



## ENDORSEMENTS

“An inspiring testimony to the miraculous power of maternal love.”

~**Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.**, Human Rights Attorney and New York Times Bestselling Author

“If you are holding this book in your hand, something made you pick it up. Whether you call it intuition, divine guidance, or sheer luck, the hundreds of families I have interviewed that have successfully recovered their children from autism all describe a moment just like Tracy’s as *the first day of the rest of their lives*. I have also interviewed many parents who express perpetual guilt for not acting upon their instincts in moments like this because their pediatrician, family member, or a visit to the CDC’s website talked them out of it. Now they angst over the critical time that was lost in the journey to their child’s recovery. Put your fear aside, forget what you have heard from the news, and relieve yourself of your allegiance to medical authority. What your gut is telling you right now is that there is hope, and you will understand why by the time you finish reading this extraordinary book.”

~**Del Bigtree**, Executive Producer of Vaxxed: From Cover-Up To Catastrophe, Host of TheHighWire.com, and CEO of Informed Consent Action Network (ICAN)

“A perfect read for not only the parent of a newly diagnosed child with autism but also for parents who desire to know more about additional *outside-the-box* medical treatments. This is a book of strength and encouragement that demonstrates how tenacity and dedication can improve the quality of life of a child with autism by identifying and treating the underlying medical issues commonly associated with autism, in turn greatly enhancing the effectiveness of therapies – all thanks to the hard work of *Warrior Moms* like Tracy who never stop fighting for their children.”

~**Jerry Kartzinel, M.D.**, Pediatrician and New York Times Bestselling Co-Author of Healing and Preventing Autism

“Warrior Mom tells the tragic – and ultimately heroic – story of a mother’s experience of having her normal healthy baby boy develop autism from routine childhood vaccines. This story is all too common. But Tracy’s approach to her son’s condition is not common at all. Instead of accepting her son’s prognosis, she got busy finding answers and putting them into practice – with remarkable results. The book you hold in your hands is a personal story of a mother’s journey through her child’s autism diagnosis and care. It is also a handbook for what to do if you or a loved one are faced with the same situation.”

~**Christiane Northrup, M.D.**, New York Times bestselling author of Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom, The Wisdom of Menopause, and Goddesses Never Age

“Tracy Slepcevic is an incredible writer and mother who brings to life a personal story of her journey in healing her child. Her clear and sincere approach to tackling her son’s very intimate health challenges shines a light on many health issues that are directly affecting the wellness of our children. Most Americans, especially young parents and childbearing women, have no idea these underlying conditions even exist. As an Air Force Veteran who worked in the field of Bioenvironmental Engineering, Tracy has focused on the affects that environmental toxins have on our children. Her fight to heal her son has inspired thousands of parents encouraging them to seek alternative methods of treatment. In this book, she breaks down the barriers parents typically face when their loved ones are diagnosed with a condition the medical community has

deemed incurable. Through her strong faith, fierce courage, and intellect, she opens to the reader a world that can positively change their lives. This is a must-read for any parent.”

~**Lt. General Michael Flynn**, U.S. Army (Retired)

“Autism is a treatable condition, and recovery is possible. This shouldn’t be a controversial statement and reading Tracy Slepcevic’s excellent account of her journey with her son Noah will resonate with parents the world over wrestling with an autism diagnosis. Like Tracy, you too can treat your child’s autism.”

~**J.B. Handley**, Co-Founder, Generation Rescue. Author of *How to End the Autism Epidemic and Underestimated: An Autism Miracle*

“God’s spirit is inviting us at this moment in time to consider what the voice of God’s people will be. Tracy’s powerful story of her journey with her son Noah is a testament to a mother’s faith when faced with adversity. *Warrior Mom* is a sobering look at the challenges parents face today. Its broad and deep range of perspectives will assist many parents in their search for answers and a clear picture of what life looks like when you put your faith and trust in the hands of God.”

~**Nick Vujicic**, Evangelist & Global New York Times Bestselling Author

“Autism Spectrum Disorder has skyrocketed over the past two decades. What used to be a very rare disorder is now projected to be one in every two children by 2032. Tracy Slepcevic (aka *Warrior Mom*) has written a story with compassion, faith, and unconditional love that is anchored in the most challenging journey a parent will ever know, providing insights into how to functionally support and emotionally embrace the child that is captured within.”

~**Judy Mikovits, Ph.D.**, Scientist, Researcher, and New York Times Bestselling Author

“Tracy chronicles her personal journey from hopes and dreams to devastating heartache to overcome. Through faith, hard work and tenacious research Tracy charts a path forward for families dealing with the devastating news that their most precious earthly treasure is faced with an autism diagnosis. This book is a how-to manual and autobiography. A must-read for every parent!!”

~**Richard Bartlett, M.D.**, Texas Health and Human Services Meritorious Service Award Recipient, and Texas Health Disparities Taskforce Advisor to Former Governor Rick Perry

“Tracy is undoubtedly the most thoughtful, knowledgeable, and loving warrior mom I know. Over the years, I have treated numerous children on the autism spectrum, and certain families stood out more than others. Tracy and Steve were so motivated and determined to get Noah well that they were constantly researching and asking me questions about treatment options for their son; they were willing to do anything to heal their child. They made many friends in the autism community and contributed more than they took. At one point, they established a non-profit organization to assist families with the costs of biomedical intervention, dedicating their time, money, and efforts to making this world a better place. This book will support new parents, give them knowledge, and highlight the difficulties faced by many families. Tracy and Steve are the most inspiring couple because they have maintained a positive attitude despite having to jump through so many loopholes and fight for what they know is best for their son. This book will inspire and educate many families looking for answers. These children are the canaries in the coal

mine, the veterans of the struggle against pharmaceutical, political, medical greed, and ignorance. Please take the time to read this book and educate yourself, and may GOD bring us all closer to his light.”

~**Rachel West, D.O.**, Integrative Family Medicine Physician

“A journey of struggle, discovery, and perseverance. Warrior Mom is a story that unfolds with a mother’s son unexpectedly diagnosed with autism after receiving a childhood scheduled vaccine. While reported and documented, vaccine injuries are rampant, but little is ever discussed about the devastating risks that are causally related to some recipients of vaccines. However, this book is not about a diagnosis or a spectrum of severity of autism. Rather, it is a well-documented guidebook that will help others on their journey in the support of their most precious investment; their own child. Tracy shares her heartaches and pains but finds refuge in the rewards and positive outcomes that her son had through integrative and holistic medical care. While many parents provide the best care and support they can for their children diagnosed on the autistic spectrum, Tracy takes that extra step to share the pearls of wisdom that she gathered through her own research and through seeking the care of medical professionals that treat the person and not the disease. It made all the difference for a young boy who is now a young man living a normal functioning life.”

~**Joshua Berka, NMD, L.Ac.**, Medical Director of Infinity Health Source and medical consultant for the Med-Tech industry

“Tracy’s story is one that everyone should read. She’s a blessing and she is changing hearts and minds everywhere, not only with her words but with her heart. This woman is on a mission to change humanity and her book is a representation of the “why” behind that mission. This is a must-read for you and everyone in your family.”

~**Cordie Williams, D.C.**, “Megaphone Marine” and founder of 1776 Forever Free and former U.S. Senate Candidate

“Warrior Mom tells the bold story of how a mother's love for her son (combined with an unrelenting pursuit of answers and dogged persistence) brought her son out from the darkness caused by pharmaceutical giants and their drug-pushing doctors – and helped her son Noah find his way through an autism diagnosis – with the assistance of functional medicine doctors who actually believe in their oath to “first, do no harm.” It is quite simply, a must-read for ALL parents – and ALL who would call themselves physicians.”

~**Leigh Dundas, Esq.**, Human Rights Attorney

“Warrior Mom is an inspiring book for all parents. Tracy’s experiences, extensive research, and resources provide parents with the most effective solutions to create the healthiest and most successful outcomes for their children and their family. This book will answer many questions and bring hope to those faced with an autism diagnosis, and it’s truly an honor to be a part of this journey.”

~**Dr. Sandra Rose Michael, DNM, Ph.D., DCSJ**, Inventor of the EESystem, Researcher, and Professor for Applied Integrative Biophysics

“Tracy will take you on an incredible must-read journey, beginning with her captivating story that will make you cry, cringe, and even laugh out loud! You will also cheer her on while you

understand firsthand her kindness, grief, and love for her son Noah. This truly is a gift of incredible resources for anyone on the same journey or just seeking understanding.”

~**Jill Bloom**, Group Publisher, EMP Media

# Warrior Mom

A Mother's Journey in Healing Her Son with Autism

## **MEDICAL DISCLAIMER**

This book's content is designed solely for educational purposes and should not be intended as medical instruction, nutrition counseling, diagnosis, prognosis, guidance, advice, or any other individualized healthcare treatment plan. Always inform your doctor of any health concerns, and consult with your physician or dietitian before making any dietary, supplemental, pharmaceutical, exercise, or lifestyle modifications.

Some of the views described in this book on the etiology of autism are controversial, and the medical perspectives outlining alternative treatment approaches, while increasingly utilized by clinicians, are not fully recognized by the medical community.

Most of the care mentioned is considered functional, complementary, alternative, or integrative medicine and may be the product of medical expertise and experience as opposed to controlled clinical research. Although these treatment methods are taught by healthcare professionals around the world whose purpose is the professional development of alternative treatments, they are not typically endorsed by the government or academic medical institutions.

Some of the supplements or treatments described in this book have not received approval by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or other regulatory agencies for the purposes for which they are suggested. Regarding the discussed subjects, readers are urged to consult with a physician, study further sources, and form their own opinions. The content in this book is based on personal experience and resources the author considers reputable and are current at the date of publishing.

## **DEDICATION**

For my son Noah Slepcevic,  
Who defied the odds to overcome an incurable disease and believed that I have always had his  
best interest at heart.

For Steve Slepcevic,  
An amazing father, husband, friend, and provider with love.

And

For all the amazing Functional Medicine Doctors, Attorneys, Advocates, Parents, and Researchers,  
who dedicate their lives to recovering children with autism and uncovering the truth behind  
the autism epidemic.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Foreword by Dr. Andrew Wakefield

Introduction

## PART 1 – MY JOURNEY WITH NOAH

Chapter 1 – A Labor of Love

Chapter 2 – Moving Backwards

Chapter 3 – Unknown Territory

Chapter 4 – Answered Prayers

Chapter 5 – Healing the Child Within

Chapter 6 – When It Rains It Pours

Chapter 7 – A Tale of New Schools

Chapter 8 – Letting Go and Letting God

## PART 2 – WHERE TO BEGIN IF YOU THINK YOUR CHILD HAS AUTISM

Chapter 9 – Signs & Symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Chapter 10 – Statistics & Obtaining a Diagnosis

Chapter 11 – Educational Plans, Schools, and Special Needs Advocates

Chapter 12 – Therapy Intervention

Chapter 13 – A Guide to Safety

Chapter 14 – Resources for Autism Parents

## PART 3 – HEALING AUTISM

Chapter 15 – Medical Conditions Associated with Autism

Chapter 16 – Biomedical Intervention

Chapter 17 – Advanced Treatments and Therapies

Chapter 18 – Diet & Food Allergies

Chapter 19 – Vaccines and Autism

Chapter 20 – Environmental Toxins & Avoiding Roadblocks

Afterword

About the Author

Research & Citations

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would be impossible to list all the names, but several people deserve my sincere thanks and gratitude. Walking this journey has been one of the hardest and most rewarding things I have ever done, but I did not do this alone.

First and foremost, I would like to thank God and His loving Angels, who have granted me countless blessings, knowledge, and guidance on this journey toward healing my son. There were many times when I felt hopeless and lost, but God gave me the strength and direction to overcome some of my most challenging moments and deepest fears. I never doubted His unconditional love and blessings along the way.

To my son, Noah Slepcevic, who has given me purpose in life and so many beautiful memories throughout the years. For all your courage, strength, and trust in me, knowing that I have always had your best interest at heart. You have brought out a side of me I never knew existed, and you have been my greatest teacher. There are no words to express my love for you and my appreciation for all you have endured. You are my inspiration for writing this book and the reason God put me on this earth. I love you son with all my heart.

More than anyone, I would like to thank my husband, Steve Slepcevic, for all his love and support throughout the years because none of this would have been possible without his hard work and sincere dedication to his family. He has stood beside me, encouraged me, and held me tight in those moments when I thought all hope was lost. We have always been on the same page and worked together as a team to make “recovery” possible for our son. I am truly blessed to have this amazing man for my husband, and I thank God for him every day.

To my mother, Mary Manners, who raised me to be strong and independent and gave me the courage to stand up for what I know is right. Although I may not have understood her plan for me then, she is truly the reason that I am the Warrior Mom I am today. And to my dad in heaven, Nicholas Manners, I will forever hold your memories in my heart.

A special thanks to Michael Dokas and Melanie Dokas for all your love and support throughout the years and for all the kindness and compassion you have shown towards Noah. We are blessed to have you both as a part of our family.

When Steve and I lost our business and I returned to work, one individual came into our lives who made a significant impact on Noah and dedicated a portion of his life to care for my son and love him like a little brother. We took him in and he became an essential part of our family. Matthew Vykydal, thank you for your love and support and for ensuring the safety and well-being of our child. We love you.

