

*why i give back...*

## MATT MAYNOR

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11 YEARS WITH CENTERSTATE



In December 2001, my older sister was going through a rough divorce. Because this was a difficult time for her and her family, my wife and I decided

to bless her and her three children with a special Christmas that year. Instead of buying gifts for each other, we spent the money on gifts for my sister's family, especially her youngest son Christian who is on the Autism spectrum and does not speak. They spent several days with us and on Christmas Day, and after the presents were opened, we decided to take a family walk around the neighborhood.

If you know anyone with a child on the Autism Spectrum, you know that going for a walk can be quite challenging. The child often has an unusual walk, rarely makes eye contact with anyone or looks up, and often shakes their hands in the air while they walk. As we were walking, we noticed another family who was walking with a child in a similar manner. As we got closer to the other family, we realized that they also had a child on the Autism spectrum. Within a few minutes, we stopped to greet the other family. That's when we met Mark and Michele Dunham.

In 2003, the Dunham's founded the Jacksonville School for Autism (JSA). It started with a small group of families who joined together in search of support and services not found in the public school system for three children on the Autism spectrum. Their goal was to create a school where children would have a place to learn and develop in an environment suited for their specific learning challenges. Many of the children have high levels of anxiety, sensory integration disorders, limited coping skills and self-regulation of mood, thoughts and actions. JSA's Social Skills classes teach students a variety of topics, including social awareness, how to be in a group, conversation skills, social problem-solving, emotional regulation,

and play skills. After explicit training, social skills are practiced throughout the day including during academic lessons. The majority of instruction in the classroom is done through several Social Skills curricula. JSA has now grown from three students to 150 students. In fact, some families have relocated to Jacksonville just so their children could attend JSA. Currently, there is a lengthy waiting list for students to enroll.

In addition to being a school for children on the Autism spectrum, JSA provides a safe place for families to gather, share ideas, and allow their kids to thrive. Our events include Tim Tebow's Night to Shine, which, in its sixth year, is an unforgettable prom night experience for children with special needs, and the Step Program that allows JSA kids to volunteer at places like Publix and other local businesses to give them purpose and help build their self-esteem.

My family and I are very involved with the school. I serve as a member of the Board of Directors and my two girls volunteer each summer on programs which has impacted their view of learning and the challenges children experience who are on the Autism spectrum. My oldest daughter, who is now a junior in college, is pursuing a degree in Speech and Language. It is her goal to teach children on the Autism spectrum how to speak. The school does several fundraisers each year including the Flounder Pounder Fishing Tournament and an annual golf tournament, which CenterState supports in a very big way. In fact, Chris Kamienski and I have a bet each year that whoever wins gets lunch. As soon as the COVID-19 restrictions pass, I will expect Chris to pay up for last year.

In addition to JSA, my family and I are also involved with the First Coast Women's Center, Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, the University of North Florida, and various religious charities in our community. Although all of these charities and non-profits are very important to us, JSA holds a very special place in our home. Who knew that a chance meeting all those years ago on Christmas Day, would lead to many years of friendships and support for the Autism community!

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