



The fervor and the Solace

A Pregnant Tracy Woodall lost her husband on Sept. 11. His death became the wellspring for the young mother's calling – to help families of autistic children.

By **LAURA GRIFFIN**

Special Contributor to The Morning News

As a college student, Tracy Woodall watched in awe as therapists transformed a violent and incoherent autistic girl into an affectionate, loving child.

She felt she had found her calling and dreamed that some day she could make such a powerful difference in the lives of other autistic children. A decade later, the dream still burning but not fully realized, Ms. Woodall's world collapsed when her husband and staunchest supporter, Brent, died in the Sept. 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center.

Five weeks pregnant with her first child, she was enveloped in

a fog of grief. Days ran together. Nights were long. For nearly nine months, she could not imagine a life without him.

But motherhood has a way of changing things.

Holding her new daughter, Pierce, in the delivery room, she knew she had to pull herself out of that hole.

"With the grief, it was all very black. I couldn't see any future," Ms. Woodall says. "But right then, I knew I could no longer be an angry, sad person. I had to do whatever I had to do to be happy again."

She vowed then to combine her dream of working with autistic kids with a commitment to keeping Brent's memory alive.

Stealing moments between changing diapers and late-night feedings, Ms. Woodall started

putting together a nonprofit foundation in his name.

This summer, the Brent Woodall Foundation for Exceptional Children began giving parents of autistic children the tools they need to manage and change their children's behavior.

"Brent had always been so supportive, emotionally and financially, of my work with these kids," says Ms. Woodall, now 34, who moved to Coppell a year ago from the New York City area to be closer to family, who had moved here when she was in college.

"I think it's appropriate that it's because of him ... we're able to help them now."

At 6-foot-5, Brent Woodall was built for sports. He played football and baseball at the University of

California at Berkeley. He pitched in the Chicago Cubs' minor league organization until sidelined by an injury. And in New York, he took on rugby.

He was a "man's man," his wife says, but what people didn't realize was how sensitive he was.

"There are sports scholarships and programs in his name, and that's great," Ms. Woodall says. "But I wanted people to remember the other side of him too." Longtime friend Tony Apollaro, President of the Brent Woodall Foundation, describes Brent as a caring "gentle giant," who wanted a large family.

"He was incredibly passionate for family," Mr. Apollaro says. "I got e-mails from him literally the day before, on Sept. 10, talking about how he hoped this child would be one of many to come."

Then came Sept. 11.

"Most people would just shut down and live their own life, but the fact that she's willing to help families who need it, says something about her."

Becky Lowe, Who has received help with her autistic daughter through the The Brent Woodall Foundation for Exceptional Children

That morning, Brent, who worked as an equities trader with Keefe, Bruyette and Woods on the 89th floor of the south tower, called his wife and his parents.

He said there had been an explosion in the other building, but not to worry: He was fine. His building was OK. They weren't even being told to evacuate.

After a plane hit his building, she frantically called him but couldn't get through. Finally, he

managed to reach her again. He was above the crash site and had made it to the 87th floor but couldn't get the door open. He was calm and assured her that everything would be all right. Firefighters were on their way up to rescue them. That was the last she heard from him.

She frantically drove home to New Jersey from Manhattan to wait for his next call, but as she pulled into the driveway, she heard on the radio that his tower had fallen. Though she hoped for a miracle, she knew at that moment that the life they had known was over.

"That was horrifying," she says with a sigh, shaking off the memory.

A Way To Cope

Creating the foundation has helped Ms. Woodall work through her grief. And in her personal life, she has also tried to carry on as they had planned.

She and her daughter, now 2 1/2, traveled to Russia a few months ago to adopt an orphaned baby girl, Isabella, now 10 months old.

"Brent and I always planned on adopting even if we had our own children," she says. "There are so many children in the world who need love. I have a big house and plenty of room. And Pierce loves having a baby sister."

The Brent Woodall Foundation, based in Coppell, benefits the very youngest autistic children and provides free assessments as well as training in behavioral therapy for parents of children 18 months to 6 years old. It also provides financial assistance to families of autistic children, if needed.

"A lot of programs provide services to the child, but not to the parents," she says. "And a lot of people are either not close to good programs for autism, or can't afford treatment or are on long waiting lists and don't know what to do." Neither of her daughters is autistic. Ms. Woodall earned a bachelor's

degree in psychology at Columbia University. She has gone on to specialize in autism in her doctoral work at the New School in New York City.