A special thanks to my amazing friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers who walked this journey with me and stood by me when times were hard. My list could go on, but I am particularly indebted to the following individuals: my nephews Brandon Manners, Adam Cummings, and Edward Barrett. My sisters Donna Cummings and Sherry Bradley. My beautiful nieces Vanasia and Jamaca Bradley. To my very close friends, Erika Brown, Katherine Pina, Ronnie Papler, Tammy Adams, Stephanie Smith, Jutem McCollum, Patrick Kral, Colleen Naus, Holly Morphey, Gabriella Pytlik, Eileen and Jeff Wheeler, Jackie Milot, Sara and Berner Calix, Olivia Chavez, Tammy Mendez, Nancy Monte-Frye, Kathy Daigle, Peter and Dawn Sliskovich, Patricia Morrone, Andreas Boettcher, and so many more. To the following families for your unwavering support: Mizzi family, Slepcevic family, Kimbel family, Gavrilovic family, Zarkovacki family, Vujicic family, Terzic family, Remnek family, Ward family, Dokas family,

Berger family and a special thanks to my SRP family to whom have always supported us through this journey.

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To the individuals and professionals who fight every day for the safety and wellbeing of our children, my deepest gratitude for all your hard work and dedication. I would like to especially thank Dr. Andrew Wakefield, Robert Kennedy Jr., Del Bigtree, Dr. Bernard Rimland, Dr. Rachel West, Dr. Joshua Berka, Dr. Jerry Kartzinel, Dr. Kenneth Bock, J.B. Handley, Dr. Christiane Northrup, Jenny McCarthy, Leigh Dundas, Nick Vujicic, Sue Espinosa, Dr. Judy Mikovits, Dr. Richard Bartlett, Jill Bloom, Karen Kingston and all the Frontline doctors, attorneys, advocates, and parents fighting the good fight.

Noah's success would not have been possible without the dedicated teachers, educators, counselors, mentors, and therapists who supported him along the way.

A special thanks to my literary coach, editor, and friend Marji Ross. You have been an incredible mentor and coach, and I am forever grateful for your hard work and management in the book-writing process. Nina Amir, for your guidance in assisting me with my book proposal. Matthew McRae for your amazing design work for my cover. And my sincere thanks to Morgan James Publishing and their incredible staff for making this dream possible and for all your support.

## **FOREWORD**

### **BY DR. ANDREW WAKEFIELD**

This is a book that should not have been written; more specifically, a book that should not have been needed. Inspiring, bold, and passionate as Tracy Slepcevic's story may be, and as valuable as it is to parents confronting a diagnosis of autism in their family, it should not have been necessary for her to write this book because, in my professional opinion, her son's autism could have been prevented.

The COVID years have borne witness to one thing for certain: the irrationality of blindly trusting the 'Experts.' Autism too has its experts. Men and women with grand titles and an array of impressive acronyms following their names. They have books and chapters, quasi-scientific papers, and reports of government-convened committees, all attesting to their expert and valued opinions. But that's what they are: *opinions*. For example, autism is rooted in a dysfunctional mother-child interaction where the mother hates her offspring and wishes them dead (i.e., refrigerator mother syndrome). The tragic child sensing this hate behaves accordingly. Or statements like "autism is primarily genetic" also implying that it's the parent's fault. "Autism is not treatable" either at all or in the opinion of some, only by behavior modification and most certainly not by trying to understand and address any biological dysfunction in the affected child.

Gastrointestinal symptoms in many children with autism have been variously described to inquiring parents as "irrelevant," "to be expected," "psychosomatic," "of no significance," and, my favorite among these expert opinions, "Don't tell me about diarrhea, I trained at Harvard."

Crushed by the expert views that they were somehow to blame for their child's condition, many parents were told that they should put their children in a home, forget about them and move on. It might be wise for them "not to have more children," leaving parents believing that they were somehow damaged.

One of the greatest tragedies of autism is that, in light of its overt behavioral character, it fell into the hands of psychiatrists, where it has languished. As a gastroenterologist in the early days of my work with affected children, I would be invited to present to doyens of autism, such as Professor Sir Michael Rutter and his associates at the Institute of Psychiatry - the Masters of Bedlam.<sup>1</sup> After my presentation on gastrointestinal pathology and an associated immunologic derangement in children undergoing autistic regression, there was an anguished silence. I had led them into unfamiliar territory with talk of Gamma-Delta T-cells and crypt abscesses. I had dared to report the parents' concerns about an MMR vaccine trigger and in their opinion, I had violated something sacred.

Their silence was brief. "Clearly, Dr. Wakefield, you don't understand. It is a fact that children with autism do not regress. Their parents may think they have lost skills or that they once had words - now gone - but they were only making noises. Your treatment of whatever bowel disease you claim cannot have made them better since their condition is known to be untreatable." As for the MMR vaccine, "Have you not considered that they are just looking for an excuse or something to blame?"

Another dismissal that baffled me then and continues to baffle many of us today is the following statement, "Autism rates have not changed. We are simply better at detecting and diagnosing the disorder than in the 1970s when the acceptance rate was approximately 1 in

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<sup>1</sup> Bed'lam. Founded in 1247, the Bethlem Royal Hospital was the first asylum for the mentally ill in England and was renowned for its brutal treatment of patients.

10,000. Accordingly, we are identifying milder cases.” The New Jersey data put the lie to this argument since those accounting for the rise reflect more – not less – severe cases that would not have been missed had they existed years before.

The Art of clinical medicine, including the skill to recognize and describe in meticulous detail the manifestations and origins of novel clinical syndromes, has all but gone. This Art has been usurped by a system of Pharmaceutical and Insurance company-driven protocols in the interests of profit. Had autism existed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century in a fraction of today’s numbers, it would have been described by one of the great diagnosticians of those days, but it was not. It is a modern and very much man-made plague. To argue for a “better diagnosis” is a vain self-deception that permits the continued autism epidemic to harm children and their families.

As autism approaches a predicted prevalence of one in two children in the next decade, here in these pages are many clues to our salvation. One in particular, has been a cornerstone of my medical training and practice, and that is the power of maternal intuition. It finds expression in the screenplay of my latest movie:

*“So, if there is one message that I would leave you with it is for you - mothers - to trust in that innate knowledge of your child, a gift that has preserved and nurtured mankind throughout evolutionary history. Our presence here, on this earth, is not down to vaccines, antibiotics, or men in white coats but to the power of that small voice, the mantra of timeless wisdom. Listen to it. Trust it.”*

Tracy Slepcevic came to trust this inner knowing and so changed her son’s destiny.

If I appear to bear some animosity towards Autism’s “Old Guard” it’s because I do. Principally for what they have allowed to happen to Noah, along with many other children like him. Professor Sir Michael Rutter worked as a paid expert on behalf of MMR vaccine manufacturers and against the child plaintiffs in the UK’s MMR-Autism litigation. In addition, he testified against me at the General Medical Council (GMC) Proceedings that took my medical license. I was falsely accused of failing to disclose to the Lancet editor that I was a paid expert on behalf of the children in the same litigation. Rutter was one of those who condemned me at the GMC while failing to disclose that in another, highly relevant autism-vaccine publication, he was on the company payroll.<sup>2</sup>

This is why Tracy Slepcevic’s book is so valuable. More valuable, in fact, than all the shelves and hard drives of the Institute of Psychiatry, The Royal Society, and the Royal College of Psychiatrists combined. Why? Because it is real. It is based on raw, real-life experiences that do not operate out of intellectual vanity, the need for a legacy, or letters after her name.

When it comes to reconciling the ‘Yeas’ and the ‘Nays,’ parents - principally mothers like Tracy - have been right on virtually every count, whether on autism’s origins, its presentation, its treatment, or its pandemic proportions. Medicine has been badly wrong. Not only has this slowed progress in our dealings with the disorder, it has also willfully suppressed it.

In closing, I would like to explain why this book should not have been written. Noah Slepcevic was born on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Five years earlier I had shared with CDC scientists my belief that the younger age of first exposure to MMR was a risk for autism. They tested this hypothesis and found it to be true. They spent the next fourteen years destroying the evidence and falsifying their findings. Had they been honest, Noah might have been spared.

In 2003, two years before Noah was born, Thomas Verstraeten authored a CDC paper exonerating the mercury-based vaccine ‘preservative’ thimerosal as a possible contributor to

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<sup>2</sup> Honda H, Shimizu Y, Rutter M. No effect of MMR withdrawal on the incidence of autism: a total population study. J. Child Psychol Psychiatry, 2005;46:572-9.

autistic encephalopathy. The CDC scientists deliberately excluded data showing that children who received the initial mercury-containing Hepatitis B vaccine were seven times more likely to develop autism than those who did not. Many thousands of children might have been spared if not for the CDC's corruption of science. To their great credit, Tracy and Steve Slepcevic did not wallow in righteous anger but did what was necessary to heal their child.

## INTRODUCTION

What do you do when your child is diagnosed with autism? That chilling question, which faces thousands of parents every year, hit me like a ton of bricks 14 years ago. I felt as if my whole world had come crumbling down as I heard the words... “I’m sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Slepcevic, but your son has autism.” I remember staring off into space as a wave of emotions came over me, and my eyes filled with tears. My husband Steve’s recollection was the painful look he saw on my face, knowing that our beautiful boy had just been diagnosed with a severe neurological disorder. I felt as though I was a million miles away as the child psychologist went over our next steps, and I could not recall a single word she said. This was the day that changed our lives forever.

In one way, the diagnosis was a relief – at least it provided some clarity after almost two years of confusion and despair as we asked the bewildering question, “What do you do if you think your child *might* have autism?” Back then, my idea of autism was Dustin Hoffman’s character in the movie *Rain Man*. That wasn’t how I saw Noah, so I was convinced something else was going on. After several trips to the pediatrician’s office, two preschools, and an evaluation by the regional center that lost my paperwork, I was still left without answers. It was like living in the Twilight Zone. My son was suffering, and no one cared or bothered to take the time to do an actual assessment. I spent over two years banging my head against the wall, trying to figure out what was wrong with my little boy.

Since Noah’s diagnosis, we have worked with some excellent doctors, therapists, and educators, but through it all, my greatest teacher has been my son. Noah gave me strength when I didn’t think I had the energy to wake up in the morning, he showed me the meaning of unconditional love, and most of all, he gave me purpose. For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a mother but I never knew the profound impact that my little boy would have on my life and the lives of so many others.

Throughout our journey, we faced many battles on our road to healing, and there were times when our strength was tested. Thankfully, I have never underestimated the power of God or His ability to answer my prayers. Whenever I started to lose hope, God would send me an angel – someone who led me in the right direction. These encounters fueled my faith and gave me the clarity to make decisions for Noah. I am forever grateful for these beautiful souls who came into my life at the perfect time and reminded me that God gave Noah to me for a reason and it was my time to make a difference in the life of my child.

As Noah’s mother, I have been called upon to be his advocate, fighting on his behalf. To say that I have been there and done that is an understatement. I could have a Ph.D. in research with all the knowledge I’ve gained on healing my son over the past fourteen years. I’ve spent countless hours exploring the internet, diving deep into biological, medical, and educational material, information, and resources. And I have had the privilege and honor to work with many functional medicine doctors, scientists, and experts in the field of autism who have guided me on this path. The rest I learned through books, at parent support groups, and while attending autism conferences.

In 2012, I became a parent mentor for two non-profit organizations, Generation Rescue and TACA (The Autism Community in Action). Mentoring parents with autistic children allowed me to give back to the community and be a support system to those in their time of need. My main goal was to give parents hope and understanding that a diagnosis of autism is not the end; it is

only the beginning. Eventually, I returned to school, where I studied alternative medicine and ultimately became a certified integrative health coach.

After all my research, studies, and experience, I wish I could tell you there is a single pill, treatment, or therapy that will cure your child. But it's not that simple. Healing your child from the underlying conditions of autism is a process that takes hard work, dedication, and a lot of patience. Throughout the pages that follow, I will reveal the treatments, strategies, and therapies we used to heal Noah. Will these approaches work for your child? I don't know. They may work, and they may not; every child is different, and they all respond differently to various treatments. I'm not a medical doctor, and I do not claim to be one, but many excellent doctors dedicate their practices to healing children diagnosed with autism, and they have countless success stories. Healing autism is a long process, but there is hope.

I believe everything in life happens for a reason, and we are all on our own perfect path. My journey began the day I became Noah's mother, and that journey has made me the *Warrior Mom* that I am today. I was willing to do anything to give my son a better quality of life, and I never gave up. I am grateful that I had the guidance, strength, and willingness to go the distance; if I hadn't, my son's life would look quite different today.

If your road resembles mine in any way, you will require the same level of perseverance and positivity. As Ernest Holmes once said, "Where the mind goes, energy flows." I have always kept a clear focus on my dream, which was for my son to live a healthy, functioning life with limitless possibilities for the future. I can proudly say I accomplished that goal.

While I cannot foresee your journey, I have walked this road, which I will share with you in **Part One**. My goal is to make it a little less complicated and intimidating for you than it was for me. I'll describe the challenges I faced in receiving a diagnosis of autism and ways to navigate the system. I know how hard it can be to sort through a ton of confusing and often conflicting data, which is why I have included so much material on the process of diagnosis and accommodations in **Part Two** and the medical, nutritional, and biological aspects of healing autism in **Part Three** of this book. You'll find a wealth of information on resources, definitions, signs, and symptoms. I explain different therapies, treatments, and protocols in laypeople's terms, and I will walk you through the labyrinth of procedures, policies, and bureaucracies you'll have to navigate along the way. I hope all this information is beneficial, but remember, it is your job to do the research and come to your own conclusions.

