the gift these cast members gave my whole family is priceless. Little moments like these are moments that we hold on to and cherish



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 15! This has been a week of birthdays - my momma, father-in-law, 2 best friends, Greg's Nana... So it seemed appropriate for a birthday themed post. This is a picture of one of Jessie's younger birthdays. My mom is beside her (oh, yes... Dressed as a clown). My mom worked so hard on those younger parties: decorations, cake, puppet shows, favors. She realized soon that everyone was having a great time except for the birthday girl. Jessie's birthdays are complex days. For my parents they are somewhat bittersweet. So sweet because it's a celebration of the remarkable woman she is. We celebrate the beautiful years Jessie has taught us, loved us and been loved by us. But there remains a sadness. Some of that is, being very candid, a sadness for the dreams that never were. Dreams my parents had, when they first held Jessie in their arms, of watching her walk across a stage to receive a diploma, walking her down the aisle to marry her love and start a family of her own. It doesn't mean they are disappointed, or that they don't feel she's achieved amazing and awesome things - it's just that on birthdays, when we so frequently look back at our years and celebrate new milestones, I know my parents also in a small way, are reminded of those forgotten dreams. But I think the sadness on birthdays is not as much about what Jessie has or has not done, but rather a question for themselves. Each year a birthday brings up the question of "did we do enough?" "Did I push enough?" "Did we fight hard enough?" "Did we exhaust every possible contact and connection?" I know the love and responsibility they have - that we have - to Jessie has never and will never stop. We will continue to ask "what can we do? How can she grow? What can we all learn?" When we speak at places, many times my dad will say that his greatest hope now is that Jessie is happy - and really isn't that what all parents truly hope for?



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 14! It's amazing how much technology has changed the lives of people living with autism. This is a picture from when we were traveling to Disney to celebrate Jessie's 21st birthday. We are waiting in the airport and we took a picture of me holding up this portable DVD player (at the time this was amazing... We are pre iPads and video iPods...) to note how this little device was making this a much more pleasant trip than we could have had 5 years earlier. Jessie has such a hard time waiting. Even waiting through a traffic light requires counting and encouragement. So the idea of sitting through a long trip or being on a plane for any amount of time made traveling more challenging than it was worth. When we took this trip 11 years ago, this DVD player meant that those hours waiting in the airport, or sitting on the plane were entertaining, pleasant and familiar for her. Beyond that, technology has opened up doors for communication that never existed for Jessie as a child. The world of "speakers" is so much friendlier and far more convenient to people with autism and their families. The accessibility of these devices means the possibility for so many more voices to be heard.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 13! Yesterday I got to focus on my amazing momma, so I thought I could shout it out to my dad today. He's incredible. This picture is so sweet and what makes it sweeter is that their relationship hasn't changed. My dad takes Jessie swimming, they go for walks with Teddy, go out for meals together, enter open water swims together. My dad pushes her, pushes her to be the best version of herself. He has never given up. He takes Jessie on "college tours" to speak to and meet his students and students at UDel and he still gets choked up when he talks about her to the classes. He has an amazing ability to see the humor in a situation as it's happening (it sometimes takes a bit of time and distance for me to find a moment funny... Not him, he appreciates the humor in [#lifewithautism](#) right away). But most remarkable is his ability to see people. Really see them - never seeing a diagnosis or a label, he always sees a person - their personality, their abilities, their potential, their hearts. When I was growing up any time I used the phrase "I can't do that" my dad would respond "you can't do that YET". He still believes that for both of his daughters... And his granddaughter too... How lucky are we?



Erica Harr with Marilyn W. Scanlon.

Autism Awareness Month - day 12! Today is my Momma's birthday! She is a truly remarkable woman. She has raised two daughters (not an easy task in itself) both with their own challenges. I love this picture of my mom holding Jessie. It's from that first year, when life was "simple". That's one of the things that makes autism so fascinating/heartbreaking/challenging. There is this little window with autism where you don't know it's a part of your life. In this sweet moment captured all those years ago, I glimpse into that window - I see so much of myself holding sweet Stella, each squeeze of that precious baby girl holding its own dream, it's own hope, it's own whisper of what tomorrow, next year, 10 years from now will look like. In some ways, my heart tears open for the woman in this picture, wanting to hug her - knowing the many fights ahead, the tears that will be shed. But in many more ways i simply look at this woman with awe. She is a stronger woman, a more compassionate woman, a fiercer woman because life didn't go the way she thought it would when this moment was captured. I look at this woman - the woman who fought and cried and still believes and I want to be like her. I am so honored to be her daughter and am thankful for the way she has loved, fought for and dreamed for both of her girls. Happy birthday, momma!!!



