

# Autism

continued from D1

Suzanne focuses on the injustice of how autism is being ignored.

In their first documentary, "The First Light," a boy tells the tale of his autistic brother. The color blue was chosen to represent autism, because more boys are affected than girls. Watching the documentary is chilling as you see buildings from all around the world light up.

In 2010, the Empire State Building lit its lights blue for Autism Awareness Day. Next came the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the pyramids of Egypt, the Lincoln Memorial, the White House, Niagara Falls and the list goes on – even into outer space, with the lighting of the International Space Station.

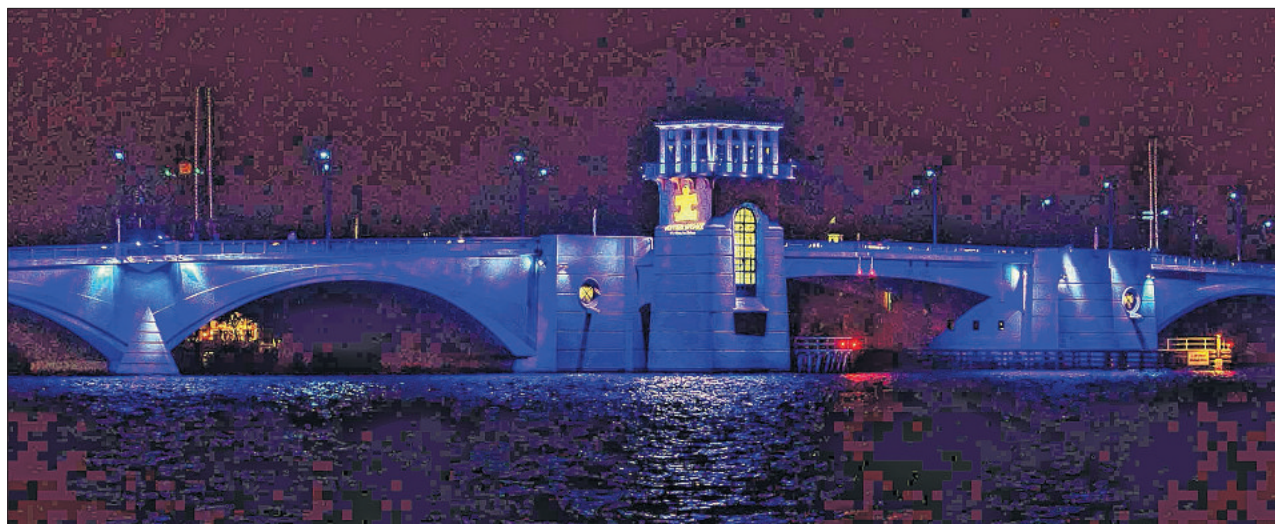
This year on April 2, World Autism Awareness Day, more than 8,400 buildings will turn blue.

"Seven continents, 101 countries, 1,300 cities," says Bob, "8,400 landmarks and buildings. That's a global movement! The blue lights spread around the world in darkness, telling millions of people they are not alone. Christian was the first blue light, and it's amazing that this little boy is changing the world for so many millions of people. He is the light I think of everyday..."

Yet no matter how fast the Wrights move, they are never fast enough.

Autism affects over 2 million individuals in the U.S. and tens of millions worldwide. A new case is diagnosed every 11 minutes.

"We need to create urgency for diagnosis," Suzanne says. "Young mothers need to know the symptoms. Grandparents can feel purpose in this



The Royal Park Bridge will be bathed in blue light on Thursday at 7 p.m. to raise awareness for autism. THOMAS CORDY / THE PALM BEACH POST 2013

## WHAT IS AUTISM?

**Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism** are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors.

**Autism appears to have its roots in very early brain development.** However, symptoms of autism tend to emerge between 2 and 3 years of age. Autism Speaks continues to fund research on effective methods for earlier diagnosis, as early intervention can help.

**Warning sign: A child who regresses.** Regression of any kind is a serious autism warning sign. Some children with autism spectrum disorders start to develop communication skills and then regress, usually between 12 and 24 months. For example, a child who was communicating with words such as "mommy" or "up" may stop using language entirely, or a child may stop playing social games he or she used to enjoy such as peek-a-boo, patty cake or waving "bye-bye." Any loss of speech, babbling, gestures, or social skills should be taken very seriously, as regression is a major red flag for autism.

On the autism spectrum, some children are high functioning and some are low functioning, like Christian.

"He's not aware. He can't communicate his real feelings," Bob says.

"Every mother should test their child," adds Suzanne. "We lost nine months, and my daughter is still beating herself up with it. When we got a diagnosis for Christian, they told us goodbye and good luck. But we didn't stop. We had the money and ability to do it, to forge forward and try to make a difference."

Bob and Suzanne wonder how people do this who don't have their resources.

"Christian is going to be 13 this year, which presents another set of issues ... basic puberty issues," says Suzanne.