I want to caution you on where to search for information these days, as many functional medicine doctors have been censored, and Big Pharma has manipulated the mainstream media. There is much controversy over biomedical intervention and vaccinations, so I recommend you form your own opinion and do your legwork. I will suggest some great books and websites to guide you along the way.

In addition to all the assistance, advice, guidance, and research you find, I urge you to trust your inner knowing. I had many experts telling me what to do, but no one knows their child better than a parent. When Noah was suffering, I knew we had to make a change. When he showed progress, I knew we had to stick to the program. I learned to trust my gut instinct. It has never led me down the wrong path, and I know this is God's way of communicating with me.

My prayer for you is that you see the good in every beautiful child with autism and look at all the blessings that come with being a part of their life.

I wrote this book to make a positive difference in the lives of families affected by autism. *Warrior Mom* is an inspiring story of hope and an indispensable guidebook for any parent



desperate to hear the truth that autism is not a hopeless diagnosis and that many underlying biological conditions associated with autism are treatable.

## CHAPTER 1: A LABOR OF LOVE

After a long hard labor, my beautiful son Noah was born on July 14, 2005. I didn't know at the time that I was destined to become a warrior mom. But during childbirth, I got a taste of what it means to fight like one.

I was determined, after fourteen hours of labor and two hours of pushing on no pain meds, to do whatever the doctor said to assure that Noah was going to come into this world safely. I had every nurse on the labor and delivery floor in my hospital room; half of them ready to rush me off to surgery and the other half cheering me on to push. You see, Noah was not an easy delivery. At nearly nine pounds and in a posterior position, it took everything in me to push my child out. After an emergency episiotomy, doctors delivered my son, but Noah was stuck for such a long time that we lost his heartbeat for a brief moment when he was born. I was pushing so hard, with no epidural, that my eyes were swollen shut, and all I could do was anxiously wait to hear my child cry.

Before long, I heard the most beautiful sound in the world... the cry of my newborn son. The nurses immediately carried him out to the NICU, where they could normalize his heart rate, as my doctor stitched me up and wheeled me off to my hospital room. My husband Steve went with Noah to ensure he was okay. All I could do at that moment was pray God would watch over my son and keep him safe. The next two hours felt like an eternity as I waited impatiently to see my newborn child. Finally, the nurse brought Noah into the room with Steve right behind her. Tears began to well up in my eyes as the nurse handed me my son. She laid him on my bare chest, and I felt more love than I could have ever imagined. My baby was safe, and I knew at that moment I would do anything to keep him that way.

Being a mother came naturally to me. The sleepless nights and constant feedings didn't faze me much. I was so grateful for this beautiful little soul brought into my life that I was the happiest I had ever been. I remember sitting up some nights just staring at his sweet face, wondering what he was dreaming about. I was so in love with this precious baby. This little guy gave me a purpose, and I was committed to being the most amazing mother.

When Noah was two months old, I took him in for his wellness visit and first set of vaccines. Little did I know what I was signing off on when the nurse handed me the consent form. But I trusted that the pediatrician had Noah's best interest at heart, so I signed without hesitation. After all, doctors take an oath to "Do no harm," so my son must be in good hands. Unfortunately, I would soon learn that wasn't the case at all.

Later that evening, Noah spiked a fever of 104, and to a new mother, that was alarming. I immediately called Steve's cousin Peter, who was a physician, and he suggested rotating Tylenol and Motrin every four to five hours until the fever subsided. In the morning, I took him in to be seen by his pediatrician. She assured me this was a normal reaction to vaccinations and that my son would be okay. I wish I had a dollar for every time our pediatrician told me, "This is normal."

After several days, Noah's fever started to subside, but he suddenly became very colicky. I reached out to my sister-in-law Eileen, who has five children, for advice. She gave me some home remedies, but Noah didn't respond to any of them. He would cry for hours on end, and it seemed like there was nothing I could do to soothe him. Steve would come home from a long day at work, and we would take turns rocking Noah back and forth in a football hold, applying pressure to his stomach that was as hard as a rock. My heart was telling me my child was in pain, but the doctor said it was just gas, and as before, I trusted her. Many people would tell me this

was just a phase and Noah would grow out of it. But as time went on, it only seemed to worsen, and my intuition was telling me there was something worse going on with my little boy.

When Noah was diagnosed with autism at age three, I pulled his medical records, only to find out that he received three flu shots in the first year of his life. I thought to myself, *that's crazy! Why does a child need three flu shots?* I clearly remember during my four-year enlistment in the Air Force that every time I received a flu shot, I would get the worst flu that knocked me out for several days. It was no different for Noah. I recall many times when Noah got sick immediately after receiving his vaccines.

Sadly, as a mother, uneducated in the field of medicine, I entrusted his health to a pediatrician who never took more than five minutes with Noah during our multiple visits to the doctor's office.

Primary care has been slowly shifting toward an assembly-line approach, with physicians focusing on treating as many patients as possible in a single day. According to Medscape research, about 50% of physicians spend less than 16 minutes with each patient.<sup>1</sup> I bet half that time is spent doing paperwork, based on my five-minute visits at the pediatrician's office.

### **Noah Was Right on Track**

The first year of Noah's life was not easy with all the crying and sleepless nights, but I was happy to report that he had reached all his developmental milestones. Besides being a colicky baby and sick all the time, Noah was right on track for being a normal, functioning child. He had his few baby words like mama, dada, Buddy (that was our dog), and even an adorable "uh-oh!" that came out of his mouth when something went wrong. He made simple gestures like shaking his head "yes and no" and even waving "bye-bye" to others as they would leave. Physically I could not keep my kid still. At four to five months old, Noah was rolling wherever he wanted to go until he finally learned to crawl, and then there was no stopping him. At six months old, I started taking baby-sign classes with Noah, where he learned simple sign language skills like milk, drink, yes, and no; this made it much easier to communicate with my child as he was still learning to speak. We had so much fun playing with the other children, and it was an excellent opportunity for me to meet new moms in my area.

By the time Noah was a year old, he was walking faster than I could keep up. He loved to climb so much that we nicknamed him our little "monkey" or, as my husband Steve would say, "majmun" (the Serbian word for monkey). We used to have a beautiful dollhouse, which my neighbor Byron had built for our daughter Kaitlyn, that stood as tall as a four-year-old child, and Noah would climb to the top and sit on the upper deck almost daily; that was his little happy place. I remember my feeling of joy on his first birthday as Noah ran around playing with all his new toys and interacting with other children. These are the moments we live for as parents. But I never imagined it was all about to come to an end.

On July 20, 2006, soon after Noah's first birthday, I took him in for his twelve-month well-baby checkup with his pediatrician. The doctor gave Noah a complete physical and checked his height and weight while her assistant gave me another consent form for Noah's one-year vaccines. During that visit, Noah received the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) and varicella vaccines.

As I signed away on the dotted line, I had no idea this would be the moment I would regret for the rest of my life.

The pediatrician assured me that Noah was healthy, strong, and right on track for growth; he was in the 95th percentile for height and weight. She also assured me that he met all his milestones for his age. I was thrilled to know my little monkey was doing so well.

Later that evening, Noah started to run a high fever and was crying uncontrollably. I gave him some children's Tylenol and a lukewarm bath attempting to bring his fever down, but after the Tylenol wore off, his fever would return. I stayed up with him all night, rotating Tylenol and Motrin as he was in and out of sleep crying incessantly.

When Noah woke up the following day, his body was covered in a rash, and he still had a fever, so I called the pediatrician and took him in to see her that morning. At this point, I was freaking out. Noah's pediatrician didn't seem fazed by his reaction to the vaccinations. She said Noah was probably allergic to one of the vaccines and assured me that he would be fine. She stated this was very common, and he would grow out of it, so there was no concern about receiving any future vaccines. She prescribed Noah a round of steroids to help with the rash and sent us on our way. Little did I know this was just the beginning of many doctor visits to come.

## CHAPTER 2: MOVING BACKWARDS

Over the next few months following his wellness visit, I noticed that Noah was slowly regressing. What used to be the words dada and mama, were now du and mu, until he stopped speaking altogether. Whatever sign language Noah had developed over the past six months was also gone. Now his only form of communication was to scream and tantrum. He made minimal eye contact and was only interested in spinning in circles, tip-toe walking, and staring out into space. I watched as his motor skills also began to decline. Nights became sleepless as he would periodically cry throughout the night. I asked my mom and sister for advice, but all they could tell me was “this too shall pass.” Well, it didn’t pass, and my heart was breaking for my little boy.

Before too long, Noah began to have chronic ear infections. The nurse at the pediatrician’s office called Noah their little mascot because he was there for ear infections so frequently. Over time, Noah became resistant to most antibiotics (and he already had an allergy to penicillin), which made it even tougher to prescribe something for his infections. During these reoccurring visits to the pediatrician’s office, I would ask the doctor why my son was regressing. Her usual answer was, “That’s normal for children to regress after the first year. Give it time and he will grow out of it.” Of course, my thought was, *what in the heck is so normal about a child regressing?!* But as usual, I trusted that she knew what was best, and I went on my way.

During the first year of Noah’s life, I had traveled with him to Michigan to visit my family on several occasions with no problems at all, but after his first-year vaccines, it became more difficult to travel with Noah – or to take him anywhere, for that matter. Going through the airport, Noah would throw himself on the ground and tantrum uncontrollably to the point of exhaustion. I would then pick him up off the floor and carry him to the plane. I was aware that people were staring at me like I was the worst mother on the planet as I stood there while my son threw a tantrum on the ground, but my only concern was to get Noah on the plane safely. Each time I returned home from visits with my family, Steve would be waiting patiently in baggage claim for me to hand Noah off to him so I could enjoy a little peace.

One day, we decided to take Noah to the beach and have a little fun in the sun. Steve grew up by the ocean and loved to surf, so his dream was for his little boy to follow in his footsteps. As Steve approached the water with Noah in his arms, Noah began to scream. Steve put Noah down and attempted to walk him slowly over to the ocean’s shore, but Noah immediately began to tantrum as if someone was trying to kill him. Steve did his best to comfort him but Noah continued to cry until Steve walked away from the water. This came as quite a shock to both of us because Noah loved being in a bathtub or a swimming pool. But the sound of the waves crashing on the ocean shore (we later learned) was sensory overload for our son and he couldn’t bear it.

### A Worrisome Difference

Playdates during this time were a bit of a challenge as well, but we figured we should do our best to surround our two-year-old with kids his age to give him some social interaction. One day we called our close friends Sonny and Gordana, whose little boy was only about 4 months younger than Noah. We took Noah to their house so the kids could play and we could spend some time catching up. As I watched their little boy Jake play with colored blocks, I listened as he named off the colors of the blocks and handed them to his mother. Then I looked over at Noah who was sitting in the corner rocking back and forth, not engaging with anyone. He had no interest in playing with Jake or any of the toys that Gordana had put out. I went over to Noah and held a red

block in front of him and said, “Say red.” Noah just stared off silently into space like I didn’t exist. I turned to Gordana and said, “Why is Jake more advanced than Noah?” I felt so confused. Gordana turned to me and said with a comforting voice, “Sometimes boys just develop later than other children.” She assured me that my son would come around, but something in my gut told me it was more complicated than that.

After that day, I was determined to work with Noah on his speech, so I began with the basics. I went to the store and purchased toddler flashcards containing pictures of objects, shapes, and colors to see if I could get Noah to speak once again. We would practice various times throughout the day, but most of the time, Noah showed no interest. I would hold up a card and say, “yellow bus,” hoping he would respond. In the beginning, Noah would just stare at the card like there was nothing there or he would slap it away and tantrum if he was frustrated. After several weeks of practice, he began to repeat the word. “Okay Noah, say the color blue.” Noah would repeat “blue.” Eventually, repeating the last word I would say was all Noah could do. “Noah do you want some milk?” I would ask. Noah would turn to me and say, “milk.” As a new mother, I thought this was tremendous progress, but I later learned this was what specialists call echolalia. This is when a child’s brain can only process the last word you spoke, so they repeat it. It is common for children with autism to use echolalia because they process speech differently. Neurotypical children tend to learn language by first understanding and using single words and gradually connecting those words together to form phrases and sentences. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often pursue a different route. Their first attempts at language may be to combine words together, but unfortunately, they don’t understand what the individual words mean. After Noah’s diagnosis, the clinical psychologist explained to me how Noah’s speech was a form of echolalia, but the fact that Noah was speaking at all was progress in my eyes.

Noah also displayed signs of poor motor function during this time. It was ironic to me because during the first year of his life he was all over the place and I could barely keep up with him. But after his regression, his motor skills steadily declined. I would watch how other children could jump and leap with both feet off the ground or hold onto the jungle gym bars, but my son could not. I figured he would eventually get the concept, but it never happened. He could not throw a ball or catch one, and he no longer showed any interest in climbing anything. My little monkey had stopped exploring altogether.

### **What's Wrong with My Son?**

As time went on, it was becoming clear to me that there was something wrong with Noah, but I just could not put my finger on it. After a while, his tantrums didn’t even faze me. We spent a lot of time at home together, and for the most part, it was just Noah and me because Steve traveled often for work. Noah became my sidekick and our bond became stronger as the months passed. I would take Noah to the park when it wasn’t crowded to avoid overstimulation, but most of the time we would just play at home. Little by little, Noah would play with different toys, but he was most fascinated with things that spun around.