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 11! This is Jessie being super cute in her skating outfit. She took both roller and ice skating lessons and was really quite good at both. On her side is her ferocious fearlessness. It's one of the ways we really differed as children - I was scared of most everything - trying new things, getting hurt, riding rollercoasters, scary movies - but Jessie would try just about anything. I admire that so much about her. She's never cared much about other people's opinions, never let fear limit her. As she's grown older a bit of the daredevil has been lost, but she still cares little for what other people think. Another brilliant and constant reminder for me - and I'm so thankful that when I fall short of that, I have such a strong example to point to for Stella. We could all stand to be a bit more like Jessie in that respect. (Also, mad props to my parents for seeing the value in taking Jessie to roller skating and ice skating lessons... When a lot of people thought "what's the point" they appreciated the value in letting Jessie succeed in something she enjoyed.)



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 10! And it's [#siblingday](#) !!! I am so proud to be Jessie's sibling. It defines who I am as much as being a momma, a wife, an actress, a director. Maybe more. It is without a doubt the reason I am who I am. She has taught me more than any teacher, given me more reason to strive to be a compassionate and kind person, she inspires me every day. I am a better person because of her.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 9! Jessie is so funny! She has a really funny off-beat sense of humor. I can remember when we were younger, Jessie getting the giggles, uncontrollable, unexplainable giggles... It was contagious and would force me into matching laughter. The thought of it still brings a smile. Jessie is ticklish, and in funny places - like her knee-pit. Sometimes, because the giggles and the laughs are less frequent it becomes more precious, more appreciated, more beautiful. I'm thankful to have a sister who makes me laugh, and think she's still making this face at her crazy big sister.



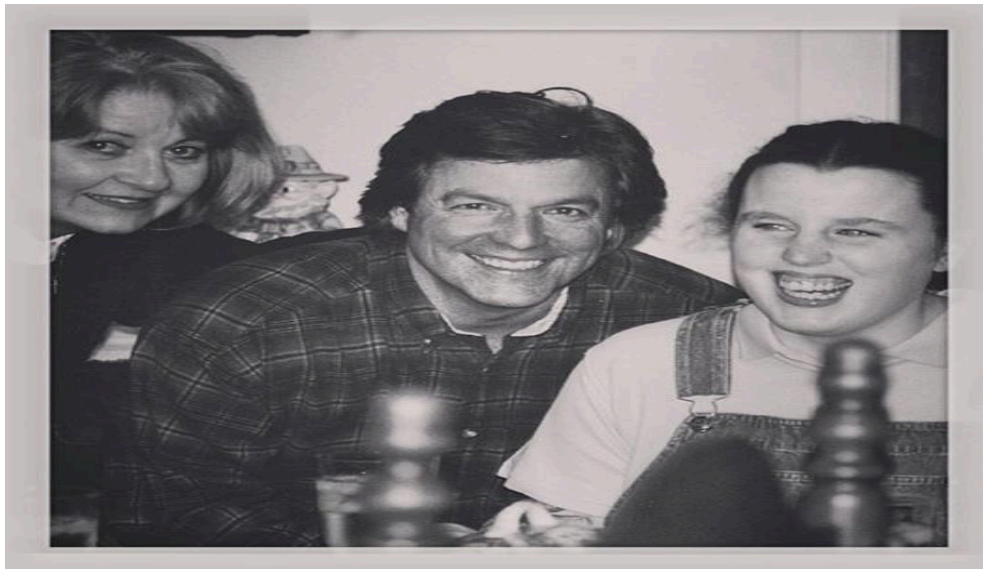
Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 8! This is a picture of Bournelyf Special Camp. It's remarkable - my dad had this dream. A dream of a summer camp where people with special needs could do awesome things like canoeing down the Brandywine, horseback riding, pitching tents and singing around a campfire. And he did it - he made that dream a reality, and a reality that still exists today. I could write an entire month of posts dedicated to [#bournelyf](#) and how amazing it is, but since I'm focusing on [#autism](#), if you see me in the picture (sporting the insanely oversized red tshirt and rocking baseball cap) I'm holding down Jessie's hands as the picture is being taken. This is one of many photos with this arrangement. Jessie's aggression is real and has been for quite some time. She can become frustrated at her inability to explain what she's thinking or feeling, or over stimulated, or sometimes just out of control. And she's strong. Like really strong. And smart - Jessie figured out a long time ago where the "best" places to pinch are, where they could do the most damage. I can remember before prom in high school, when Jessie was pinching me, thinking "oh please not under the arm... That will totally show in my dress..." It's a really scary thing to have your sister looking at you, pulling your hair so hard you're certain you won't have any left when she's finished, pinching you until it bleeds, or clamping down her bite so hard... In those moments when I would look at my sweet sister, Jessie had somehow disappeared... And yet behind her frantic, almost crazed eyes - there was a sad and scared and frustrated girl. It's these heartbreaking moments where my sister's strength is so limitless, so unreal. It's the saddest and bravest thing I've ever witnessed.



