



BY DIANE ISAACS

Diane Isaacs is a film and television producer with over 20 years of industry experience. As President of Green Moon Productions, a film company she co-founded with Antonio Banderas, Diane produced the Emmy-nominated HBO historical drama titled *And Starring Pancho Villa As Himself*; *Imagining Argentina* with Academy Award winner Emma Thompson; Antonio Banderas's directorial debut *Crazy In Alabama*; *Forever Lulu* with Patrick Swayze; *Tart* starring Mischa Barton; and *The Body* starring Antonio Banderas.

With film and English degrees from New York University, Diane worked on *The David Letterman Show* before producing the revolutionary television series *Miami Vice*.

As president of Production for the Don Johnson Company, she produced the ABC series *The Marshal*, the CBS pilot *Nash Bridges*, and the acclaimed CBS tele-film *In The Company Of Darkness* starring Helen Hunt. Her experience in content development, writing, production, music, film, marketing and overall producing is aligned to fulfil The Miracle Project's diverse platforms.

# IN SEARCH OF WYATT'S MIRACLE

Groundhog Day 2001 was the day my son, Wyatt, was diagnosed with autism. He was already six years old and had been through a battery of doctors and tests attempting to figure out his missed milestones, macrocephaly and hypotonia. Typically, autism is diagnosed before the age of three but, as with all children, Wyatt is unique. Since he did not have the textbook behaviours of autism, we danced around other alphabet diagnoses until, one day, enough was enough. The groundhog saw his shadow, and Wyatt was officially 'on the spectrum'. And, suddenly, so was I.

There is a common misperception that autism is strictly the child's label – as if he or she is a vacuum-packed bubble within the family. In reality, Wyatt's diagnosis was hard to reconcile for me, as well as for every member of the family. At first, autism was a 'bad' word for me and I was not open to talking about it with friends. 'Special needs' sounded somehow more forgiving, ambiguous. As Wyatt says, "We all have special needs." So began our 'special' journey together – one

that requires unlimited time, money and perseverance. I don't know if it was our intense schedule or if Wyatt's perceived differences made it uncomfortable for other mothers, but we were invited to fewer and fewer play dates and parties. Wyatt and I were becoming increasingly isolated. We were losing our connection to our community when we needed it most.

As a parent of a typically developing older sibling of Wyatt's, I experienced that a parent will do virtually anything for their child's wellbeing. So, when the stakes were raised with autism, that axiom set me on an amplified mission to find ways to help Wyatt. I looked under every rock, spending hours on the web, in bookstores and scanning medical journals. It was a full-time job.

For years, Wyatt walked into adult-led therapy sessions to 'fix' his deficits. He needed help with fine and gross motor, speech and language, sensory integration, socialisation and self-expression. He developed relationships with his one-on-one therapists, but his peers remained a challenge. So, Wyatt attended social



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skills classes to learn how to make friends. He was taught to shake hands to say hello, participate in group games and make a play date on the telephone, but these procedures seemed to fade away. While they made sense to me, they were not natural for Wyatt. He retreated into himself and spent more time with his inner world friends because they “could not hurt him”. Even with all the external effort, Wyatt was withdrawing.

In my own inner world, I dreamed about uncovering a hidden protocol that would **miraculously** transform my son to normal. I envisioned telling everyone about this treatment: some powerful herb, revolutionary diet or electromagnetic stimulation that instantly removed autism. This was my happy ending story. It was science fiction.

Through a mother at school, I heard about a theatre and film programme for children of ‘all abilities’: children with autism as well as typically developing peers and siblings. Since Wyatt lived in his imagination, I instinctively felt he would enjoy something like this, even without any acting, singing or dancing experience. I also figured he needed something purely fun beyond therapies and homework.

Arriving at **THE MIRACLE PROJECT**, we were greeted by its dynamic, bright-eyed founder and creative director, Elaine Hall (better known as ‘Coach E!’), and something told me our lives would never be the same.

Coach E! was like a colourful court jester in the wild kingdom of unique children. She moved around the room like a graceful butterfly joining each child in whatever they were doing. Two kids had burrowed under a rainbow parachute. A kid was leapfrogging across the floor chased by an obsessed T-Rex boy. Others were singing, colouring, flapping like a bird and drumming a pot. One was under a table, another spinning in her own private orbit. The most memorable impression of that first day was that the children with autism, their siblings and peers, the volunteers and staff, the parents and Coach E! all sparkled. There was a charge to them that was kinetic. I realise now it was the distinct frequency of human joy.

Based on Dr Stanley Greenspan’s groundbreaking DIR®/Floortime™ (Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-based Model) methods, The Miracle Project is all about building relationships. Using the Floortime model,

its methods are focused on joining the world of the child instead of ‘square-pegging’ the child into our world. It was a complete shift in my perspective. I had to forget the way I thought Wyatt was **supposed** to be. Forget the way Wyatt should act. Forget what I **wanted** him to do. Forget what I think is a **good or bad** Wyatt. As Coach E! pointed out, relationship is paramount, certainly more so than ‘good behaviour’. She encouraged me to let Wyatt **be**.