Ms. Woodall previously supported the foundation herself – but now, operating it as a nonprofit, she's trying to raise money.

"Brent had always been so supportive, emotionally and financially, of my work with these kids. I think it's appropriate that it's because of him ... we're able to help them now."

Tracy Woodall, on her late husband, Brent

"We want to help as many families as we can," she says. "I'd like it to be self-sustaining. I don't need a salary, but there are other manpower costs involved."

The organization has specialists who spend three days at the home of the autistic child, she says, teaching the parents the skills to deal with everyday problems and situations that arise.

"We let the parents know they can do it themselves," she says. Becky Lowe was one of the first parents to receive help from the foundation.

Her 6-year-old daughter, Katie, spent most of her days in her "own world," rarely interacting with others.

This summer, therapists from the foundation went to Mrs. Lowe's home in rural Ohio. They rewarded Katie when she interacted with others, and they showed her parents how to elicit a response from her. After an intense three days, Mrs. Lowe took Katie to New York for follow-up help.

"The difference we've seen in her is remarkable," says Mrs. Lowe. "It's nothing short of a miracle. In the first five hours, she went up to



her twin brother and asked him to chase her. We burst into tears – it was the first time in her life she had requested that he do anything with her.”

The Autism Society of America says that as many as 1.5 million people today are autistic and that 1 in 250 children is born with autism. Boys account for 80 percent of those cases.

Autism is a development disability that usually appears in the first three years of life but can surface later. It is the result of a neurological disorder that affects development in social interaction and communication with varying degrees of severity.

“Children with autism are like a puzzle that you have to take apart and put back together,” Ms. Woodall says. “We want to help families make the pieces fit and help these children reach their potential.”

The training that the foundation offers includes goal setting and rewarding good behavior. It also often includes changing the way parents interact with their autistic children.

Mrs. Lowe says that for her daughter, “the biggest change would be forcing her to make a connection.

“Since I always knew what she wanted, I would just get it for her, but by not making her ask for what she wants, I was doing more harm than good.”

Ms. Woodall met the Lowe family several months ago when she was going through the process of adopting Isabella.

Mrs. Lowe worked for the adoption agency, and the two women began talking about their lives and the subject of Katie came up.

“I couldn’t believe it,” Mrs. Lowe says. “We have no services where we live in Ohio, and here was someone willing to help us – even after all she’s been through. Most people would just shut down and live their own life, but the fact that she’s willing to help families who need it, says something about her. You don’t see that every day.”

Overseas Reach

Beyond the training for parents, the foundation also helps support a program for autistic children in an orphanage in Barlad, Romania, that Ms. Woodall started as part of her graduate studies.

Cristi’s Outreach Foundation, named after a boy from a Romanian orphanage with autism who inspired Ms. Woodall to start the program, provides education and therapy for orphans with disabilities.

Its success later gave Ms. Woodall the confidence that the Brent Woodall Foundation could do a lot of good. “We don’t need or want to overlap with other services,” she says. “We’re just a jumpstart for families. If they can learn advanced behavioral therapy and see a difference in their child and their families, that’s a wonderful thing.”

Ms. Woodall’s dedication to children and to her husband’s memory inspires others at the foundation, says Chief Operating Officer David Griswold, who never met Brent but says he feels as if he knows him.

“You see what she’s been through with 9-11 and having Pierce and then adopting a little baby – it’s a lot, but she has a real passion for kids,” he says. “Being able to have the foundation in Brent’s name is like continued sponsorship from him, like him watching out for her and making sure she’s able to achieve her goals.”

That’s important to Mrs. Woodall. “What I’ve tried to let people understand is that he was so much more than the day he died,” she says.

“I don’t want anyone, especially our daughter, to only associate who he is with 9-11, but rather with all the interesting and intricate things that made him who he was – a great guy who loved kids.”

*Laura Griffin is a Dallas freelance writer.
E-mail lauramgriffin@yahoo.com*

RESOURCES

The Brent Woodall Foundation for Exceptional Children provides education, training and financial support to families with autistic children. For information, visit www.woodallkids.org, or call 1-800-209-9776.

