



## Lighting Another's Candle



### **The Problem:**

After moving to Charlotte from Houston in August 2016, Rohini's family of three felt particularly small, when her then three year old son Daya couldn't get access to early intervention services as he had in Texas public schools. After Daya was diagnosed on the autism spectrum at age one, Rohini was determined to give him every opportunity for brain development and peer integration. Without any friends or family in the area, they totally lacked peer interactive opportunities for Daya as no public school services were available for children ages 3-4 years old; however, they were told that they could try the lottery system for a spot in one of the Montessori schools.

Rohini was adamant that Daya not lose a whole year of brain development. She tried to negotiate with the local school administrators. She researched state and federal laws to determine their rights but was getting nowhere.

### **The Solution:**

When she heard about MHA's ParentVOICE program, Rohini was connected with a Family Partner, Cathy, who has both lived experience raising children with mental health challenges and national certification as a Parent Support Partner. After the first meeting that Cathy attended with Rohini and advocated on Daya's behalf, changes started to happen. Rohini said, ***"Now I had someone there to speak calmly and in layman's terms. Daya had been sitting on the bus for an hour every day; the next day, the school starting sending a van. Additionally, there had been no communication from the teacher. We got instant results – all 18 children in the class started receiving a communication folder home every day."***

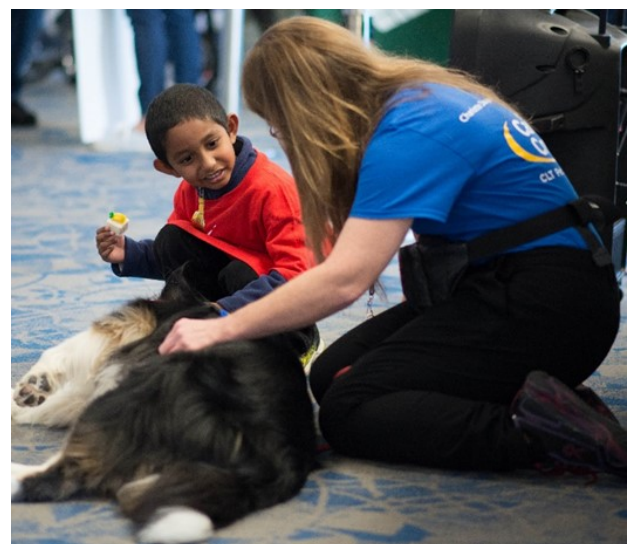


(L to R): Rohini, Daya and EmJay—a Charlotte family who has been empowered through MHA's ParentVOICE program and gone on to help others.

Rohini faced another battle when the public school's initial assessment found that Daya was not on the autism spectrum, therefore, he wouldn't qualify for Exceptional Children's services. Cathy empowered the family to ask for a 3rd party assessment and got the NC Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) involved. This resulted in the school funding a private assessment with a psychologist who determined that Daya ***does in*** fact still qualify for services and ***should be*** in an integrated classroom. Cathy continued to support Rohini's family as they battled the school system from September 2016-March 2017, attending school meetings and checking in regularly.

Fortunately, Daya's name was pulled in the lottery, and he began pre-school in a local Montessori school in August 2017. Daya recently turned age five and as these pictures illustrate, he is flourishing with both his interpersonal and "interspecies" skills developing well.

### **But the story doesn't end there. . .**



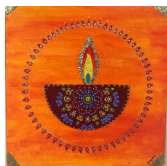
## New Purpose:

With Daya in an appropriate educational setting, receiving needed supports and services, Rohini decided to begin attending Family Partner training with ParentVOICE to become better equipped for her own family, and in order to help other families who might be experiencing similar challenges. A Family Partner is defined as a caregiver/parent of someone who has received services and therefore has firsthand experience within the child and family system, or who has gone through the mental health system themselves and is now interested in helping other families navigate the system.

## New Family:

Rohini has now completed over 80 hours of education from MHA around how to support and empower other families of youth with emotional, behavioral or mental health challenges. She plans to earn certification at the national level as a Certified Parent Support Partner (CPSP).

**As Rohini said, “It was like MHA lit my candle and now I want to light others’ candles.” Rohini added, “When we moved to Charlotte, our family was just three people – now ParentVOICE is an extension of my family and I have a whole support system.”**



- Rohini was feeling isolated and overwhelmed when trying to navigate the school system for her son Daya who is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). She called MHA.
- Rohini was referred to a ParentVOICE Family Partner, Cathy Johnson, for one-on-one support. Rohini saw immediate results for her own family. Per Rohini, “Cathy insisted that I should be trained to be my son’s voice where ever we move, due to the nature of my husband’s job.”
- Rohini continues her education with MHA as a Family Partner to help other families. See quotes from three parents whose candles Rohini lit with the knowledge and advocacy skills she gained from MHA. Per Rohini, “If I made a difference in [their] lives, I credit MHA, ParentVOICE and Cathy. . . I just did what one should do.”

**A father we’ll call V said,** “Adage says ignorance is bliss. But my ignorance would have cost my daughter S’s life. When Rohini approached us to help S, she was 3+ years old. My wife N and I were not ready to accept that she has special needs and requires “Exceptional Children’s” care from the school system to support her academic demands. Such was our ignorance. Everything went well after meeting Rohini. She helped us in our Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting. S is an active kid now; her life has improved a lot after getting all the therapies required from school. **Thank you, Rohini, for throwing light into S’s world.”**

**Krithika shared,** “As a parent of a special needs kid in an alien country, I created a support group for moms like me who don’t have family support. . . having Rohini as a part of this group was a real game changer. Her knowledge about the school system and educational laws with early intervention was helpful to many of us in our group. She became our go to person about school meetings and guidance with getting services from the school system. She was kind enough to give her time and be there for my IEP meeting and for many others. Her knowledge helped many parents like me who are overwhelmed with the process. She is a great asset to our group!”

**A mother we’ll call M said,** “I am a mother of a little boy who regressed and lost his speech and social [skills] and was diagnosed with ASD at the age of 2. I was depressed, confused, isolated and quit my job. I was clueless about what to do and where to start. We are immigrants and staying alone in Charlotte without extended family members to help us. Rohini was the first person who understood my situation. . . she guided our whole process. . . my son is now accessing pre-school and related services [and] it wouldn’t have happened without her support. I am very impressed with her level of knowledge on school system and educational laws.”