Coach E!, who had worked professionally as a ‘baby wrangler’ on movie sets, effortlessly gathered the children together for the opening Miracle Project circle. The energy of the room shifted to a group experience as the class flowed into a series of integrated warm-up exercises, movement, breathing, singing and sharing around the circle – the ‘stage’. Here, socialisation was occurring in an organic way, without any ‘how to’ guidebook. Without rules or anyone judging them, the kids were more open to try new things, play together and stand up before the group to perform to any degree. They bravely sang and danced, sharing their unique abilities within their disabilities. After each bow, the kids in the ‘audience’ enthusiastically clapped and cheered. The sense of connection between the children was profound.

After several sessions, I became more and more aware of the many protocols that Coach E! had invisibly woven into her unique methodology. While Wyatt was simply playing in a loving and accepting environment, he was receiving a powerful concoction of the therapies he had been doing individually, but now it was in a social dynamic.

Through The Miracle Project’s yoga-based warm up exercises, Wyatt connected more to his body and used his breath to calm himself. His stinging subsided and his teeth grinding stopped. Physical therapy was in full force as the kids did gross motor movement across the floor – hopping, skipping and dancing. The kids did art projects, thereby refining their fine motor skills.

Although Wyatt always had use of language, he had been reserved in expressing his own voice. Most often, he kept his emotions bottled up inside. At The Miracle Project, speech and language are seamlessly integrated throughout the entire class. The music therapist teaches rhythm, tone and volume control. Kids

who are loud learn to find their ‘theatre voice’. Non-verbal kids learn to use body and sign language. The musical director creates original music by, for, and about the Miracle Project kids and singing is fantastic for articulation and cadence. All the pieces fit together holistically to make each class a total sensory integration experience.



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During the first year, Wyatt shared a story in class that I had never heard. It was about being bullied in school. Coach E! immediately pulled together an improvisation group of kids to act out the bully scene. Then, a song called "Sensitive" was written about it. At the close of each class, the parents are invited into The Miracle Project room to catch a preview of what the kids worked on that day. I listened to Wyatt sing "Am I too Sensitive?" and I sensed that this was something personal to him. Afterwards, I gave him a hug, and he opened up about all his stories of being



bullied and how sad and scared he felt. It wasn't as though he had been hiding the stories from me; they were simply locked inside of him. Through The Miracle Project's creative process, he developed the tools to first explore his feelings, identify them and then release them through creative channels. The Miracle Project unlocked Wyatt's inner world.

From its original ideas to final curtain calls, The Miracle Project is a 22 week journey. Along the way, stories are written, songs are sung, scenes are staged, dances rehearsed, and, in the end, a full-on musical production is mounted. Each child's talent, whatever it may be, is valued and cherished. Each child's autism is accepted and loved. However, the connections that are made and the community that is created for these kids and their families is the most inspiring result.

During class, I enjoy being in the 'parent room' to unplug with other moms and dads. As the weeks pass, we talk less and less about therapies, individualised education plans and remedies, and more about the amazing moments we have the privilege to share with this group of children.

The first season, Wyatt's older brother, Jackson, joined as a Miracle Project volunteer. Through his hands-on experience, he continues to discover the unique qualities in every child. Instead of viewing autism with 'dis-ease', he



comes home uplifted and amazed at the breakthroughs, however big or small, that he is 'up close and personal' to weekly.

As a family with autism, we have found our place in The Miracle Project. And our place in autism. Wyatt, Jackson and I are part of these special communities or, as I can now say from a place of being miracle minded, these **autism** communities.

All this time, I was searching outside for the miracle cure, when the miracles were already inside Wyatt. And inside each and every one of us. This is my story. And this I know to be true.



**The Miracle Project** is a musical theatre and film programme for children with autism and other special needs and their typically developing peers and siblings. Families, neighbours and volunteers become part of this diverse, dynamic community. As profiled in HBO's Emmy award-winning documentary, *Autism: The Musical*, The Miracle Project effectively integrates traditional therapies and

creative protocols in an interactive, social dynamic. Founder Elaine Hall - Coach E - utilises music, movement and drama to nurture self-expression and social skills. As part of its total inclusion principles, The Miracle Project offers AUTISM 360, an integrated mind/body/spirit programme for families and friends living with autism, to help remove the isolation often associated with autism and foster an inspired

community. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa recently sent Elaine Hall a letter of commendation for her "**work as an educator and as an autism awareness advocate.**" He applauded her "efforts in creating the INSPIRE programme, a 360 degree lifestyle programme for all members of the family, as well as THE MIRACLE PROJECT..." More information can be found at [www.themiracleproject.com](http://www.themiracleproject.com).