

SPOTLIGHT

Family experience led Tomerlin into autism advocacy role

By Justin Graves Sports Writer Feb 9, 2018



Todd Tomerlin and his son Gage, 17, who live in eastern Limestone County, were among the proponents of an autism therapy coverage bill that passed in the Legislature in 2017. [MARY SELL/DECATUR DAILY FILE]

ATHENS — Glancing through his schedule, Todd Tomerlin tried to find an open date. There were not many.

From his professional career as an IT technician at Steelcase in Athens, to countless hours of volunteer service, Tomerlin is always busy.

“But that’s not a bad thing,” the Limestone County resident said. “If you’re passionate about the things you do, then it’s time well spent.”

When Tomerlin is not at work, a large portion of his personal time is devoted to autism advocacy. He is the north Alabama community and program coordinator with the Alabama Autism Society. In this role, Tomerlin and his wife Tammy help coordinate events and fundraisers in the Tennessee Valley for autism awareness.

Tomerlin also is a political advocate for legislation that affects individuals and families impacted by autism.

This past year, Tomerlin made numerous trips to Montgomery, speaking to state lawmakers about a bill that extends insurance coverage for autism therapy and ensures access to those services for low-income families. Last May, Gov. Kay Ivey signed the bill into law.

"That was a major step in this state for families affected by autism," Tomerlin said. "Getting that legislation passed is something we had been working on for a very, very long time.

"You know, we've got a lot on our plates, but when you can help do something meaningful that helps others, it's time well spent."

For the Tomerlin family, autism awareness is personal. Shortly after his second birthday, their son Gage was diagnosed with autism.

"It was a life-changing moment," Tammy Tomerlin said. "The signs were there, but as a parent, it doesn't set in until you hear it from a doctor. But we stayed positive and started looking into everything we could do to help."

Tom and Tammy had to make significant adjustments. At home, the family tried to create a comfortable, low-stress environment for their son. They also took safety precautions, such as placing stickers on the family vehicles to notify emergency workers that an autistic child was onboard.

For children with autism, communication skills and social settings can be difficult. This was the case for Gage, who is a special needs student at East Limestone High School.

"It's been a process," Todd Tomerlin said. "Throughout the years, we've taken steps to help Gage with the development of his communication and social skills. With the right therapy, and lots of love and care, Gage has made a lot of progress over the years. He's come a long way."

Outside speech therapy, however, can be expensive. The Tomerlin family was able to handle the financial burden, but while taking their son to sessions, they met families who were not as fortunate.

That's what pulled Todd Tomerlin into advocacy.

"All children struggling with autism need these opportunities," he said. "Money shouldn't be another obstacle they have to overcome."

The Tomerlin family's journey into advocacy began small. They started attending fundraisers, like the annual Walk for Autism in Huntsville.

But eventually, as Todd and Tammy began to attend more events, their roles expanded. Todd eventually was selected to take a major role for Autism Society of Alabama as a community and program coordinator.

This new position also required him to step out of his comfort zone as a political advocate for legislation concerning autism.

"Twenty years ago, I never pictured myself as the kind of person who could go to the Capitol and talk to lawmakers," Tomerlin said. "That was a whole new experience."

Todd Tomerlin might have been nervous about talking to lawmakers. His wife was confident he would do well.

"This is important to him, and I knew he would do a great job," she said.

The main reason Todd and Tammy are strong advocates for communication therapy is because they have seen it work. Through the assistance of therapy, Gage has made significant progress with communication skills. He also can read, but Todd Tomerlin said he is trying to improve his reading comprehension skills.

"We're always seeing progress," Todd Tomerlin said.

Even though Gage has been able to communicate with others for years, he still struggles at times in social settings.

Two years ago, Gage made a significant breakthrough with his social skills. That progress was the result of an unlikely source: the 2016 presidential election.

While at home watching election coverage with the family, Gage began showing interest in Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders.

"The whole thing is kind of ironic," said Todd Tomerlin, who is a conservative.

"Whenever Bernie was on TV speaking, Gage would stop whatever he was doing and watch. He

became pretty passionate about it, watching all the coverage. He watched the speeches. He watched the debates. He watched it all.”

The social breakthrough occurred in January 2016, when Sanders was making a campaign stop in Birmingham.

“When Gage found out about that, he wanted to go,” Todd Tomerlin said. “I knew there would be a lot of people there, but I took him to the rally. The way he handled that social setting, being around all of those people, I was absolutely thrilled. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t voting for Bernie. Gage was happy. That’s the only thing that mattered.”

Getting legislation passed into law was a major milestone, but that does not mean Todd and Tammy plan to trim the amount of time they devote to autism advocacy.

Both plan to continue working with the Autism Society of Alabama, coordinating fundraisers and events.

“Children with autism have a lot of needs,” Todd Tomerlin said. “It’s pretty demanding on families. But, for families with a child who never has spoken, having that therapy, and then finally hearing those first words is wonderful.

“You eventually want the children to be independent as possible. Hopefully they’ll be able to have a job and sustain work in the community. We want to help as many families as possible — help them get the therapy and resources they need to make that a reality.”

How does the family manage this demanding schedule?

“My wife, Tammy, is the rock that holds everything together,” Todd Tomerlin said. “Without her, we would fall apart. She’s a great wife and mother — and inspiration to all of us.”

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