Then Noah developed an obsession for *Barney and Friends*, and I’m pretty sure that after a month or so I knew every Barney song by heart. I cherished those days, dancing around the house with Noah in my arms, singing songs until we were both so tired we would crash. I would lie on the sofa as Noah would cradle in my arms, sucking his thumb and playing with my ear. Most children grow attached to blankets or teddy bears but my son had an obsession with ears. I don’t think I wore earrings for the first five or six years of Noah’s life because I was so afraid he would rip them out. It never fazed me, though, because it was the one thing that soothed my son – and like anything, he would eventually grow out of it.

Any opportunity for me to bond with Noah, I took advantage of. I never dreamed I could love someone as much as I love my son. I knew at the time God had a reason for everything. But as a mother, I felt certain I should be doing more to help my son; if only I knew the right path. So I asked God, "How do I put the light back into my little boy's eyes?"

## CHAPTER 3: UNKNOWN TERRITORY

When Noah turned two, we decided to enroll him in preschool, thinking it would be a good way for him to gain some social skills and have the opportunity to play with other children. For the most part, Noah was an only child. His half-sister Kaitlyn was only with us every other weekend, so he barely had enough time with her to make a difference. Noah started preschool that fall and I remember the first day as if it were yesterday. I brought Noah to the school and as soon as he saw all the kids and staff members, he went into complete meltdown mode. The preschool teacher assured me that it would be okay and he would eventually calm down. As I walked away, I could hear my child screaming so loud that it tore a hole right through my heart. I walked around the corner, sat down on a bench, and began to cry. I sat there for the remainder of the day until it was time to pick Noah up from school. I felt like the worst mother in the world. When I walked up to the gate to greet Noah, he immediately ran into my arms and held me so tight that I could barely breathe. This behavior went on for *months*. Noah continued to tantrum and cry every time I dropped him off.

Eventually, the school director called Steve and me in for a meeting. She was a very kind lady and you could tell she had the weight of the world on her shoulders as she began the conversation. She explained to us that Noah was not engaging with other children, would not potty train, and spent most of his days sitting in the corner rocking back and forth. She suggested that we have Noah evaluated at the Harbor Regional Center. You could tell she was very limited in what she could say, so she just gave her recommendation and asked if we had any questions. I had a million questions, but not any that she could legally answer, so I thanked her for her time and told her we would keep her updated.

The next day, I called the Harbor Regional Center in Torrance and scheduled Noah for an occupational developmental evaluation. In the meantime, I kept Noah home from school and worked with him on his communication skills until it came time for his evaluation.

In February of 2008, Noah received a preliminary evaluation by a behavioralist at the Harbor Regional Center. This evaluation was to be completed before further examination by a clinical psychologist. The therapist noted that Noah failed four critical items on the MCHAT (Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers) and displayed a lack of social interest, poor engagement in symbolic or representational play with toys, and spent most of his time staring at nothing or wandering around the room flipping the lights on and off, avoiding her altogether. By the time she finished her evaluation, I could see the frustration written all over her face. I then asked her, "Can you please tell me what's wrong with my son?" She responded with an angry tone in her voice, "I don't know what is wrong with Noah. He will not sit still long enough for me to work with him, and he keeps running around the room playing with the lights. My guess is that he is autistic or has severe ADHD but I am not a clinical psychologist so I cannot make that diagnosis." As I stood there completely stunned by what she said, she walked away without exhibiting an ounce of compassion for a mother who was desperate for answers. All I could think was, "If my kid is hard to evaluate, cannot pay attention, and does not respond; then why in the world am I here in the first place?!" Not to mention, you don't just throw the word "autism" at a parent and walk away as if nothing happened. I was mortified.

I was so shocked and angry that I didn't care if I ever heard back from Harbor Regional Center, and to my surprise, I got my wish. The therapist who evaluated Noah failed to forward her findings to a clinical psychologist, so Noah could be properly evaluated. Over time, his paperwork was lost in the system and we were never contacted.



## **In Search of Solutions**

Meanwhile, we decided to search for another solution to Noah's chronic ear infections and the almost-monthly rounds of antibiotics. Little did I know, antibiotics are derived from fungi and soil bacteria, so when someone takes antibiotics, it kills off all the bacteria (good and bad) and replaces them with yeast. This yeast lines the gut and the intestinal wall, making it hard for the body to absorb proteins, vitamins, and nutrients. Today, the evolution of antibiotic resistance in human pathogens has rendered these original antibiotics and most of their successors largely ineffective. Over time, these antibiotics did not work for Noah so we decided to take Noah to see an Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) specialist. The ENT recommended putting tubes in Noah's ears. Ear tubes are tiny, hollow plastic cylinders that are surgically inserted into the eardrum. This opening enables drainage of the middle ear, allowing air to flow into the middle ear, preventing the buildup of fluids behind the eardrum. Did this fix the problem? Well, Noah still got ear infections, but at least the tubes allowed the fluid to drain out of Noah's ears so he no longer had to experience pain from the pressure of fluid buildup. This procedure allowed us to put a band-aid on the problem until we could address the underlying issues.

That summer, my sister Donna came to visit. She has four children of her own, so I figured she would be of great assistance with Noah, and I was right. She would play with Noah for hours on end and never get bored. By that time, it didn't take a rocket scientist to see there was something wrong with my son, but it definitely took a lot of courage to say something. Fortunately, my sister has never let others' feelings prevent her from speaking her mind, so she just came out and said, "Tracy, don't you think that there is a possibility Noah could have autism? I've been watching him over the last week and decided to do some research, and everything I am observing points to autism." Here we go again! Yes, I know something is wrong, but autism? As I said before, my idea of autism was Dustin Hoffman's character in the movie *Rain Man*, and that's not how I saw Noah at all. Nevertheless, I had to figure out what was wrong with my child and get him the proper treatment.

The following week, I had Noah's 3-year wellness check-up with his pediatrician. My stomach was turning and I was so afraid to ask her the big question, but I forced myself to look directly at her and ask, "Is it possible that my son could have autism?" She looked over at Noah and saw that he was spinning her stethoscope round and round. Then she turned to me and said, "No. Children with autism do not do pretend play." She added, "He just needs speech and he will be fine." My first thought was, *Yay! My son does not have autism!* But over time I came to understand that her observation was incorrect and what Noah was doing was not considered pretend play. Autism is a broad spectrum and I believe any clinical psychologist will tell you that she should have immediately referred us back to the Regional Center to have Noah properly diagnosed. Instead, his doctor didn't take the time to ask a single question and couldn't spare a few minutes of her time to observe Noah's actions. She was in and out, showing absolutely no interest in discovering what was wrong with my son.

If I had a dollar for every time Noah's doctor said, "That's normal" or "He will be fine." I would be a rich woman. All the ear infections, his regression, Noah's severe reaction to vaccines. Nothing! Not a single sign of concern for her patient and all he had endured during the first three years of his life. Not even a hint of compassion or desire to get to the root of Noah's problems. Clearly, it was up to me to figure out what to do for my son, and I was up for the challenge.

The doctor said my son needed speech, so I looked for a speech therapist. I called around to several speech therapists in our area who accepted our insurance, but to my surprise, they all wanted payment up-front and said that I would have to pay first and then submit receipts to my

insurance carrier for reimbursement. The average cost per visit was \$200 to \$300 per hour with visits twice a week. Who had that kind of money?! I know we didn't at that time so I found myself reading more books on speech therapy and different exercises I could do with Noah.

### **Starting Preschool**

That fall, Steve and I decided to enroll Noah into Peninsula Montessori preschool in Rancho Palos Verdes. Someone had mentioned to us that Montessori schools have different methods and principles to get children to engage, so I figured, what do we have to lose? My stepdaughter Kaitlyn attended this preschool, and Steve seemed to really like it, so I did the necessary paperwork to enroll Noah for the fall semester. Noah was unable to attend the main campus because he was not potty trained, so they enrolled him in the Torrance location. When the big day came to take Noah to school, he was a bit hesitant. I was really hoping by now that Noah would be more open to the idea of playing with other kids his age, but that didn't seem to be the case.

For the most part, Noah was still non-verbal. He had some speech, but it consisted of only echolalia. This made communication very difficult for a teacher, but luckily Noah's teacher was very patient and kind, and I knew he was in a good place. Her name was Ms. Ratani, and Noah really bonded with her after the first couple weeks of school. We still had the typical meltdown when I dropped him off, but soon after I would leave, Ms. Ratani would have Noah calmed down before the school day began.

As the weeks went on, I received more and more reports from Ms. Ratani about Noah's behavior. She stated that Noah did not like to go to the restroom, wash his hands or put his shoes on. She also noted that he was frequently frustrated and would use words in a repetitive manner as he would spin in circles. While most children were playing on the playground, Noah would sit and repeatedly run his fingers through the sand. He spent a great deal of his time in the classroom sitting by the fan watching the blades spin around, and he had little to no attention span unless he was working on puzzles.

One day, I picked Noah up and he had a bite mark on his arm. When I asked Ms. Ratani what happened, she explained that Noah was sitting in the corner and a little girl bit him because he would not engage with her. She went on to explain that the school had called the girl's parents and made them pick her up and she could not return for the remainder of the week. The week passed, but once the little girl returned to school she attacked Noah again, scratching his face. At this point, I was livid! I demanded to know who this child was and I wanted a meeting scheduled with her parents. The teacher explained she could not give out that information and assured me that the school was addressing the matter.

The following day, I saw Claudia (the owner of the school) in the office. Steve knew Claudia really well as she was a previous client of his. I asked if she had a minute to talk. She stepped aside to speak with me but seemed to know what was coming. I shared my anger and frustration regarding the child in Noah's class who had been abusing him. She immediately snapped back in defense, "You need to open your eyes! You have a child with special needs and this school cannot care for him. You need to pay more attention to your child and less attention to what goes on at my school." As you can imagine, I was completely thrown back by her response and devastated at the same time. Again, I was being told there was something wrong with my child by someone who was offering no solutions. I immediately got Noah and gave notice that he would not be returning. I redirected my attention to Noah, who deserved 100% of my focus and vowed not to waste my time being angry at small-minded people.

That evening, I took Noah home, held him tight in my arms, and I cried. As I watched this beautiful boy stare off into space as he laid his head on my chest and played with my ear, I prayed to God for help. I was tired, broken, and felt as if all hope was lost. "Please God, tell me what to do."

## CHAPTER 4: ANSWERED PRAYERS

There have been many times in my life when I've felt helpless and lost, and this time was no different. Fortunately for me, God would always send an Angel to light my path and guide me in the right direction. Never do I underestimate His power or question His methods because there truly are no accidents in life. Everyone who has come into my life has been there for a reason, either to teach me something new or to simply bring out what was inside me all along. These Angels arrived in my life when I needed them most, and their wisdom has led me to profound spiritual growth.

When I returned to the office the day after my stressful encounter with Claudia at Noah's preschool, I noticed my husband had hired a new front desk assistant. She was a kind woman and was truly grateful for the opportunity to have a flexible part-time job that would work around her son's schedule. Her name was Katherine, and she was the mother of a 4-year-old boy with severe autism. My heart went out to her as she shared her son's story with me. I instantly thought to myself *how difficult it must be to watch your child struggle to function in this world*, but what I didn't realize at the time was that her struggles were my own.

I told her about the challenges we were having with Noah, and she seemed to have all the answers I had been searching for. She asked me several questions regarding Noah's actions and behaviors, but as I responded, I wasn't fully honest with her or myself. I was in complete denial.

She explained to me that once a child is over the age of 3, you can have them evaluated through the school district. She then gave me the number for Launch Preschool in Torrance and suggested I call and set up an evaluation. Her son attended the same school full-time, and she had nothing but great things to say. When we finished our conversation, I immediately called Launch Preschool and asked what I needed to do to have my son evaluated for speech. They took down my information and said a caseworker would reach out to me and set up a preliminary phone consultation to get a better idea of what type of evaluation would be most suitable for Noah.

During the short time Katherine worked for us, she was frequently called out of work to pick up her son from school. Eventually, she came to me and Steve to put in her two-week notice because she realized her son demanded her attention full-time. When she applied for the position, she thought her son was doing well enough for her to return to work, but unfortunately, that was not the case. I was truly grateful for her guidance and wished her all the best. God had sent me an Angel to point me in the right direction, and now it was time for her to move on. Once Katherine left, we never saw her again.

### **Finally, A Full Evaluation**

Two weeks after I submitted the request for an evaluation, a woman from Launch Preschool called and asked if I had a moment to answer a few questions. I responded with excitement, "Yes! Of course!" Finally, I can get some answers. Over the next twenty minutes, she asked me a series of questions, and to my surprise, they were some of the same questions Katherine had asked me the week prior. This time, I made sure not to sugarcoat anything. Once she finished with her questions, she asked me to hold for a few minutes. I waited patiently on line until she came back on the phone. "Mrs. Slepcevic, I really feel like your son needs a full evaluation based on the information you have provided. If you are in agreement, I can get that scheduled for you." I was a bit surprised but delighted to know we were moving in the right direction. As I was scheduling the appointment, the woman asked if Noah had any teachers who had observed his

behaviors and would be willing to fill out a questionnaire. I said, “Yes, that would be Ms. Ratani. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind. I will contact her and ask.”

The next day, I picked up two questionnaire packets from Launch Preschool, one for Noah’s teacher and one for myself. I reached out to Ms. Ratani and asked if she would fill out the questionnaire and write a short letter based on her experience with Noah in her classroom. She happily agreed.

