

disability by bringing information and events into their communities. SNN also tackles cultural biases that persist in African-American and Latino communities. "Many of these individuals are ashamed about their children's disabilities, so they isolate themselves from mainstream organizations," says Areva. That's why she recruits role models whom members of these lower-income communities admire and trust (such as California congresswoman Diane Watson) to participate in the organization's events and share personal stories.

Since SNN's launch, the nonprofit has served nearly 10,000 families with events such as resource fairs (for information about available services) and parenting workshops (including one that covers managing a career while raising a disabled child). "The network gives these people hope," says Areva, "and it puts the needs of the underserved on the radar." —N.R.
Find out more about Special Needs Network at specialneedsnetwork.net.

Toni Braxton

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

When six-time Grammy Award-winner Toni Braxton first belted out "Un-Break My Heart" in 1996, she never imagined how much the painful lyric would resonate a decade later, when her then 2½-year-old son, Diezel, started slipping away from her. "His speech regressed, he wouldn't make eye contact, and he often got hyper," says Toni. "As his mother, I knew something was off."

For two years Toni went from doctor to doctor to find out what was wrong with her boy, but his problems remained a mystery until she tried to enroll him in a mainstream school; the dean directed her to Child Find in Las Vegas, where Diezel was diagnosed with autism. "At first, I felt bewildered and defeated," says Toni, 41. "When Autism Speaks reached out to me to help my son, it was a lifesaver. And then I wanted to do something to help them too." In 2007, Toni became a spokesperson for the advocacy organization—and last year she performed in A Concert for



Toni Braxton uses her powerful voice to create awareness about autism and raise the funds to fight it.

"Children with autism are the most beautiful kids in the world for me."

Toni Braxton, singer-songwriter, actress, and spokesperson for Autism Speaks



Helen Shafer refused to let the label of autism hold her son back.

Helen Shafer

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

Helen Shafer's least favorite word is *can't*, especially when it comes to her 6-year-old, Hayden, who has autism. Before he turned 3, Helen began exploring options for him in the private and public school systems. What she learned was disheartening. "The expectations seemed so low," says Helen, 33, of Baltimore County, MD.

Hayden had to be given the chance to reach his potential, Helen decided. So she dipped into her private funds to start the Shafer Center and hired a board-certified behavior analyst to be the program director. The facility has an early-intervention program for children ages 18 months up to 7 years old who've been diagnosed with autism, and the curriculum helps them thrive in mainstream situations; they go on field trips and even put on a holiday musical. There's also a resource center for families with older kids. The facility opened in August 2006 and this past summer had its inaugural graduating class, which included Hayden.

And in the fall, Hayden entered the first grade at a public magnet elementary school. "Opening the Shafer Center was the right decision," she says. "You just have to steer your own course." —N.R.
To find out more about the Shafer Center, visit shafercenter.com.

Autism Speaks
 Featuring Bill Cosby, which raised money to examine the disorder's potential environmental causes and for research on treatments. "When other parents tell me that I've inspired them," says Toni, "and when I look at Diezel and see how much he's progressed, I feel so hopeful."

—Lindsey Palmer
To learn more about Autism Speaks, visit autismspeaks.org.

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