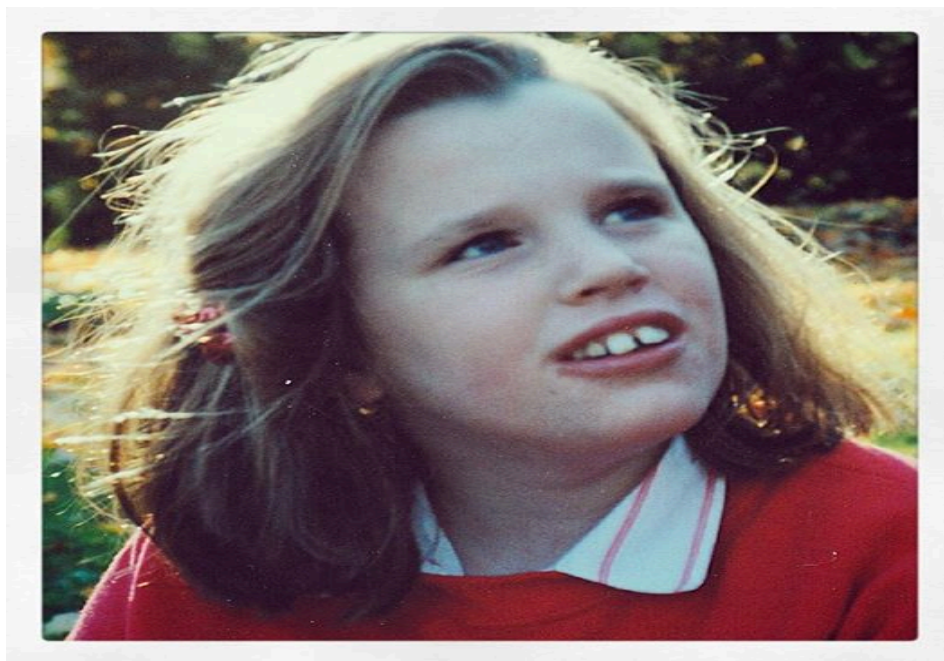
Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 7! We are really lucky. My parents' home has the BEST neighbors. Like literally the most amazing people - the kind of neighbors where you take out part of the fence that goes between your houses and put in an arch with a gate so you can come and go as easily as possible between the two. They have heard it all - from me singing at the top of my lungs to Jessie screaming through the night, a lot of laughter and a LOT of tears. A diagnosis of autism can feel like the loneliest thing in the world. You feel like you're entering a new, unfamiliar world (you are). There isn't time for friends, sometimes friends don't know what to say or how to help. My parents have been so fortunate to have angels along the way: a college friend who randomly sent \$100 once (enough to pay for a week of Jessie's therapy at the time), a sister who kept an eye on me when Jessie needed something (despite the fact that she had 5 kids herself and had just undergone serious dental work), and neighbors like the Cummings who have always seen Jessie as a truly remarkable and valuable young woman. They have celebrated birthdays, come over on holidays when we otherwise wouldn't have seen anyone else, came over when pets died, cried with and prayed for us when times were toughest. They are such a gift. One thing I try to say often is that being there, saying something (even if it might be the wrong thing), celebrating and crying with... that is so important.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 6! Between friends, colleagues and in pageant interviews I can't count how many times I've been asked the question "what is autism?" Sometimes answering with what autism ISN'T is just as important. Autism isn't fatal and it isn't a death sentence. Jessie's life is full and beautiful and she has made such a difference in her 32 years. A much greater difference and impact than most people make in their lifetime. When Jessie was diagnosed, there were people who told my parents to institutionalize her... That she would never accomplish anything... That she wouldn't be able to be potty trained. In response, my mother locked herself and Jessie in the bathroom for a weekend - resulting in a fully potty trained toddler. Even back then, even at a time with so few answers, so few resources, so little in terms of support - even then my parents refused to see autism as tragic. There were lots of tears, yes - but that fierce love and refusal to let someone else tell them what their child would or would not be able to achieve... It's one of the greatest lessons in parenthood I have ever and could ever witness.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 5!!! When Jessie was diagnosed, the resources, education and information that are around today were non-existent. There was no such thing as "early intervention", there were no programs with focus in autism, in fact - just finding another family who had a child with autism seemed like a miracle - because at the time my parents felt like they were facing this alone... Because in so many ways they were! When Jessie was diagnosed the technology that is helping so many people with autism break through their communication barriers didn't exist. My parents have tried every means of communication with Jess - PECS, iPad, even a good old fashioned Connect 4 board with letters so she could "type" out words with hand over hand assistance. But what still remains Jessie's best way to communicate are the dozen or so signs that she learned with discreet trial teaching in the foyer of our Fox Chase home... We've been teaching Stella sign language. She has about 15 signs that she can use to let us know what she wants or needs. A student asked me the other week when we were speaking at UDel if we were teaching Stella to sign because of Jessie. I told her that I've always been so aware of how frustrating it is for Jessie to not be able to communicate - and if we could eliminate that frustration for Stella early on - earlier than she'd be able to speak these words, maybe it would be helpful for her! (Plus, we love that Stella and Jessie can share some of their thoughts!!!) Here are a few of Jessie & Stella's favorite words!



