

A wish FOR ERIN

Club for autistic teens keep daughter's memory alive

ERIN'S HOPE
FOR FRIENDS



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On a cold January day in 2014, Stacy Horst found herself in a place no parent can ever imagine, unless they've traveled the same dark path. Her gentle, sensitive daughter, Erin, who loved the color purple and homeless animals, had taken her own life at just 17 years old. Four days later, Horst and her husband, Darren, found themselves overcome with grief in their Rowell home as they watched the furniture removed from their younger daughter's bedroom.



Stacy and Darren Horst with daughters, Erin (left) and Rachael.

"They were taking the furniture out of Erin's room, and we just sat down on the floor and lost it," said Horst, drawing up a memory that never loses its sharpness.

In their pain, the couple made a commitment that Erin was not going to be just another statistic, and promised themselves something good would come from their family tragedy.

"We just promised ourselves that Erin's life was not going to be in vain. We were going to do something so that others kids wouldn't feel the way she did, and other parents would not have to go through what we were going through," said Horst.

Days later, the two set up the Erin's Hope for Friends Foundation which helps teens struggling with autism disorders to make meaningful and lasting social connections. A medical advisory board was formed, and the first annual fundraiser was held five months later in June 2014.

Horst believes Erin would still be here today if she had a single friend by her side as she navigated the complexities of the teenage years. For Erin, the teenage years were difficult. She had Asperger's Syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism marked by difficulty with social interactions and challenges in interpreting nonverbal communication.

"There were such deficits in Erin's life...of not having friends, of being 17 and not having anywhere to go on the weekends, of not being asked to birthday parties or the movies, or anywhere," said Horst.

She said her daughter spent every Friday night at home with her parents; the isolation punctuated by social media which supplied a steady stream of information on what her peers were doing - and what Erin was missing.

"Social media can be wonderful tool for kids, but it can also be very hurtful," said Horst. "In Erin's words, she would say 'I love you, Mom and Dad, but I don't want to be

with you every weekend."

But she was. And while Horst can't undo the past for Erin, she and he husband vowed to make it better for others.

In February, the Erin's Hope for Friends Foundation opened E's Club in Alpharetta as a place where kids from age 12 to 18 with HFAS (high functioning autism spectrum) can meet to "have fun, and develop meaningful friendships in a safe and encouraging environment," said Horst.

Making friends is something parents cannot force, she noted, so E's Club allows that process to develop on its own.

"E's Club brings these kids together who are on the [autism] spectrum, where they can be themselves," Horst explains. "When they go to school and try to be 'normal' it's exhausting. Here they don't have to worry...it's a just a breath of fresh air."

At E's Club, a variety of activities are available from simply hanging out and watching movies, to activities which encourage interaction such as foosball, billiards, ping-pong, board games, playing cards, and Xbox gaming



Teenagers gather on a Friday night at E's Club.

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