"He's non-verbal. He can't talk about what he's feeling and what he might be experiencing. He goes to a lot of therapy. He goes to (a special) school in Chelsea in New York."

Suzanne turns into the protective grandmother firing off questions, as she did when she led the first-ever national policy and action summit in Washington, D.C.: "What

will these children do when they turn 21? What happens then? If 3 million children in America one day went missing – what would we as a country do? If 3 million children in America one morning fell gravely ill – what would we as a country do?"

"We would call out the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. We'd call up every member of the National Guard. We'd use every piece of equipment ever made. We'd leave no stone unturned!"

"Each day across this country, those 3 million moms, dads and other care-takers wake to the sounds of their son or daughter pounding through the house. That is – if they aren't already awake," says Suzanne.

"Truth be told, many of them barely sleep – or when they do – they somehow sleep with one ear towards their child's room, always waiting. Wondering what they will get into next. Will they try to escape? Hurt themselves? Strip off their clothes? Climb the furniture? Raid the refrigerator? These families are not living. They are existing. Life is lived moment-to-moment...in anticipation of the child's

next move. In despair...in fear of the future. This is autism!"

At this year's Sundance Film Festival, Robert Redford ran a screening of the Wrights' newest documentary "Sounding the Alarm," by the Emmy Award-winning producer John Black.

It delivers astounding facts: In 1975, 1 in 5,000 children were diagnosed with autism. By 2001 the prevalence rate had climbed from 1 in 250. The film will have a private screening at the Four Arts Society on April 8.

And as a grandmother, what does Suzanne see? She remains emotional. "If you see these mothers who come up to me and say, 'Suzanne, I can't do it anymore' because it's so hard. The school boards don't want this. It costs them money."

Imagine living with a child who is in constant hyper mode. Eventually even friends go away because it's difficult to expect friends to hang around for a birthday party or a dinner with a child in constant meltdown.

Yet when Suzanne sees her grandson she's the one who melts.

"He's my first light. I see innocence. He loves me with an unconditional love. When he sees me he runs up to hug me and then runs away as autistic children don't want to be held that much.

"But he holds my hand and sits on the couch or takes me by the hand to the fridge and shows me what he wants."

And what does Bob Wright love most when he thinks about his grandson?

"He loves to be on my boat. He loves the whipping wind and the freedom in his face. Such kindness, such love, so much built-in compassion."

# Kravis

continued from D1

irreverent and profane "The Book of Mormon" (Dec. 16-21), a tale of two Mormon missionaries in over their heads in Uganda. Written by the creators of cable TV's "South Park," it remains the hottest ticket on Broadway after three years.

Number three in the season line-up is "Flashdance – The Musical" (Jan. 27-Feb. 1, 2015), based on the 1983 movie about the female welder and professional dancer wannabe. Unlike the other shows, "Flashdance" has never played Broadway, but has found box office success on perpetual tour.

Next is the 2011 Tony-winning Best Revival, "Anything Goes" (March 10-15, 2015), a tap-happy musical by the great Cole Porter about romance and hijinks on the high seas. It is followed by "Memphis" (April 7-12), the 2010 Best Musical, wall-to-wall songs and stories of life in a Tennessee music club.

The Kravis on Broadway season ends with another coup, the 2013 Best Revival winner, "Pippin" (April 28-May 3), the anachronistic tale of the son of French King Charlemagne, who is searching for meaning in his life. Revival specialist Diane Paulus ("Hair," "Por-

## LINEUP

**"Rodgers + Hammerstein's Cinderella"** (Nov. 11-16)

**"The Book of Mormon"** (Dec. 16-21)

**"Flashdance – The Musical"** (Jan. 27-Feb. 1, 2015)

**"Anything Goes"** (March 10-15, 2015)

**"Memphis"** (April 7-12, 2015)

**"Pippin"** (April 28-May 3, 2015)

## IF YOU GO

Kravis on Broadway subscribers will receive renewal information in the mail in early April. Kravis donors can subscribe by early May. Subscription prices range from \$174 to \$492 and for all six attractions, available to the general public in midsummer. **For more info:** 561-832-7469 or [kravis.org/broadway](http://kravis.org/broadway)

gy and Bess") stands the show on its head by placing the action inside a circus tent.

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The cast of "Pippin," honored as Broadway's best revival in 2013, included Matthew James Thomas, Patina Miller, Andrea Martin, Terrence Mann, Charlotte d'Amboise, Rachel Bay Jones, Gregory Arsenal, Andrew Cekala, Lolita Costet, Colin Cunliffe, Andrew Fitch, Orion Griffiths, Viktoria Grimm, Olga Karmansky, Bethany Moore, Brad Musgrove, Stephanie Pope, Philip Rosenberg, Yannick Thomas, Molly Tynes and Anthony Wayne. CONTRIBUTED



Lillian Mueller stars as Alex Owens in "Flashdance – The Musical." The show will run at Kravis from Jan. 27 to Feb. 1, 2015. CONTRIBUTED BY JEREMY DANIEL

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