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BROWARD COUNTY NEWS

Sensory maps and social scripts: Broward cities embrace ‘Autism Friendly’ approach

By Scott Luxor
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The goal of The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities is for South Florida to become more more empathetic toward people on the spectrum. A recent production of “Cat in the Hat” at Broward Center for the Performing Arts in Fort Lauderdale was created as a sensory friendly experience. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

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The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities has one big goal: to make South Florida more empathetic toward people on the spectrum.

The nonprofit has been around since 1993, providing families and other groups support and assistance with the goal of enhancing the potential of people on the spectrum, as well as other disabilities.

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Recently, [CARD](#) has taken another tack through a collaboration with UM-NSU’s program called Autism Friendly to work directly with cities and businesses to create a deeper awareness of the needs of the neurodiverse population.

With its program, UM-NSU provides businesses with the training and support needed to raise their conscious awareness and sensitivity. Once a business completes the training, it receives a decal, which can be displayed to identify the business as “Autism Friendly” and will be included on the [UM-NSU CARD website](#).

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A recent production of "Cat in the Hat" at Broward Center for the Performing Arts was created as a sensory friendly experience. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

All of the work that CARD does is available for free because the funds are provided through the Florida Department of Education.

Understanding CARD

Silvia Gil, manager of adult services at [UM-NSU CARD](#), works with adults on the spectrum who have left high school and who have a lot of questions about their next steps in life. Gil also works closely with efforts to train businesses and cities in Broward County to teach them how they can become “Autism Friendly.”

“The original focus for CARD was mainly on parents,” she said. “The main reason for that is that when you have a child of any ability, no one gives you a handbook. But then throw in a diagnosis of autism and, for so many families, they really don’t know what the next step is. Through CARD, we try to help by laying out somewhat of a roadmap.”

Florida is divided up into [seven CARD centers](#), according to Gil. The one she works with is connected through the University of Miami and Nova Southeastern University, which serves Broward, Miami Dade and Monroe counties.

“There are two general parts of what CARD does,” she said. “We support the family in accessing resources, support systems as well as how to maneuver their community. We also help them look at therapies. There’s so much information out there. We work with babies, all the way to 80-year-old clients. Basically, anyone who has any kind of a diagnosis of autism and all of it at no cost to the family.”

What started with families has grown into support for larger organizations. Now the focus



Silvia Gil (Silvia Gil/Courtesy)

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is on private enterprises that have a major impact on the lives of everyone in South Florida.

“We’re really targeting different industries and organizations, especially health care right now,” Gil said. “What we typically do is to assess a company’s business model and really see where we can improve or bring in good ideas. Most businesses have no idea what kind of challenges there actually are for those on the spectrum.”

Gil said what CARD coaches businesses to do applies to a broader audience.

“What we really noticed is that most of these attitudes at work are best practices,” she said. “People with autism are not going to come in with a big sign saying, ‘I have a disability.’ A lot of the changes are simply just being humane, caring, compassionate and being able to tailor your services to accommodate that.”



The goal of the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities is for South Florida to become more more empathetic toward people on the spectrum. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

Ted Miller, board member of the UM-NSU CARD program, works to get the word out about the “Autism Friendly” initiative.

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“I have a son on the spectrum,” he said. “For us, going out to things like big events, concerts or film festivals or anything with big crowds and big noises has always been a challenge for us. I’m involved with CARD as a board member because I have a passion for helping out and helping raise the visibility for some of the efforts they are working on in the larger community.”

Miller said CARD keeps looking for new avenues for making an impact because they know that autism affects people everywhere.

Engaging with the arts

Gil had a personal experience that created an opportunity to work with the business of creative arts in the community.

“My daughter got diagnosed at the age of 3 as being on the spectrum,” she said. “My direct involvement working with city arts centers started because I went to a museum with my daughter and realized that one of the biggest challenges is some of the sensory issues. When we were there, they wanted to put a paper bracelet on her and she had a fit. She threw herself on the floor and the museum didn’t let us come inside.”

Even though the experience left Gil feeling unsettled, her reaction made her engage with the museum in a constructive way, rather than react to the treatment she and her daughter received.

“Both as a parent and as a professional, I felt that what was lacking here was a sense of education,” she said. “That awareness is what empowers the community. I went back there and decided that we needed to redo that experience.”

The response from the museum was better than she expected.

“They actually ended up being so open to it that they asked me to come in and train their staff,” Gil said. “They realized that they wanted to be better, so that doesn’t happen to another parent. That became our first partnership with [Young at Art Museum](#). I helped them start an initiative so that everything that they do within the museum in their programming supports all neurodiverse individuals.”

Gil’s experience with the museum led her to get involved with more venues. [Broward Center for the Performing Arts](#) in Fort Lauderdale was a logical next step for CARD and an “Autism Friendly” project.



Giuliana Sordelli gets a “Cat in the Hat” hat fitted for her son Logan before the performance. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“That experience made me want to shift and start this approach,” she said. “I went from museums to the Broward Center for Performing Arts to do something similar there. As a matter of fact, we just recently did a Broadway ‘Frozen’ experience. Some parents were in tears because they were never able to do this before. We just needed to create the right accommodations for the kids on the spectrum.”

Broward Center embraces ‘sensory friendly’

Gil’s outreach to the Broward Center has resulted in a strong connection and an ongoing effort to create experiences for youth on the spectrum.

Gustavo Padrino, the center’s community engagement manager, has taken on the role of making the most of the “Autism Friendly” direction.

