

Advocates gather to raise awareness about autism

By **LLUVIA MARES**
STAFF WRITER

HARTFORD—In a room filled with people at the State Capitol, 11-year-old Alison Willette was easy to spot wearing a short-blue wig and blue clothing during the Autism Awareness conference, Wednesday.

Bristol resident and advocate Melissa Willette, Sen. Jason Welch, R-Bristol, and other advocates of Autism Speaks, held a breakfast and press conference at the Capitol to educate people about autism and its 10-fold increase over the last 40 years.

"I want to do everything I can at the State Capitol to improve the quality of life for Connecticut's children," said Welch, a father of seven. "By raising awareness of autism, we can bring hope to children and families who are struggling and we can help them break down barriers."

Through early treatments such as speech, language and social skills therapies, a positive change can be reached, said Welch.

"The sooner treatments are begun, the more effective they can be," he said.

According to Autism Speaks,

autism is a complex neurobiological disorder that can occur in any racial, ethnic, or social group, but is most often diagnosed in boys than girls.

"Very early in my son's life, something was very different," said Melissa Willette, a mother of two autistic children. "He wouldn't let me hold him; he would become very rigid and didn't want to leave the home. I knew early on that something was wrong."

Willette said she took her son Aidan, who is now 7 years old, to the pediatrician at seven months, only to be sent home with no answers to her questions.

"I raised my concerns with the pediatrician and she said 'well he's a boy, he's just lazy and he'll catch up when he gets older,'" she said as tears welled up in her eyes. "I felt hopeless."

Willette said Aidan received therapy at 12 months, which helped his motor skills; however, something was still amiss, prompting her to visit several doctors.

"They (doctors) did all kinds of tests on him, MRIs, and brain scans and they all said he was fine, but I knew he wasn't," she said. "I finally asked, 'Could he have autism?' They said no."

Willette became dedicated to

MORE INFORMATION

Autism Quick Facts by Autism Speaks

- 1 in 110 children is diagnosed with autism
- 1 in 70 boys is on the autism spectrum
- More children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with AIDS, diabetes and pediatric cancer combined
- Autism is the fastest-growing serious development disability in the U.S.
- Autism costs the nation more than \$35 billion per year, a figure expected to significantly increase in the next decade
- Currently there is no medical detection or cure for autism

finding out more about autism and researched the subject, which led her to the Autism Speaks organization.

"Volunteering my time to this cause has given my children a voice that they otherwise would not have," she said.

Willette, Welch and the Autism Speaks organization will continue to work together to bring attention to the disorder. "I was thrilled to welcome Melissa Willette to the



Lluvia Mares | Staff

State Sen. Jason Welch, R-Bristol, joined Bristol resident Melissa Willette, right, and Willette's daughter Alison to mark Autism Awareness Day at the State Capitol. Alison brought Senator Welch a painting she made for him. The painting now hangs in Welch's Capitol office.

State Capitol because she is a tremendous advocate," Welch said. "I was also touched to receive a beautiful painting from her daughter Alison. By continuing to work together, I believe we

can continue to make progress on behalf of children like Alison all across our state."

For more information about autism, visit www.autismspeaks.org.