That evening, I went home and pulled out the packet labeled “Parent Questionnaire” and started filling it out. There were several questionnaires in the packet, so I knew it was going to take me a while. As I started to read through the questions, I began to ask myself, “Can Noah really do that? Of course he can!” Like any mother, I paid more attention to Noah’s strengths than I did his weaknesses. Needless to say, I don’t think I was straightforward with my answers. I wanted everyone to see the fun, loving child that I saw.

Luckily, Ms. Ratani did not take the same approach. When I stopped by to pick up her questionnaire packet and letter, I thanked her for her time. When I got home, I opened the packet and read Ms. Ratani’s letter to Launch. Here is what she said...

*To Whom It May Concern:*

*Noah has been in my class since September 2008. When I first met him, his mother informed me that he had some speech-related problems, which she was actively working on at home. Initially, I thought that Noah’s frequent tantrums were due to separation anxiety. However, after six weeks, the frequency continued, and I became concerned. Noah tended to throw tantrums under the following circumstances:*

*Whenever an adult would leave the classroom.*

*When asked to wash his hands.*

*When asked to take a bathroom break.*

*When asked to put his shoes back on.*

*With any changes in his schedule.*

*I also realized that Noah avoided eye contact when I spoke with him. During the first three months of school, he avoided eye contact altogether. He only recently started to look at me when we would play together or when I would speak directly to him.*

*Noah knows the names of most objects in the classroom and recognizes letters and numbers; but when it comes to communicating his needs, he doesn’t use words at all. He will frequently repeat the last word in an adult’s sentence over and over again. For the most part, the things he repeats do not seem to serve any communicative purpose. Sometimes I ascribe Noah’s tantrums and frustration to his problems with communicative language.*

*Since September 2008, Noah has always managed to avoid his peers; he does not seem to mingle at all. He does occasionally seek the company of his teachers. Once in a while he will approach me, take my hand and point to something he wants. When an adult to whom Noah feels some attachment leaves the room, Noah’s consequent tantrum almost always begins with him placing his fingers in his ears. Then he screams and throws himself onto the floor. I often worry about his safety.*

*On the playground, Noah prefers to lay down and repeatedly run his fingers through the sand. He also spends a great deal of time touching the fence and almost always removes his shoes and socks as he prefers not to wear them. In the classroom, his attention span is short unless he is stringing beads or putting together a puzzle.*

*I must mention that there has been an improvement in Noah's behavior in the classroom. He has grown very attached to me and is now starting to listen more than before. I feel it is important that Noah receives professional help with his issues and that is why I would highly recommend Noah to attend the program at Launch Preschool. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.*

*Thanks, Nooreen Ratani (Montessori Director at Peninsula Montessori School)*

My first thought was *my son doesn't act that way*, but after I had some time to reflect, I realized I had just grown accustomed to Noah's behavior. Plus, he was much more comfortable at home, so that resulted in fewer incidents. I was grateful for Ms. Ratani's honesty and her compassion for what Noah was going through. I made sure to drop both packets off at the preschool prior to the upcoming evaluation.

On February 11, 2009, Steve and I got Noah ready for his comprehensive psycho-educational preschool evaluation at Launch Preschool. I was nervous and excited all at the same time. I remembered all the wonderful things Katherine had told me about Launch Preschool; I had the feeling this assessment was the answer to our prayers.

We arrived at the school in the early afternoon and were greeted by five incredible women. Sallie Reeves was the school psychologist; she was accompanied by two speech and language pathologists, a special education teacher, and an occupational therapist. They escorted us into Sallie's office where she explained the purpose of the assessment and how it was going to work. She clearly stated, "The purpose of this assessment is to determine current levels of functioning, examine eligibility for special education services, and explore areas of educational needs. While you and Steve will be answering a series of questions with me, these four ladies will be working with Noah to observe his behaviors, motor skills, pre-academic skills, self-help, play, and social skills, along with a full speech and language evaluation. Do you have any questions before we start?" We both said no, and sat down at a table with Sallie while Noah was taken into another room for his evaluation. She confirmed that she had received both parent and teacher packets and had reviewed them prior to the meeting.

Over the next couple of hours, Steve and I sat with the school psychologist answering a range of questions pertaining to Noah's developmental history. Most of these questions I'd covered in the parent packet, but I wasn't about to complain about having to answer them again. It was a long, drawn-out process, but I was happy they were being so thorough with their assessment, especially as my previous experience with therapists had been underwhelming, to say the least.

As Sallie finished up with some final questions, the other therapists brought Noah back into the room. He immediately jumped into my arms, sat down on my lap, and started playing with my ear while he sucked his thumb. Sallie and her team said they were going to meet for about twenty minutes and then come back to discuss their findings. We waited nervously in the room. It may have been only twenty minutes, but it certainly felt like an eternity.

### **The Only Word I Heard Was "Autism"**

Sallie and her team reentered the room and my heart literally skipped a beat. I could see the concern in her eyes as she sat down beside us and said, "Mr. and Mrs. Slepcevic, I'm sorry to report but we do find that Noah falls under the category of "Autistic-Like." The good news is that we are going to enroll Noah in our program where he will receive all his services, including speech, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral therapy. This is not a formal diagnosis because the school district cannot diagnose this disorder, but I do recommend that you take this report back to Harbor Regional Center where Noah can be formally diagnosed by a

clinical psychologist. I know you probably have a ton of questions so please feel free to ask me anything.”

I am almost certain that the only word I heard come out of her mouth was “autism.” Everything else went in one ear and out the other. What I do remember was the kindness and compassion that Ms. Reeves and her staff demonstrated towards me and my husband. She even called us later that evening to see how we were doing and to ask if we had any questions. In this whole journey, I had never experienced such love and understanding as I did from Sallie Reeves.

On our way home, I asked Steve to take me by his office so I could grab some things I had left behind earlier. As I walked down the hall with tears streaming down my cheeks, I saw Dr. Berka walking my way. Dr. Joshua Berka was my Naturopathic doctor and his office was next door to Steve’s company office. When he got close enough to see my tears, he immediately stopped, reached out, and gave me the warmest hug. I completely broke down and started to cry. Once I was able to pull myself together, Dr. Berka asked, “What’s wrong?” I looked back at him and said, “Noah has autism.” With complete and utter surprise, he looked back at me and said, “Tracy, Noah is going to be fine. Many children with autism are making rapid improvements with biomedical intervention. My recommendation to you is to go home and do your research. Everything will be okay.”

This was a HUGE turning point in my life. I realized I had two choices: I could wallow in my own self-pity and say, “Woe is me, my child has autism.” Or I could suck those tears back into my eyes and get to work because my son’s life depended on it. Needless to say, I chose option number two. Dr. Berka had given me hope and reassured me Noah would be okay. It wasn’t until later in life that I came to realize God had sent me another Angel.

## CHAPTER 5: HEALING THE CHILD WITHIN

As soon as we got home, I ran inside and began my research. I opened my laptop and typed into the search engine “healing autism.” The first links that popped up were Generation Rescue, TACA (Talk About Curing Autism), and some books on healing autism. I started with Generation Rescue, which was a non-profit organization founded by Lisa and JB Handley whose son Jamison was diagnosed with autism. After watching their son improve physically with alternative treatments and therapies, they decided to share their knowledge with the world. Generation Rescue’s mission was focused on providing support to families affected by autism, including grants for biomedical treatment, a platform for parents to connect, a mentor program, education and awareness, and 24-hour support through a hotline service.

The Rescue Family Grant Program, provided by Generation Rescue, funded grants for autism treatment for families who otherwise would not have access due to lack of income. They provided a unique autism treatment program that was not found in school districts, county programs, insurance, or other grant-generating entities.

Generation Rescue’s parent mentor program, Rescue Angels, was a community of parents with children on the autism spectrum who had seen a significant improvement or loss of diagnosis through the use of alternative treatments and therapies. These Rescue Angels volunteered their time to answer questions, give guidance, and provide referrals to local resources for families starting their journey. I would eventually become one of those Rescue Angels after healing Noah. Back in 2009, it was an answer to my prayers, so I submitted a request for a Rescue Angel and waited to hear back.

Next, I checked out the TACA website ([www.tacanow.org](http://www.tacanow.org)). I discovered they had many support groups, fundraisers, and meetings, which gave me an opportunity to socialize with parents who were on the same road as me. This brought me comfort right away, and over time I obtained the knowledge and support I needed to successfully make my way through this journey.

My next stop was the bookstore. I searched for any books I could find on healing autism. The very first book I found was *Louder than Words* by Jenny McCarthy. In the same section, there was *Healing the New Childhood Epidemics* by Dr. Kenneth Bock and Cameron Stauth. I purchased both books and went home to start reading. Over the next couple of days, I read Jenny McCarthy’s book, and I was blown away. Here was a woman fighting to heal her child as she faced so many challenges along the way. This book was a God-send to me. Before reading her story, I felt so alone in the world. Even those who were close to me could not truly provide comfort or sound advice because no one could relate to the pain I was feeling inside. When I read Jenny’s story, I felt like there was hope. She spoke a lot about diet and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy, and she recommended finding a DAN! Doctor (Defeat Autism Now). I am truly grateful she decided to share her story with the world because I gained so much strength through her words. She gave great advice on what steps to take next and provided resources for finding the right doctor in my area.

### Finding the Right Doctor

After reading *Louder than Words*, it was very clear to me I had to find a doctor to treat Noah. DAN! Doctors were trained to follow a protocol to address underlying conditions to treat certain conditions. I went into my office and started making phone calls to see what I could schedule. As I called around, I found that many DAN! doctors in LA county were just not within our budget. That afternoon, I spoke to Dr. Berka who was usually busy in his office doing some kind of research. I shared with him my failing attempt to find a doctor and he said, “Don’t worry. I have



some free time tomorrow morning. Come by my office and we can make some calls together and find Noah the perfect doctor.” The very next morning, Dr. Berka and I got to work. He called a number of physicians, asking them what their protocol consisted of, what labs they used, and what their fees were. We narrowed the search down to one doctor: Dr. Rachel West, a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (D.O.) located in Los Angeles. The majority of Dr. West’s clients at the time were children on the spectrum. She did not overcharge me, and when money was tight, she allowed us to make payments. Since then, she has become my dear friend and is still our doctor to this day.

Prior to meeting with Dr. West, I decided to start Noah on a gluten-free, casein-free diet. Jenny McCarthy raved about how well the diet worked for her son Evan, so I thought I would give it a try. I cleaned out all the cabinets and the refrigerator, discarding any foods that were not a part of Noah’s new meal plan. I wanted to support my child in his new lifestyle change, so I decided to join him. I figured if Noah cannot eat it, neither can I. I cut up fruits and vegetables and put them in containers in the refrigerator to have as snacks throughout the day. I made homemade chicken nuggets with gluten-free alternative ingredients. I even attempted to make gluten-free bread. After all, the name of the recipe was “Noah’s Bread” so it had to be good. Well, I was wrong! It came out of the oven like a brick and seemed more like a weapon than a loaf of bread. That was my last attempt at making gluten-free bread in those days – I figured it was probably best to skip the bread anyway. Today, you can find great-tasting GF bread in almost every grocery store in every town, but that wasn’t the case in 2009. I guess you can say I was gluten-free when gluten-free wasn’t cool.

Noah was very much a carb kid so I did my best to find alternatives to bread and muffins. Noah would literally stuff his whole mouth with food, looking like a chipmunk, until he eventually chewed everything and swallowed. People would ask me, “Aren’t you afraid he is going to choke?” I would respond, “If he hasn’t choked by now, I doubt he ever will.” I was always sure to keep a tight eye on Noah as he was eating.

Later on, I was told by the occupational therapist that this was part of Noah’s sensory disorder. Children with sensory processing difficulties will put things in their mouths or chew when they are overstimulated. Sensory overload occurs when the child has experienced too much sensory input from their environment. It really made no sense to me; I had just grown accustomed to Noah eating a certain way.

After just a few weeks, I started to notice some changes in Noah. As I mentioned earlier, Noah only had single-word echolalia and could not speak in sentences. But in just a short time on the gluten-free, casein-free (GFCF) diet, his vocabulary grew and he could put two or more words together. I was over the moon. Was it a coincidence? I think not! This protocol was working and there was no stopping me now.

Prior to our visit with Dr. West, I requested a copy of Noah’s records from his pediatrician. I explained to the office nurse that Noah had been diagnosed with autism and we were having him treated by another doctor moving forward. Once I received the records, I thoroughly went through each page with a fine-tooth comb. As I began to review her most recent notes, I noticed that Noah’s doctor had written in his records, on three separate occasions, “Suspect Autism. Recommended to parents that Noah be further evaluated.”

I was furious. *What a lying bit\*\*!* I thought. She had never done any such thing! She literally had sat there and told me “Noah doesn’t have autism. He just needs speech,” and then she goes back and alters his medical records?! I was furious! I immediately called the pediatrician’s office and demanded that she call me or I was going to report her to the medical board.

By the end of the day, I received her phone call. I clearly asked her why she had falsified documentation in Noah's records but her only answer to me was, "I'm certain that I told you Noah was showing signs of autism. If not, I know I told your husband." Now, I get that husbands can sometimes check out, but I am positive that if she'd ever told Steve there was a possibility that his child could have autism, he would not have forgotten. Not to mention the fact that she had told me to my face Noah didn't have autism when I asked her. I spent the next hour reprimanding her on the phone until I was so exhausted I could not continue. She asked me if Noah would be returning to her office and I about died laughing. "Are you kidding?! You are lucky that I do not have the time or the energy to report you or to take you to court. Noah is better off seeing a DAN! doctor who cares about his health and wellbeing." She replied, "What? DAN! doctor? You don't think that nonsense actually works?" At this point, any ounce of patience I had went out the window. "Yes, DAN! doctor! And based on results, the protocol is already working for my child and I haven't even had his first doctor visit." After a while, I realized that this conversation was going nowhere. My last words to this woman were, "My recommendation to you is to pay more attention to your patients so you can spend less time being reprimanded by parents." Down the road, I met other parents who'd had a similar experience with the same pediatrician, so I definitely wasn't alone.