“We had started to do what we call ‘sensory friendly’ performances at the center,” he said.

“I was in charge of promoting the show, and I just didn’t know what I was going to encounter until the day of the performance. Then, it was a performance of ‘Pete the Cat’ for little kids with disabilities and



Gustavo Padrino (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

autism.”

Padrino said that he was able to interact with some of the families that attended the show and listened to some of their personal stories.

“One of the moms talked about how she could never really have a moment of daughter time because the girl was heavily on the spectrum,” he said. “The daughter would get kicked out of events because of her behavior. The mom was so happy that she finally found the theater to be a place where she could come to have that time with her daughter.”



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A recent production of "Cat in the Hat" at Broward Center for the Performing Arts was created as a sensory friendly experience. Audience members took part in a meet and greet with the cast. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

A sensory friendly show is based on modifying the dynamics of the show so that the kids could respond and enjoy the performance.

“To help those on the spectrum, the show lowers the sound levels,” Padrino said. “There are no special effects, no strobe lights, no shushing. People can walk, they can use their cell phone devices if they need to, as long as they don’t take photos or record the show. We also have a quiet room with a therapist on site if they ever need it, plus they can also see the show from there without sound. We also have noise-canceling headphones.”

Padrino said that he gives CARD credit for helping Broward Center to reach an audience that hasn’t been possible in the same way before.

“CARD really allowed us to tell the story better, and at the same time help us reach more families who didn’t know that sensory friendly performances existed,” he said. “And the parents always bring the rest of their family to the shows so they can be part of it as well.”

‘Autism Friendly’ cities

The effort to get cities designated as friendly to autistic people and families is an ongoing one now for Silvia Gil and Ted Miller.

“We’re trying to get city commissioners and mayors to really understand the needs of the autism community,” Gil said. “The way we go about it is that the commissioners and the mayors receive sensitivity training to make better policies when they understand the needs of that community. We work with other groups like first responders, libraries, and parks and recreation to make sure that every aspect of a resident there can be able to have the right accommodations.”



This is the logo that is given a business that goes through CARD’s training course. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“Cities can highlight the businesses who exemplify best practices in places like Parkland, in Cooper City or in Weston,” she said. “Those are cities we’re working with in Broward County.

“What I do is work directly with the chamber of commerce and I give a presentation to inform them how we work with them and also inform them how they can hire individuals with autism or neurodiverse individuals, and that there are resources available.”

Parkland is the first city in Broward and the second in Florida to be recognized as “Autism Friendly.” The designation was presented in March through a partnership with UM-NSU CARD, the University of Miami, and Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities.

Rich Walker was elected mayor of Parkland in 2020. He was previously a city commissioner in 2018. The “Autism Friendly” designation was started under the previous mayor, but Walker is an avid supporter of the new identity the city holds.



Ted Miller (Ted Miller / Courtesy)

“When I was elected mayor, the designation was something that the new commissioner and I wanted to make sure we saw through,” Walker said, “It’s important to me that we let the residents know that we’re an inclusive community. And this is one of those projects that we were able to work with UM-NSU and CARD to ensure that we got the ‘Autism Friendly’ designation.”

Walker said that the designation proves how inclusive the city of Parkland is, and that it shows how many people are actually on the spectrum. He said he believes that there is a real need for it, not just in the city of Parkland, but everywhere.

“As a result of our interaction with CARD, Parkland now has sensory maps at all of our facilities,” Walker said. “We also have social scripts there so we can communicate better with people on the

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Parkland Mayor Rich Walker (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

spectrum. These tools will help anyone with autism or on the spectrum to navigate our facilities in a way that was not available to them before.”



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Walker said the purpose for the “Autism Friendly” designation is about removing the stigma for people on the spectrum.



UM-NSU CARD Clinical Support Administrator Jacquelyn Moultrie-Sequeira presents the award identifying the city of Parkland as an "Autism Friendly" City to Parkland Mayor Rich Walker as Luis Grana, director of the NSU Satellite office of UM-NSU CARD, watches. (City of Parkland/Courtesy)

“We want the city to say to all people that we want them to be here and we want to help them navigate the city, whether it’s a facility, a government program or whatever it is,” he said. “We’re also taking a leadership role in the county and state to say to other cities that autism is more prevalent than you think. You can help your residents and this is a great opportunity to do that.”

Here’s what families had to say about a recent sensory friendly performance of “Cat in the Hat” at the Broward Center:



Jose Perez, wife Karina Kerrigan, along with daughter Rafaela, left and their son Liam, who is on the spectrum, enjoyed the sensory friendly performance of "Cat in the Hat." (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

Jose Perez (father of Liam): "Going to a typical play production with our son Liam is definitely difficult for us. This makes such a difference. I think that the Broward Center is doing a phenomenal job of accommodating kids with special needs. They have a great space for the productions, and they also have a quiet room for kids that need a little bit of silence for any reason. I think it's just outstanding."

Jackie Silverman (mother of Nicholas): "It was great, and the people were so accommodating. They encourage the kids to run around, and they could get loud if they wanted to."



Jeremy Silverman, left, wife Jackie and their son Nicholas, who is on the spectrum, enjoyed the sensory friendly performance of "Cat in the Hat." (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

Jeremy Silverman (father of Nicholas): “Nicholas really enjoyed the play. He liked that he could just walk around and not have to sit down. Plus it was more interactive. He was very stimulated with everything going on and really enjoyed it.”



"Cat in the Hat" at Broward Center for the Performing Arts had a special performance for children on the autism spectrum. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

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