

# Out of Tragedy Comes

# Hope



9/11

helps widow  
realize dream  
of helping autistic  
children

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By Anne Stover - Staff writer

May 2004 Coppel Gazette / All about Coppel

The Brent Woodall Foundation for Exceptional Children, an organization giving hope to families of children with autism, was born out of Coppel resident Tracy Pierce Woodall's desire to make a difference in the lives of autistic children -- even as she was experiencing unimaginable tragedy in her own life.

The foundation is named in memory of her late husband, Brent Woodall, who died in the attack on the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. She was just five weeks pregnant with their first child, a daughter named Pierce. Woodall and her husband had just begun

developing the idea for a foundation that would provide free education to families of children with autism, a complex developmental disorder affecting the function of the brain in areas of cognition, social interaction and communication skills, when 9/11 took its toll.

"Things fell apart for a while," Woodall said. However, after she moved to Coppel in 2002 to be close to her family, she revisited the idea and was determined to make the foundation happen. "I told my brother that I really wanted to do it, but I didn't know how to do it," Woodall said.

They decided to start the foundation by forming a board of directors including members with expertise in psychology, social work, education, accounting and technical support. "Everyone that has come on to the foundation may or may not know anything about autism, but they bring support and understanding. They want to make a difference," Woodall explained. Like several members of the board, Brent did not know much about autism either, but he wanted to help his wife make a difference. Woodall said he was always supportive of her and her work with autistic children. He had even planned to take a trip with her to Romania, where she would be working with profoundly autistic orphaned children.

"The more he learned about it and the more times he came to see me at work, and the more he sat at home and helped me put things together for the kids, the more he became involved. He really wanted for me to be able to give this to families for free," Woodall said.

She decided to start a foundation offering free education, training and support because services for children with autism are extremely expensive, and she wanted to give parents the opportunity to learn how to help their autistic children. She explained how parents would come to her not knowing what to do with their autistic child because they had never received training in how to help their child learn and function.

"I feel so strongly about working for a program that doesn't charge people," she said. "There would be no socioeconomic discrimination because autism doesn't discriminate. One in 250 children is affected by it regardless of race, ethnicity or where you live. A parent should receive this training and have the power to help themselves. Why should it cost a fortune? It shouldn't; it should be free."

The Brent Woodall Foundation is the vehicle she uses to get education, training and advice to parents and families of autistic children who need it. "Our mission is to give parents the tools to navigate the system and get the services they need quickly," she said.

It can take months before an evaluation of a child with autism can be performed, and it can take even longer to begin therapy because many schools and programs for autistic children are overwhelmed with families waiting to get in. While parents are waiting for a program to open they can use what they have learned through the

services of the Brent Woodall Foundation to help their child, explained Woodall.

"Time is the only enemy of autism. Early intervention is the key," she said.

Woodall has been working with autistic children for 11 years. Six of those years were spent working for the founding chapter of the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC) in New York. She worked at ARC for six years and helped develop their Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) program, a form of therapy Woodall said is the only proven method to teach children with autism.

"It seems to be the way autistic children learn the best," Woodall said.

She described the therapy as an individualized program based upon the assessment of the child's skills and deficits. Therapy begins with basic skills and builds upon these skills using repetition and positive reinforcement.

She explained ABA therapy is administered by trained professionals; however, parents should also be trained in ABA therapy in order to support and augment treatment being provided by professionals. And when families cannot afford to pay for outside professionals, they can provide the treatment to their children.

"Some well-funded, excellent programs don't educate the parents. The school knows what to do but the parents don't," Woodall said.

She first saw ABA therapy for autistic children at work while she was a graduate student in psychology at Columbia University. As she was looking for a research position in psychology, she came across an advertisement looking for someone to help the parents with an autistic daughter named Nechama. Woodall had no experience with autistic children, but would receive training if she agreed to help. She jumped at the opportunity, and from that point on has dedicated her life to helping children with autism.

"When I met her, I thought she was so fascinating because she was profoundly autistic but she had a very high IQ, so she had a lot of interesting skills but not like a typical child," Woodall said.

“I watched a woman work with her using ABA, and I was completely floored by how ABA transformed [Nechama] who was more like a creature into a little girl.” ABA taught Nechama how to respond and behave, and she was learning how to interact socially. Woodall said Nechama was happy like she had not been before.

“It was an epiphany for me. I said, ‘I’m going to do this for the rest of my life,’ and that was it. I’ve been fortunate enough to meet people that have shown me how to do ABA and do it properly,” said Woodall, who went on to specialize in autism in her doctoral work at the New School in New York City.

Additionally, Woodall has traveled to Barlad, Romania, five times in the last three years to work with autistic children in orphanages using ABA. The Brent Woodall Foundation is a sponsor of Cristi’s Outreach, a foundation in Barlad providing expertise, education and therapy for orphaned special needs children. The Brent Woodall Foundation has helped facilitate adoption of some of these children in the United States.

The Woodall Foundation also provides modest financial support to families of autistic children in the form of grants and resource programs. Next year, the foundation hopes to start a center-based program in which Woodall and a team of professionals can provide evaluations of children with autism.

Currently, the Brent Woodall Foundation, a non-profit charitable organization, is funded solely by Tracy Woodall. The foundation had its first fund-raiser April 24, at The Crescent Club in Dallas, after Woodall returned from Romania and Russia, where she recently adopted a daughter.

More fund-raisers are scheduled for New York and Dallas in the future.

To find out more about the Brent Woodall Foundation for Exceptional Children or to make a charitable donation, visit [www.woodallkids.org](http://www.woodallkids.org). To find out more about the Brent Woodall Foundation for Exceptional Children or to make a charitable donation, visit [www.woodallkids.org](http://www.woodallkids.org).