### **The First Key: Addressing Noah's Digestion**

Soon it was time to take Noah in for his first appointment with Dr. West, and I was eager to take the next steps to heal my child. She started off by explaining that she needed to run blood, urine, and fecal tests on Noah to cover all the basics and find out if there were any underlying conditions contributing to his symptoms. She praised me for being proactive and starting the diet. She also told me to remove soy products as well, stating that soy is very similar to dairy and is hard for our systems to digest. She said she could better determine a course of action for treating Noah once his test results came back. She did inform us that she suspected Noah had leaky-gut syndrome from all the antibiotics he had been taking. Over the years, Noah's eyes became glazed over, his skin ghostly and pale, and dark circles began to form around his eyes. His belly was distended, he was often constipated, and he spent a lot of time leaning over chairs or lying on his tummy to apply pressure onto his stomach because he was in so much pain. Yes, Noah definitely had something going on with his gut.

Proper digestion plays a vital role in delivering essential nutrients to the brain, and the lining of the gut is made up of countless nerves and beneficial bacteria that support good cognitive function. This idea is the primary reason why there is a connection between the health of one's gastrointestinal (GI) tract and their mental health. In order to guarantee that nutrients are delivered to the brain in the appropriate manner, it is vital to have a healthy environment in the intestines. This is what science calls "the gut-brain theory."

Children with autism, ADHD, ADD, and other developmental disabilities often suffer from stomach problems. One such problem is a digestive condition known as "leaky gut" when tight junctions in the intestines become damaged, making it possible for undigested food, bacteria, or other substances to pass through the intestinal wall and enter the bloodstream.

It took approximately two weeks to get all Noah's test results back – and to sum it up, it was not good news. Just as we suspected, Noah had a lot of bacteria and yeast in his gut, which meant we had to remove sugar and refined carbohydrates from his diet as well as gluten, dairy, and soy. His bloodwork confirmed low levels of protein, vitamins, and nutrients, but this was mainly due to yeast overgrowth in the body. When yeast coats the intestinal wall, it inhibits your body's natural ability to properly absorb proteins, vitamins, or nutrients, which is why Noah's levels

were so low. Lastly, we went over his heavy metal test results. His lead and mercury were off the charts, his aluminum was moderately high and he showed some levels of arsenic in his blood. Dr. West recommended chelation for Noah along with some supplementation and a strict diet. Now I had my marching orders and it was time to get to work.

At this point, Noah was settling into his new preschool and he really enjoyed taking the bus to school; it made him feel like a big boy. The teachers at Launch preschool were amazing with Noah and for the first time in a while, I felt like he was in a safe environment that truly understood him. This gave me the perfect opportunity to dive into my research.

### **Learning Everything I Could**

Over the next few months, I embarked on a pilgrimage into the medical world. I spent countless hours reading books, watching educational videos, surfing the internet, and attending conferences and parent support groups. I was determined to educate myself so I could do everything possible to heal my child. As Anne Lamott so beautifully said, “There are places in the heart you don’t even know exist until you love a child.” This is so true for me. I had no idea what I was capable of accomplishing until I was faced with the task of healing my little boy. I know I’m not perfect, but I know I am the perfect mother for Noah.

In June 2009, when Noah was just shy of four years old, he was evaluated by a Clinical Psychologist at Harbor Regional Center by the name of Dr. du Varglas. There were a total of three visits to HRC and I was given another packet of questionnaires to fill out and return to her on the second visit. By this time, Noah had been on his new diet for over three months and was thriving. When asked to come into the room and sit in the chair, Noah complied. He could name the pictures she put before him but had some difficulty with pronunciation. He still had trouble answering questions but was starting to put words together. He was very agile on puzzles and was able to concentrate for prolonged periods of time to complete them. He still liked to line up objects and watch things as they spun around. He was compliant with directions, which was a major improvement. In summary, Noah was getting better, but he still fell under the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, as he displayed behaviors in qualitative impairment in social interaction, communication, and repetitive patterns of behavior. His cognitive abilities scored in the low average range and his global language was in the average range. I felt encouraged. Noah was making progress and now that we’d received a formal diagnosis of Autism, I could focus on bringing my child back to life. And just when life seemed like it was back on track, the universe quickly reminded me there was more to come.

## CHAPTER 6: WHEN IT RAINS IT POURS

While I was focused on healing Noah, my husband Steve was engaged in a different battle. For over twenty years, Steve ran a successful restoration business, Paramount Disaster Recovery, helping disaster victims throughout the United States restore and rebuild their properties following major disasters. But now, Steve was caught up in a legal fight with the State of California's Department of Insurance and its commissioner.

Steve, along with his industrial hygienist, exposed certain insurance companies whose practices were failing to cover the cost of removing cancer-causing smoke and ash particulates in people's homes following the wildfires that ravaged northern California in 2007.

These recommendations, based on third-party environmental and respiratory reports, if necessary, would have cost the insurance companies a great deal of money on these claims. Because of Steve's efforts to expose their questionable practices, the Insurance Commissioner issued a cease and desist order against Steve on all his jobs, sided with the insurance companies, and fined Steve \$250,000 for acting as a public adjuster.

Unable to work and struggling to pay this heavy fine, Steve filed a lawsuit against the Department of Insurance and named the Insurance Commissioner as a party to the action. Although there was a fine line between the types of services Restoration Contractors and Public Adjusters could provide their customers in the State of California, Steve was always careful to follow the guidelines as a licensed general contractor, and he was confident that both the penalties and suspension imposed on him were unwarranted.

During this same time, we also tried to make the required payments on this egregious fine until we could no longer afford to do so. Eventually, after paying \$150,000, the Insurance Commissioner dismissed the matter and settled the balance for a lesser amount to close the case.

On July 5, 2009, the LA Times published an article about Steve that, from Steve's perspective and from the countless others who know him and used his services, was unfairly one-sided and purposefully negative, which effectively brought an end to the company he had spent over twenty years building, and ultimately, his career as a restoration contractor. I remember Steve showing me the article in the paper that Sunday morning and saying, "Don't worry honey. There is no such thing as bad press. Besides, it's a bunch of lies anyway."

Little did we know how much this article would affect our lives moving forward. Anytime Steve would consult for a new client, they would do a Google search, and the article would pop up, painting my husband as a criminal. People we thought were friends disappeared from our lives, proving they had never been our true friends.

We lost almost everything. Steve was forced to file for bankruptcy relief, and we closed the doors of Paramount Disaster Recovery for good. Our home went into foreclosure, our bank accounts were drained to pay attorney fees, and just when we thought it couldn't get any worse, the bookkeeper quit and deleted all accounting records for the previous two years.

This led to another crisis. Working together with our bank and the company accountant, it took us more than three months to recover all of the data that had been erased – at which point we discovered that our staff had been stealing money from the business. The bookkeeper had taken more than \$100,000 from us during the fourteen months she was employed with Paramount Disaster Recovery, and our marketing guy was also siphoning money (over \$80,000!) from our PayPal account for the Disaster Preparedness conference we were running, leaving us with barely enough funds to pay for the event itself. Life as we knew it was getting a whole lot worse.

My heart broke for my husband, who had spent over twenty years building a successful business, only to have it all swept out from underneath him. My mother moved to California to assist us in recovering all the books for the business and eventually became Steve's full-time bookkeeper for the next five years until she retired. I also enlisted my friend Eileen and her husband Jeff, who uprooted their family and moved in with us for several months to assist my mom and me with recovering all the deleted data. We worked day and night to recreate two years' worth of accounting and I was genuinely grateful for their sacrifice and commitment.

When we discovered the embezzlement that had been going on, we submitted everything to the local DA, but he refused to take on the case. I assumed he came to this decision after reading the article written by the LA Times. Even though any criminal charges against Steve were dismissed entirely and the insurance commissioner settled the balance of our fine for a modest amount to close out the case, it didn't change the public's perception. It blew my mind how easily an article could tarnish one's reputation.

### **No Time for Tears**

Either way, Steve and I had no time for tears or to worry about what had happened; we were focused on the future and the well-being of our family. Luckily, we were able to buy a little time in our home without paying the mortgage as we rebuilt everything from the ground up. I went on unemployment and sold anything that had any value in our home on eBay so we could keep food on the table. Steve was out knocking on doors, doing consulting jobs for fire victims while we figured out what to do next.

Eventually, Steve founded Pride Public Adjusters, a public adjusting firm, which he sold several years later before launching Strategic Response Partners. This new consulting firm would become his most successful business to date. Steve continues to speak out for disaster victims across the country to ensure they make a full recovery and are not taken advantage of by insurance companies or their paid opinion consultants. I am so proud of my husband for standing up for what he knows to be right and never surrendering when times get tough.

That wasn't the only legal battle we were up against. Steve's ex-wife, the mother of his daughter Kaitlyn, decided she wanted more money in child support, so she took Steve back to court. She petitioned to raise her child support from \$1300 each month to \$7300.

My first thought was, *What kind of crack is she smoking?!* We didn't have that kind of money. We could barely pay the \$1300 every month and couldn't pay our mortgage. I instantly went into panic mode. "What if the judge awards her the increase in child support? What will we do then?" Steve couldn't afford legal counsel, so he had to take a court-appointed attorney as recommended by the judge. Based on all the documentation provided, our attorney was able to get the judge to *lower* his child support to \$1000 each month. He even awarded Steve more time with his daughter. It's amazing how life works. Things were starting to look up.

Meanwhile, I took a full-time job in the catering department at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Long Beach to make ends meet. In exchange for room and board, my nephew Matt took care of Noah after school until I would return home from work.

### **Hearing the Four Sweetest Words for the First Time**

At this point, Noah was making great strides. He was in a good school, eating healthy, and to my amazement, my son said, "I love you mama" for the first time ever. Oh, how I longed to hear these words. I was so overwhelmed with joy that I burst into tears and gave him the biggest hug!

Every day, as I would get Noah dressed and ready for the day, I would turn to him and say, "I love you Noah" with the hope that someday he would respond. And then he did! We had visited neurologists, clinical psychologists, and doctors who all said the same thing: "Noah will never

live a normal life and he will always require one-on-one care.” We were proving them all wrong. After several months on a restricted diet, daily supplements, and chelation (to remove heavy metals), Noah had made great progress. But as his progress began to plateau, I decided it was time to implement something new.

Whenever I had the opportunity, I would attend a TACA event to learn about the newest breakthroughs in alternative treatments for autism. At one of the events, I met a group of guys who owned Advanced Hyperbaric, a hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT) center in Stanton, CA. I had read about HBOT and all the benefits it had for children with autism. The downside was that most kids lacked the ability to clear their ears in the dive chamber, which was required so they wouldn't damage their eardrums. Fortunately for Noah, he didn't have to clear his ears in a pressurized environment because he had ear tubes from all his ear infections.

The other obstacle was the cost. Typically, each dive was about \$150 and they recommend forty dives for kids with autism. We couldn't afford that, but it never stopped me. I knew God would lead me in the right direction so I decided to talk to the guys at Advanced Hyperbaric. I told them my story – about what we were going through with Noah and our financial situation. I stated that my son deserved to have this therapy and I would do whatever it took to make that possible. I asked if I could work for them in exchange for Noah's treatments. I offered to do their marketing, work the front desk on my days off, and even scrub their toilets if I had to, in exchange for HBOT for my son. I was willing to do anything for my child, and they saw that. They offered to allow me to market their company on the weekends until I worked off what I owed. I was beside myself. Finally, good news!

Over the next several months I took Noah to his HBOT twice a week. “Time to go into the spaceship Noah.” I would tell him before entering the dive chamber. He would put on a helmet connected to a tube that supplied oxygen directly into the helmet. Noah and I would go into the chamber where he could play with puzzles and watch Barney videos through the chamber window. Over time Noah's tantrums were less and less, his eye contact was getting better, and he could speak in sentences. To me, this was proof that when you set a clear intention and stick to it, you can accomplish anything. And that's what I did. There wasn't a single soul who could tell me my son would not function or lead a normal life someday because I knew in my heart that he would.

### **Everyone Has An Opinion**

However, my conviction didn't stop others from stating their opinions when it came to the welfare of my child. One day, we were visiting Steve's cousin who was a physician, and I shared with him the protocol we were using with Noah. The first words out of his mouth were, “Don't even think about not vaccinating your son.” I immediately thought, *Who the heck do you think you are? He is my child and I will do what I think is best for him, not you!* But I decided not to argue with a man for whom I had a lot of respect, so I simply told him “We will take that into consideration.” It angered me (and it still does) that so many doctors are programmed to believe that vaccines are the answer to everything when in fact, I believe they are a major contributor and pose a significant risk to kids with autism.

Later that year, we attended a holiday party at this cousin's home. When Peter saw how well Noah was developing after seven short months of following the DAN! Protocol, he pulled me aside. “Tracy, I'm not sure what it is that you are doing with Noah but keep it up. I stand corrected on what I said. You have done an amazing job, and he has come a long way. I am very proud of you.” To hear him say those words meant everything because this man has been like a second father to me over the years.

