



A 501 (c) 3 Non Profit Corporation

## **Press Release**

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### ***For Immediate Release***

## **Union County Autism Group Announces Organizational Makeover Autism Family Times Affirms Commitment to Wide Scope of Family-Centered Offerings**

**Fanwood, NJ, January 16, 2011** – Effective December 24, Autism Family Tours with Brianna, Inc. is operating under the name Autism Family Times with Brianna, Inc. This organization has been popularly known for its commitment to recreation, social and cultural programs for families who have a child diagnosed with Autism. The Executive Board voted to legally use Autism Family Times in order to help more families understand their mission and the wide range of activities offered to families.

For many families experiencing Autism, significant financial burdens relating to therapies, medical interventions, academic enhancements and specialized recreational activities – along with behavioral, social, and sensory challenges – prevent families from participating in most traditional community events. Through grants and various fundraising efforts, Autism Family Times with Brianna focuses on providing either reduced-cost or complimentary programs and supports for the whole family.

Along with the name change, the Board has transformed its structure by instituting program directors to supervise various organizational operations.

Tovah Segelman of Scotch Plains has accepted the role leading the ‘We Dream Athletic Team’ with the support of Pete Kelly (Assistant Program Director) and Claudette Bardwil (Autism Family Times President). This subdivision of the organization will focus on fundraising efforts through various athletic efforts. AFT has had a successful running team serve this purpose, but will now expand to include athletes who participate in areas such as cycling events and triathlons. The driving force of the *We Dream Athletic Team* is to fulfill the dreams of children diagnosed with Autism and their families by supporting the programs offered by Autism Family Times. Some of the successful family-based offerings AFT has implemented have been swimming, yoga, horseback riding, music, art, gardening, bicycling lessons, social events, and trips to cultural and sporting events.

Diane McGee, a resident of Mountainside, has taken on the leadership role of AFT’s Peer Mentor program. Autism Family Times sponsors training programs for local children of various ages, to encourage understanding and interaction with peers with various disabilities. In

December, many Peer Mentors set-up shop in Fanwood offering local residents free gift wrapping of their holiday gifts. Children with Autism and their peers shared this festive community outreach event. Diane will be working with the mentors to implement such programs as a teen club, social skills group, and informal recreation gatherings. It is the hope of the AFT Executive Board that these Peer Mentors will engage in many inclusive activities and learn to incorporate and advocate for people with disabilities in all aspects of their lives.

Scotch Plains resident Christine Gee-Lowrey manages *Group S.P.I.R.I.T.!*, a family-centered Autism support group. Family members meet monthly at Scotch Plains Public Library. For those new to the diagnosis, the group offers important information from friends who have been there. For those with young children on the spectrum, this group can offer guidance for the many daily functions and intricacies that are seemingly unmanageable. As these children approach their teens, support group members can offer support for these particularly unique challenges. Christine lays emphasis that “group meetings are opportunities for parents to know they’re not alone with their challenges. There is help.” Discussions take on many areas of interest including information exchange, advocacy, education, family issues, therapies, nutrition, safety, travel, and recreation.

President Claudette Bardwil, a travel agent by trade, will direct the organization’s new *Learn-Through-Travel* initiative. “We’re so eager to be introducing the program this February. We’ll enable many families living with Autism to travel to destinations that they never considered before.” Venturing to new places is often challenging for these families. “We’re working very hard at coordinating supports so that children with Autism can experience new surroundings, meet new people, and learn while they’re at it. The planning has been exciting and I’m looking forward to sharing these meaningful experiences with our families.” Although the program involves extensive preparation, collaboration and funding, the Executive Board has put emphasis on moving it forward and offering ongoing local and remote excursions for these families.

The organization has instituted a comprehensive database and will soon present a new, dynamic website highlighting their revamped graphic identity. Autism Family Times will use these new mechanisms to strengthen communication and provide improved access to Autism-related resources and event information. “The site has been a good resource, but it will soon be able to offer improved access and functionality with a creative, streamlined design,” states Adrienne Robertiello, AFT Board member.

Families who have children diagnosed with Autism are encouraged to call for information about Autism and the programs. Autism Family Times relies on contributions, sponsorships and grant funding for its development and implementation of programs. Personal, corporate, and organizational donations are sought to support the ongoing programs. All donations are tax deductible. More information about the organization is available at [www.autismfamilytimes.org](http://www.autismfamilytimes.org) or by calling (908)889-8860.

Autism Family Times with Brianna pioneers customized, therapeutic, educational family-centered programs utilizing the services of partners sensitive to the needs and challenges of people with Autism, their siblings, and caregivers.

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