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness - day 4! A lot of my posts are about how inspiring and incredible my sister is, but I want to make sure there are some practical posts too. Dental care is something that we don't necessarily think about in connection to autism awareness, but dental care has been a struggle for Jessie! I had the real honor of speaking to some dental residents last year (shout out [Colleen Montgomery!!!](#)). For Jessie it's a combination of a pretty severe overbite, making it challenging and uncomfortable to simply close her mouth, along with needing constant prompting and some hand over hand help to get a decent daily tooth brushing. In fact, for her regular checkups, Jessie has been sedated in order to get a good cleaning. So many simple things become great challenges when autism enters the picture, but the advances we are making in so many fields and areas to make these a little less stressful can make such a difference! And who wouldn't want to see more of Jessie's beautiful smile!?!



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 3! This photo is inspired by today's chilly April weather. (I believe we are Christmas Tree hunting in this one). Fun fact about Jessie: the cold doesn't seem to bother her too much. She'll go on walks with dad no matter the weather and I have very distinct memories of some sweaty palms when mine would be freezing... She's quite a trooper, and not much really bothers her. Her pain tolerance is crazy high. When she was a toddler, my mom noticed she had a little limp - turns out she had a straight pin stuck in her knee (so far in you couldn't see it) but she was just pushing through it... She's still that way (though if she has a stray hair on her, she will lose her mind... Haha) so strong, so impressive.



Erica Harr

Autism Awareness Month - day 2! This picture is awesome for so many reasons - and especially appropriate for [#worldautismawarenessday](#) !!! This photo is special because 1) Jessie looks adorable 2) this was from when Jessie was on a "buddy softball team" where each player had a buddy that would assist them as they were batting, running or in the field - one day my parents wanted to find out where this "Dippy's" was - since they were so awesome to sponsor such a special league. Once we discovered the awesomeness that is Dippy's we never looked back 3) yesterday Dippy's had their free cone day and Stella got to experience her first ice cream cone and her first Dippy's 4) It's world autism awareness day - when this picture was taken (20 some years ago, yikes!) the journey to autism awareness was a much tougher and longer one. The strides that have been made to raise awareness, acceptance and COMPASSION for people with autism and their families - they fill my heart with such joy. When this picture was taken, whenever I told someone my sister was autistic, I was met with blank stares or asked if I meant she liked to paint. Now there is a much greater understanding and I'm so thankful for the opportunity to continue sharing and loving! And 5) the most awesome thing about this picture is that I snapped a photo of this photo because my dad has carried it in his wallet every day since it was taken! That's a pretty amazing dad...



Erica Harr

Happy April 1st! Autism Awareness month... Day 1! This is the most recent picture of me & Jessie (& Stella too!) taken just a week ago on Easter Sunday! We were able to celebrate with Jessie (though any kind of celebration is a bit hurried, simple and food centered) which is such a gift. I'm always aware of the efforts my parents have gone to, from our childhood to now, to make any holiday feel special. In addition to the "normal" preparation, so much extra time and effort went into planning a day that Jessie would be comfortable with, that she could actually enjoy, but would also seem special and memorable for me. Happy Autism Awareness Month!!!