During these tough times, my husband and I grew closer as a team. It was us against the world. Back then, the divorce rate for parents of children with autism was quite high so the odds were stacked against us, but that didn't faze us at all. He would look at me and say, "Do you trust me?" and I would always respond "Yes." I married a strong, honest, and caring man whom I knew would support his family the best way he knew how. I was confident that no matter what, he would always make things better. As far as husbands go, I hit the jackpot.

As Steve was out knocking on doors consulting for new clients, I was working hard to do my part. Our new situation gave a whole new meaning to the words, "For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health." We experienced it all, building a bond that no one could break.

During the times that humbled us the most, I never lost faith. I knew that God and His angels were watching over us. That was something no one could take from me. I have always believed there are no accidents in life, and even the toughest of times make us stronger souls. As it is said in Matthew 19:26: Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." As long as my family was healthy, that was all I needed to get me through these difficult times. When I look back, I thank God for all the lessons learned, and I am truly grateful. I never knew my own strength or what I was capable of achieving when I put my mind to it until I was faced with my biggest challenge.

## CHAPTER 7: A TALE OF NEW SCHOOLS

Noah's preschool days were passing by sooner than expected and before long he would be starting kindergarten. This saddened me because the teachers and staff at Launch Preschool were nothing short of amazing. My son was truly blessed to have had the opportunity to attend a school full of educators and therapists dedicated to making a profound difference in the life of a child with autism. Noah had the best care, attention, and education imaginable during the short eighteen months he attended Launch Preschool. But now it was time to move on.

As with every transition for a child with special needs, there is a collaborative model that is standard practice to support the transition from preschool to kindergarten, which involves the preschool team, the elementary school team, and the program specialist. It started with a meeting to determine the services Noah would receive moving forward. Next, they assessed Noah's achievement levels and the ways his disabilities affected his academic performance. They then discussed any accommodations, modifications, and services required to meet his individual needs.

I can honestly tell you that I was completely lost as I sat there and listened to these experts determine what was best for my son. As a mother who had never sat through an IEP (Individual Education Plan) meeting before, it was like they were speaking a whole new language. What I do remember is that Noah's preschool teacher, Ms. Pfeiffer, advocated strongly for Noah to have a one-on-one paraeducator (aide). This would assure his physical safety and emotional well-being, provide behavioral support when necessary, and help Noah achieve academic success. I was all for it, but I could tell that the principal from Riviera Elementary School was not thoroughly convinced it was necessary. As I sat and watched each team go back and forth, it became clear to me which side cared the most for my son. The staff from Launch Preschool did not back down and Noah received the services necessary to transition to kindergarten.

Once the meeting was over, Ms. Pfeiffer explained to me that this was a win for Noah, and he was going to receive all the services he needed to be successful in his new school. It was sad to say goodbye to these wonderful ladies but they will always hold a special place in my heart for everything they did for my son.

### **The First Day of Kindergarten**

Noah's first day of kindergarten was just as I expected. I arrived early to find a parking spot and began walking Noah up to the school. You would have thought someone was killing him the way he was screaming and fighting against me. I practically had to drag him onto the school grounds and to his classroom.

Waiting at the door was Ms. Jessica, his new paraeducator. This was the woman who was to watch over my son during school hours. She was great with Noah and they developed a close bond. Over time, Jessica would become Noah's best friend. Also waiting at the door was Ms. Hirakawa, his kindergarten teacher. As the year went by, I came to believe that even though Ms. Hirakawa was a great teacher, she was not a good fit for Noah. She liked structure in her classroom and was very rigid. Unfortunately, I don't think "structure" was in Noah's vocabulary. While most kids would play with the toys in the toy box, Noah was the kid *in the toy box* playing. I came to dread picking up Noah from school because I didn't want to hear the laundry list of problems Noah had caused that day. I still don't understand how a kindergarten teacher could have so little patience. I realize Noah was a handful but overall he was a very sweet child.

A week after Noah started elementary school, I applied to have Noah enrolled in the afterschool program on campus through the YMCA. I was still working full-time at the Hyatt so



I needed to find additional services for Noah until I got off work. Because Noah had a tendency to wander, I applied for an after-school paraeducator for him through the Harbor Regional Center. They dragged their feet when it came to giving extra services to my child. As the weeks went on and the negotiation continued, HRC agreed to give Noah a shared aide at the YMCA. Of course, they had to find another child with special needs who needed care and was in the same program at Riviera Elementary. While they were figuring out the details, my fears became a reality.

### **"We Lost Your Son"**

I showed up one day to pick up Noah from the YMCA, and I asked the director how his day went. Without hesitation, she said, "Noah was not very good today" and then she simply walked away. I approached one of the staff members who was watching Noah as he sat at a desk playing with some blocks. "Can you tell me what happened with Noah today?" I asked. He looked at me with surprise and in a nervous voice said, "We lost him." I replied "What?! How did you lose my kid?" He told me that Noah had wandered off to the park adjacent to the schoolyard when they went out to play. He said, "We took all the kids over to the playground and once we were there, we realized Noah was gone. We had every adult available looking for him. It was scary but eventually, we found him in the park playing with sticks on the hillside. Didn't they contact you?" I replied, "No. Does it sound like they contacted me?" At this point, I was ready to lose my patience with the director who had just brushed me off and said my child had misbehaved. I looked around for her but she was nowhere to be found. I had to get Noah to his occupational therapy appointment so I left a message for her to call me.

Once we arrived at Pediatric Therapy Network and I turned Noah over to his occupational therapist, I sat down in the waiting room to process what had just happened. All of a sudden, a flood of emotions came over me and I burst into tears. So many horrible things could have happened to my child and it hit me like a ton of bricks. What if he had been kidnapped? What if he'd run out into the street and was hit by a car? What if he had fallen down the hill he was playing on and was seriously injured? All the what-ifs went through my mind and I started to panic. When Noah finished with his therapy, I grabbed hold of him and hugged him so tight that I started to cry. Stacey (Noah's therapist) asked me what was wrong and I told her what had happened. Once I was able to pull myself together, I put Noah in the car and drove home.

The next day I called work and explained to my boss that I needed to take some time to figure out childcare for my son. She completely understood and gave me the rest of the week off. Later that day, I received a call from Debbie, the director of the YMCA childcare program. Needless to say, she got an earful. I immediately withdrew Noah from the program and asked my nephew Matt if he would watch Noah after school until I could figure out what to do next. He agreed. Noah and Matt grew very close over the years and Matt became an essential part of our family. It was a perfect fit. Once Noah's kindergarten year was over, I resigned from my position at the Hyatt to return home. Fortunately, our finances were starting to improve, making it easier for me to stop working and be a full-time mom again. This gave me an opportunity to immerse myself in my child's social and academic environment. I was overjoyed.

### **Keeping My Eyes on Noah**

Noah began first grade in Ms. G's class and I decided to volunteer as the class mom. I coordinated with all the parent volunteers to make sure there was someone there every day to assist Ms. G with grading papers, cleaning up the classroom, and so on. Whatever assistance she needed, I made sure it was handled. When there wasn't a parent volunteer, I filled in all the gaps. It felt

good to be present for my child and to observe him in a classroom setting. I can tell you this... there certainly are no accidents.

One day, I happened to be in Noah's class at the perfect time. As I was grading papers, I noticed Ms. G pull Noah's paraeducator (Jessica) away from Noah several times to pass out papers, leaving Noah unattended. Once class was over, I explained to Ms. G that if she needed assistance, that is what parent volunteers were for, and she should not use Noah's paraeducator for other classroom duties. She was aware that Noah had a tendency to wander and that the YMCA had lost him the previous year, but I made sure to reiterate my concerns.

The following week when I was volunteering in her classroom, she did exactly what I'd asked her not to do. She asked Jessica to pass out papers for her again. I thought to myself, *What on earth does she think she is doing?! Is she purposely trying to make me angry?* Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Noah get up from his seat and wander out of the classroom. I got up and followed him to see where he would go. Walking as fast as his little legs could take him, he headed across the school playground toward the park. I called out his name and he turned around. "Oh, hi Mommy!" Noah said. I walked over to him and took his hand in mine. I explained to him the dangers of going off by himself and walked him back to the classroom.

When I got to the doorway, I asked for Ms. G to come out so I could speak with her for a moment. It took everything in me not to lose my cool with her as I explained, once again, what happens when you take Noah's paraeducator away from him. Her response was, "I think it would be best if you no longer volunteer in my classroom." I explained that neither I nor my son would be returning to her classroom, and I picked up Noah's things and took him home. Before leaving, I left a message for the principal to call me to discuss the matter before I would return Noah to school. I was very clear that if I allowed Noah to go back to Riviera, he would have to be moved to a different class.

Later that evening, the school principal gave me a call. Initially, she told me that there was no room in any other class to move Noah. I replied, "Either you move my son to another classroom or Noah will not return to school, and we will be forced to hire an attorney." The next day she called Steve and told him that Noah would be moved to Ms. Coleman's class. Steve always came off as the nice parent because I was the one on the frontlines battling with the school. But that was fine with me; if we had to play good-cop-bad-cop to keep Noah safe, I had no problem being the bad cop.

### **Friends and Allies**

When it came to learning, Noah was incredibly smart. When I read to him as a child, he would memorize the words I read and instantly was able to repeat them. After reading a book to him a few times, he could recite the book back to me from memory. It amazed me because I struggled to read when I was a child, but it came naturally to Noah. Academics were one thing I didn't have to worry about with my son – unless Noah didn't like his teacher. If he was in a stressful environment, he would not apply himself, so it was important to match him up with the right teachers over the years. Noah had the same teacher for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade, a wonderful woman named Mrs. Williamson who even gave me her personal cell number so I could contact her when necessary. She was one of many teachers who made a profound difference in Noah's life.

Initially, Noah struggled with making friends in elementary school. Some kids were cruel and would make fun of Noah, but there was one kid who took Noah under his wing. His name was Michael. Now Michael was the popular, athletic, outgoing kid who liked everyone, but he saw something special in Noah and watched out for him over the years. In 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, Ms.

Williamson sat Noah next to Michael because he had a gift for keeping Noah calm in stressful situations. Over time, Noah became more independent and was able to make friends more easily.

So many people made a difference in Noah's life but one lady stood out from the rest, and that was the ASSISTT (Autism Spectrum Services, Inclusion Support Team for Torrance) therapist Sue Espinosa. Her job was to provide academic, social, and life skills to students who had learning, emotional, or physical disabilities. As part of Noah's IEP, he was given a few hours a week with Ms. Sue, including lunch club where he could take his friends to the ASSISTT room to have lunch and play games. This was a great way for Noah to learn how to communicate with his peers. When Noah would have a meltdown in class or struggle with overstimulation, Ms. Sue was there to guide him through the process. This wasn't just a job for her, it was personal. Ms. Sue was also the mother of a boy with autism. She knew the struggles these children faced and she treated each child as though they were her own. Not only was she a great support system to Noah but to me as well. There were many times when I felt so defeated, and she would know just the right thing to say to make me feel better. God would always bless me with love and guidance from Angels, and Ms. Sue was definitely one to remember.

### **Noah the Pop Star**

Even though there were many challenging times, there were also moments that reminded me of how inspiring Noah could truly be. After watching the movie Megamind, Noah heard the song "Bad" by Michael Jackson (MJ) for the first time. He immediately did a Google search on MJ and started listening to all his songs and watching his YouTube videos. Eventually, Noah would become known as "the kid who loved Michael Jackson" at Riviera Elementary School.

In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Noah entered his first talent show, dancing to "Thriller" by Michael Jackson. When he told me he was going to perform at the talent show I immediately panicked. My first thought was, *what if they make fun of him?* But Noah did not care. He was determined to show off his dance skills and nothing was going to stand in his way. I had spent a good portion of my life learning various forms of dance from modern jazz to ballroom, so I knew how to choreograph Noah's performance. After counting out the steps to the music, I was able to teach Noah some of MJ's moves and create the perfect dance routine. We purchased a costume and a wig so Noah could look the part, and his friend Kortney dressed up as a zombie and danced around in the background.

His performance received a standing ovation and Noah suddenly became the "cool kid" at school. This was just the first of many talent shows where Noah would perform to MJ's music. And I realized that our roles were reversed; this is where the child became the teacher. As I was trying to convince Noah that it wasn't a good idea to perform, he lived without fear of embarrassment and danced like no one was watching. I am forever proud.

### **The Middle School Nightmare**

As elementary school was coming to an end, we began to prepare for middle school. For some reason, I thought it would be a breeze; sadly, Richardson Middle School turned out to be a complete nightmare.

Most children on the spectrum don't do well with change, and Noah was no exception. Middle school meant six different classes with six different teachers, a new paraeducator, and a load of challenges we were not prepared for. Every day was something new. He either didn't like his teacher or he was arguing with his aide. I spent more time battling with the principal and school counselor than I care to explain. There were times when I would pick up Noah and he would be shaking, crying, and sick to his stomach from the stress.

The biggest battle was with Noah's paraeducators. As you know by now, I had been a huge advocate for Noah having a one-on-one paraeducator during his early school years. But by 6th grade, it was clear that Noah really didn't need that one-on-one supervision. Our interventions and therapies were working, and Noah had made such great progress that we no longer needed to worry about his wandering off or getting from class to class as he was quite capable of doing it all on his own. Unfortunately, Richardson Middle School didn't see things the same way. They insisted that Noah be assigned a dedicated paraeducator who stuck with him throughout the school day.

