

# Milestones Autism Resources to celebrate 20th anniversary

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Milestones Autism Resources, a Warrensville Heights-based nonprofit focused on educating, coaching and connecting the autism community, is preparing to celebrate its 20th anniversary alongside its annual National Autism Conference, which will be held virtually June 15 and June 16.

Created by Executive Director Ilana Hoffer Skoff and operations director Mia Buchwald Gelles in 2003 when facing autism diagnoses for their children, the pair told the Cleveland Jewish News that reaching the 20th year of the organization and its conference feels "significant."

"When you think about all of the effort you put into create something, educate and mentor within your own family, I think for us, we're grateful we can give that back," said Skoff, who lives in Beachwood and is a member of Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights and Pepper Pike. "That we can help others. We're extremely grateful for the support of the community. While we started as two people, we're very proud of the fact we're here representing a team of 18 staff members, and honored we're part of a leadership team of staff, board members and autistic individuals and their families that share this dedication in improving outcomes for autistic individuals."

Building Milestones Autism Resources was a journey in itself, Gelles said. The organization started with a smaller-scale conference featuring a single keynote speaker, a grant from the Mt. Sinai Health Foundation and a single email account that the women monitored together once they were able to put their children to bed.

That first conference attracted over 400 attendees. The annual conference is now attended by thousands of people and features



Gelles

Skoff

80 sessions over two days.

This year's keynote speaker is Eric Garcia, an autistic journalist who covers politics and policy in Washington, D.C., for The Independent and MSNBC. Other highlights include talks by author, consultant, advocate and scholar Paula Kluth; Maria David-Pierre, a licensed mental health counselor, autism awareness advocate and founder of Autism in Black; Peter Gerhardt, executive director of the EPIC School in Paramus, N.J.; and Haley Moss, a lawyer, neurodiversity expert and author.

"You put in the time, invest efforts and build those partnerships and relationships, but you never know how it's going to come out," said Gelles, who lives in Cleveland Heights and attends Beth El-The Heights Synagogue in Cleveland Heights. "It's amazing that 20 years later we're here with a huge conference. Who could've foreseen that?"

When Skoff and Gelles were first compiling research and information for their own families back in 2003, it was because they felt the medical field did not provide enough guidance on what to do and how to find support and guidance through the diagnosis.

"It was a lonely journey, for sure, and there was not a lot of talk about autism," Skoff said. "Finding Mia and having a relationship with her, while supporting each other, was a gift. Milestones grew from that recognition - finding someone to work with both on the professional

and human side, as a friend to support each other. That really helped me feel like I could manage and determine a way to move forward."

After finding each other and collaborating on ways to approach an autism diagnosis, the pair knew they couldn't keep it to themselves, Skoff said.

"How could we learn all of this and not share it?" she said. "We felt the gap in the community and wanted to share the knowledge and information with others so they could also have an easier time. And that was the right thing to do."

No organization stays the same over a single year, let alone 20. As society became more willing to discuss neurodiversity and autism, Milestones Autism Resources adapted alongside it, Gelles said.

"Even just 10 years ago, we shifted our focus on the transitional years of after high school and adulthood," she said. "Half the calls and intake forms from our website are related to issues in teens to adults. That has been a huge shift. We got out ahead of that trend and are invested in that. As things in life get more complex to deal with, there are challenges families face while navigating various systems during school. But, during that time, you know who to talk to. Beyond high school, it's a little bit of a different story."

That willingness to adapt has always sat at the center of Milestones' work, Skoff said. Starting as just the conference, it evolved to add its free Helpdesk - which serves as an autism services guide - and now also offers individual and family consultation, self-advocate social groups, professional consultation and training, and teen and adult service. Its newest addition to services is the Milestones Autism Planning tool, which helps guide families and autistic individuals from early childhood through adulthood.

"What has shifted is recognizing that people

are part of a community and interdependent," Skoff said. "Just as Mia and I have different skills, autistic individuals also come with differences in skills and experiences. Here, we are thinking about how we can support them so they can then advocate for themselves."

Looking to the next 20 years of Milestones Autism Resources, Skoff said the main focus will be deepening partnerships and collaborations with community health care partners. That way, autistic individuals and their families have direct access to resources right at diagnosis, she said.

"We have the opportunity to be open about it, to be encouraged to seek help and advocate for those needs," she said. "But families still have a very hard time managing everything they have on their plates. COVID made it more difficult to keep up with those needs. So, a focus in the coming years will be on making it easier for families to access the help they need. We just want to make the process easier."

Gelles and Skoff were both honored by the Cleveland Jewish News as members of the 2015 class of CJN 18 Difference Makers. To read more about them, visit [cjn.org/18dm](http://cjn.org/18dm).



**WHAT:** Milestones National Autism Conference

**WHEN:** June 15-16

**WHERE:** Virtual sessions, which will be available to stream through Aug. 15

**TICKETS:** Visit [bit.ly/3NgEZOc](http://bit.ly/3NgEZOc). Cost depends on who is registering, with school district, professional, parent and family member, autistic individual, full-time student and medical student, fellows, residents and graduate nursing student discounts. Need-based scholarships are also available.