

# Ag For Autism: Ag Organizations Band Together To Aid Families Affected By Autism

**JONESBORO, ARK.**

Several Northeast Arkansas agricultural businesses have joined together to launch Ag for Autism, an allegiance dedicated to helping local children and families affected by autism.

The organization is a partnering of local agriculture-related businesses led by Armor Seed, Cache River Valley Seed, LLC and Farm Credit Midsouth. The trio, with support from other local companies, will collect donations and hold fundraisers on an ongoing basis, the proceeds of which will be channeled to area autism research and therapy programs.

Ag for Autism's first major fundraising event, the 2012 Bracket Bonanza, recently netted \$30,000 for autism therapies. More than 160 generous guests enjoyed what organizers intend to become an annual event including live and silent auctions, great prizes, a delicious dinner and a good bit of college basketball and bracket-centered entertainment.

Big winners of the night's top prizes included Danny Graham, who won the Live Auction Bracket, snagging a trip for four to the NCAA National Championship game in Atlanta next

a library so families will have access to important resources without having to purchase them; and to bring in recognized experts for community training.

"These are things that would simply be out of reach for many of the families we serve," adds Miller-Black. "Children who receive early diagnosis and intervention show real, significant improvement. It is just impossible for everyone to realize what this all means to us."

In many cases, autism therapies are not covered by insurance and Medicaid, but are critical to help a child function at his or her highest ability. Because of that cost, many families in Northeast Arkansas – including many in the ag community – cannot afford these services. SPARC 2 Center provides these services at a fraction of the typical cost.

"We had been giving considerable thought for some time as to how we – as a company – might give back," says Kelly Phipps, president of Armor Seed. "It just so happens that a member of the Armor sales team is personally affected by autism in his own family, and as we learned more, we realized the best place to direct our efforts was right under our noses."



**Armor Seed Sales Representative Matthew Harvey and his son, Cade, who receives therapy at SPARC 2 Center in Jonesboro. Matthew may be reached for comment at 870.295.1909.**

year; and second-place winner Shelia Phipps, who walked away with a Weber gas grill. Halo Bracket Winners were Evyn Graham and Jarrod Staggs.

This event's proceeds will be directed to the SPARC 2 Center, Inc. (Social Pragmatic Awareness Resource and Counseling) in Jonesboro, a non-profit organization founded in 2007 which provides research-based therapies to children and adults affected by an autism spectrum disorder or other neurological disabilities.

"We were blown away by the generosity shown," says SPARC Coordinator and Co-Owner Dayna Miller-Black, who attended the event. "Like a lot of non-profits, we struggle to raise funds and this support couldn't have come at a better time."

The donation will directly benefit children and adults with autism in a "massive way," according to Miller-Black. The organization will use the funds to provide research-based therapies, including Applied Behavior Analysis (A.B.A.); scholarships to patients who could not otherwise afford therapy; training materials to create

Phipps said other ag-related businesses, including Cache River Valley Seed, LLC and Farm Credit Midsouth, have been very receptive to jumping in and offering both financial support and the time and energies of their own staffs. More than a dozen companies sponsored the 2012 Bracket Bonanza.

"We knew that would be the case," says Phipps. "Ag is a very giving industry, and as we dove in, we were all surprised by the number of folks who have some connection to autism."

What's next?

"We would love to see Ag for Autism grow beyond Northeast Arkansas," says Phipps. "Autism is a national issue, and we would love to bring more awareness to that cause."

April is National Autism Awareness Month. Ag for Autism supporters are encouraged to contact Nathan Waldrip at 870.336.2290 for more information. Donations are accepted at [www.agforautism.org](http://www.agforautism.org), and organizers have created a Facebook page to keep followers updated as well. Δ



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