One day, Noah came home gripped with anxiety, stating that his aide was threatening him because he asked her to keep her distance. He felt embarrassed having someone follow him around, he said, when he was perfectly capable at this point in his life to take care of himself. I pleaded with the school to remove the paraeducator from his IEP, but they refused. Each day Noah's para would send home a parent log stating his progress for the day. In one notation, the para stated the following, "If Noah continues to disobey me, I will have to discipline him to the fullest extent." You can imagine what came out of my mouth when I read that.

I immediately contacted the school and asked to speak with the principal. After he read the parent log, he scrambled to find the right words to say, realizing he could have a lawsuit on his hands if I chose to pursue the matter. I did hire an advocate to represent Noah moving forward and pulled him from school. Dr. West (Noah's functional medicine doctor) wrote a note to the school excusing his absences until it was a safe environment for him to return to.

A month went by and I was doing my best to homeschool Noah until the situation was resolved and he could return to school with a new aide. We had meeting after meeting and I was not caving. The longer I kept Noah home, the more money the school lost, so they were not happy. After the new year, Noah returned to school. Not even two months went by and my son was stressed out by the new paraeducator. At this point, the advocate explained that she could only do so much and recommended we hire an attorney. The last thing I wanted was to deal with a lawsuit and attorney fees. Fortunately for us, things were about to change.

One day that spring, when Steve returned home from one of his business trips, we went for a walk and had a serious discussion about Noah's education. Steve could see that I was at my wit's end and I was tired of fighting with the school district. He said, "Honey, you've always wanted to move back to San Diego – so let's do it." I had lived in San Diego when Steve and I first met and it has always been my favorite place to live. "Absolutely!" I said, "Let's go!"

### **A New Start in San Diego**

I wasn't wasting any time so I immediately started looking for rental properties in San Diego. We eventually found a place to rent in Carlsbad, which put Noah in the San Marcos School District. It was like day and night. San Elijo Middle School was very accommodating and instantly made Noah feel at home in his new school. They removed the paraeducator from his IEP and put him in collaborative classes, which meant that there would be an aide in the back of the classroom for those who needed assistance. It was the perfect place for Noah to learn and grow and I have tremendous respect for the staff at SEMS. Finally, Noah was in an environment where he could focus on learning.

While San Elijo was a big improvement over Noah's previous school, every school has bullies, and children with autism are frequently their targets. In seventh grade, Noah was attacked by three students in the boys' locker room. Because there is no adult supervision in the locker rooms, Noah was left to defend himself against a group of boys all on his own. Luckily, Noah had taken martial arts classes most of his life, so he knew very well how to protect himself

and that is exactly what he did. While he didn't strike anyone, he was able to block all their punches and kicks until an adult finally came in and stopped the fight. One of the kids even recorded the entire incident on video, so there was no question as to what had happened.

Needless to say, I was not a happy parent. My first question to my son was, "Why didn't you hit them back?" but Noah replied, "I didn't want to hurt anyone mom." This instantly brought tears to my eyes. Irrationally, I wanted those kids to suffer, but I realized that was not a very Christian-like impulse! Not to mention that my son would have faced a whole new set of problems if he ever did strike back. To say that Noah is a strong kid is an understatement. He has always been in the 95th to 100th percentile in height and weight and has an incredible amount of strength. If he ever hit someone, I'm certain he would cause significant damage.

I knew this was not the first time Noah had been bullied, so I consulted with him on alternative options: what if we moved schools? What if I went back to homeschooling? Noah would have none of it. "No, Mom," he said, "I don't want to change schools again. I'll be fine. I can handle it." At this moment I realized Noah was much tougher than I gave him credit for.

This is where my son taught me a very valuable lesson. I had to let him grow up and trust that God would watch over him. I had succeeded in making him a strong, resilient young man able to take care of himself. Now I had to let him take the reins.

### **Noah - The Top Fund Raiser in the Country**

Every year San Elijo Middle School did a fundraiser to raise money for school laptops. If you raised a certain amount of money, you could earn prizes. Noah was excited about the possibility of winning a prize, maybe even the biggest prize, so he asked his dad if he could call all his clients and ask them to donate. Steve, motivated to teach his son some marketing skills, told Noah that he would give him the names and numbers of his closest business associates, clients, and family members, but Noah had to make the calls himself. Steve made sure to reach out to each individual prior to giving Noah their names and numbers, preparing them for Noah's call. Motivated to win the prize, Noah took on the task.

He called each person on the list saying, "Hi. This is Noah. I am doing a fundraiser for my school. Will you donate?" Most of them readily agreed and said they would get online and donate. As they attempted to talk with Noah about the fundraiser, his response was, "Thank you! Bye!" Then Noah would sit on the computer and wait for them to make the donation. In Noah's mind, this was something they should do immediately, after all, they had promised to donate. If a day went by and they still hadn't made a donation, Noah would call them again. "Hi. This is Noah. You said you were going to make a donation, but you didn't. Can you please do so now?" Steve and I followed up on each call to apologize for our son not having the patience to wait a few days. Gracefully, they said they were not bothered by the phone calls at all – they appreciated Noah's enthusiasm and thought he would make a great salesman someday. They were right! Noah became the top fundraiser in the whole nation, earning several prizes, including the one he wanted.

We were thrilled, but being a star at school was not that simple for Noah. Like so many parts of our journey, we took two steps forward and one step back.

Soon after, I was called into the school for a meeting by the assistant principal. Noah's caseworker met me at the front desk. I asked him what the meeting was about, and he said, "Well, we have some good news and some bad news." *Oh no*, I thought, *what now?* He then said, "The good news is, Noah is the top fundraiser in the nation. But the bad news is, Noah made a bully list and posted it on the school's google classroom site."

Apparently, Noah had named all the kids who ganged up on him in the locker room and added a few celebrities and politicians to the list as well (which I found a little comical) and posted the list on Google classroom for all to see.

When I sat with Noah's assistant principal, I could immediately tell she was on Noah's side. Ms. Kurylo (the assistant principal) was joined by Ms. O'Connor (the counselor), and they placed a paper in front of me titled "Noah's Bully List." They told me they understood Noah's motives for making a list, but posting it in Google Classroom was off-limits. Based on California law, they had to enforce some sort of disciplinary action. They explained to Noah that there had to be consequences for his actions, but they also were careful to assure him this was just a minor setback. He would face a one-day in-school suspension, but Noah could still participate in the fundraiser celebration that day because they were so proud that he was the top fundraiser in the nation. I hadn't seen a staff advocate for Noah this much since Launch Preschool. I recall many times when Noah would be stressed in class and Ms. O'Connor allowed him to sit in her office and do his work alongside her. Again, I was reminded that there was still goodness in the world, and I will forever be grateful to these women for always looking out for my boy.

Noah completed middle school like a champ with the assistance of a great staff. He has been a wonderful friend to many kids, always supportive and helpful to others in need. What once was my little boy has grown up to become a kind and loving young man that I am so proud to call my son.

## CHAPTER 8: LETTING GO AND LETTING GOD

By the time Noah entered high school, many of the challenges we had faced were typical teenage trials. However, as with all kids with autism, Noah still faces some genuine health issues as well. Ironically, the remarkable progress Noah has made in healing from autism has put a new twist on staying healthy.

Over the past few years, Noah has put on some excess weight. It started with his reoccurring PANDAS (auto-immune) flair-ups when we were forced to put him on several rounds of antibiotics, which in turn brought back the *leaky gut syndrome* that had taken us years to clear up when he was a child. But it's a lot more challenging to control what my teenager eats; he is more independent, and his part-time job as a film editor means he has his own money to buy food.

For most of Noah's life, he was very limited in food choices. We fed him primarily gluten-free, dairy-free, soy-free foods, and we had to avoid all refined sugars and carbohydrates. The day came when Noah said to me, "I have been limited most of my life on what I can eat. I just want to eat food that tastes good regardless of what it does to my body. I know you love me mom, but you have to let me make my own food choices." This broke my heart; I never wanted my son to feel limited on any level. All I have ever wanted is for him to be healthy.

### COVID-19 Pandemic

When COVID-19 first struck in March 2020, during Noah's first year of high school, I took full advantage of the opportunity to increase our physical activity, consume more nutritious foods, spend more time with family, and most importantly, teach Noah some essential life skills. I decided that since he would be out of school for several weeks, it would be the ideal time to get to work and prioritize self-care. Teaching teenagers how to meet their own needs is essential, whether or not they have special needs. I used this time to ensure Noah mastered some practical everyday skills such as doing laundry, household chores, cooking, cleaning, and other skills (taught by his cousin Michael) such as changing a tire or the oil in his car. I know Noah will eventually go off to college and live on his own, and we wanted to ensure he knew how to take care of himself and his surroundings.

Two weeks of quarantine turned into more than a year before my son returned to school, which led to a significant regression in his social skills. Our growing dismay over the shut-downs and mandates led to many political debates in our home with our son. We discovered that Noah had been programmed at school to accept the narrative by watching CNN news in class daily for current events and through peer pressure. I became the crazy parent, and my son became the know-it-all teenager.

This has presented us with a major concern for Noah's safety. He has been force-fed an ideology that paints his parents as conspiracy theorists and all vaccines as safe. I am all for people having the right to choose what they put into their bodies – but for my son, any vaccine is a game of Russian roulette. Since his vaccine injury in 2006, Noah has been diagnosed with mitochondrial dysfunction, the inability of mitochondria to fully burn food and oxygen to produce energy, which is essential for normal cell function. According to a 2006 study, children with mitochondrial dysfunction face a significant risk of immune-activating events following vaccination.<sup>1</sup> My biggest concern is that Noah will take it upon himself someday to get vaccinated without the understanding that his immune system is not built to withstand another vaccine. By age three, Noah had received over 38 different vaccines, most of which he had a severe reaction to, including his regression, so I think I have a valid reason to be concerned.

Today, Noah takes it upon himself to eat what he wants outside our home, which isn't always the best and has caused some reoccurring medical issues. For the most part, we can address those issues with supplementation, IV therapy, and other alternative treatments. Typically, I make pretty healthy dinners, and Noah doesn't fight me on eating his vegetables as long as it's something he likes. We're limited to broccoli, green beans, carrots, and cauliflower. I know I should be grateful he eats any vegetables at all because most kids with autism are very picky eaters.

Every day Noah takes a handful of vitamins prescribed by his doctor based on his bloodwork. He also goes in for the occasional IV treatment, which is necessary to boost his immune system and control his auto-immune issues. He works out with a trainer three times a week and frequently goes on walks to keep his cardio up. There is so much that I ask of Noah and he never complains. He just responds, "Okay mom, no problem." Most kids who repeatedly have to get an IV or blood taken put up some sort of fight, but not Noah. I am so grateful he is willing to do whatever I ask him to do in order to stay healthy. The catch is that if I am out of town or busy with appointments, none of those things gets done. No different than asking him to do his laundry. If I stand over him, he will comply – but if I don't, he'll opt out every time.

For the longest time, I wondered if Noah would ever drive a car. Plenty of kids these days don't want to drive, and Noah is not the exception. I literally had to threaten that if he didn't get his driver's license by his senior year of high school, I would make him walk to school. That definitely was a motivator because we live about eight miles from his school and the walk home is all uphill. I feel it is essential for Noah to have his driver's license before going to college because he is not the type of person who will take a bus.

There is a feeling of independence that comes with getting one's driver's license, and I think Noah is starting to appreciate that. After Noah's last driving lesson, he returned and said, "I think I will be ready by next month to take my DMV driving exam." I thought, *There is no way that would happen any time soon.* He drives almost every day, and with practice, he is getting much better ... but I feel he has a long way to go. Or maybe I am just an overprotective mom.

As we prepare for Noah to graduate and go to college next year, my fears about what lies ahead as he becomes more independent have grown significantly. Will he leave home only to sit in a dorm room and play video games 24/7? Ugh! What will I do with myself? My main job over the last seventeen years has been to care for my son. Sure, I work, but my priority has always been Noah. I'm not sure I am ready to be an empty-nester yet.

I have come to understand that I have to trust the process because Noah is on his own perfect journey. I continue to tell myself: "Let go and let God," because in the end, it is not up to me, and I know God has a perfect plan for my son. My job is to keep Noah safe and healthy for as long as possible. But eventually, he will grow up and be on his own. He constantly tells me, "Mom, I will not be a grown man someday who lives at home with his parents." It makes me laugh, but it is so true. We teach our children as much as we can for the period of time that they are in our care, and then it is up to God and all His angels to watch over them.

In many ways, my journey with Noah has been no different from any other parent's journey. We all want what's best for our children, and we do our best with the knowledge and skills we have been given. Because of the particular challenges Noah faced, I made it a point to read every book, search every website, and seek out every expert and treatment plan in an effort to educate myself so my son can live a healthy, happy life filled with memories that will last forever. What I discovered along the way was that there is so much to be learned *from your child* and wisdom



you cannot find in books or at school. Noah has been my most prominent teacher, and he has taught me more about myself than I even knew existed. I am who I am because of my son, and I am proud of the *Warrior Mom* I have become.

To say that Noah has overcome many obstacles in his seventeen years of life is an understatement. Fifteen years ago my son could barely function, now he has no limitations. There are so many ways this story could have played out but by the grace of God we have been blessed. Noah will go on to college next year and begin his journey as an adult. He has been given the tools to take care of himself and he will always have his family watching over him; the rest I leave up to his angels. When Dr. Berka told me so many years ago that Noah would be okay, I never imagined a future as bright as the one that lies before him today.