

make it better

north shore—family, community and you

LOCAL TREASURE

bridge builders

JJ Hanley raises awareness for people with disabilities

By Liz Logan



“We’re all about building bridges between people and the community so that [people with disabilities] can live and work”

—JJ Hanley

Want to unleash something fierce? Call a North Shore woman a bad mother.

Consider the case of JJ Hanley of Wilmette. Concerned about her 3-year-old son’s lack of language development, she took him to the pediatrician in 1996. Hanley remembers the doctor saying, “I was overbearing and neurotic, and I needed to get off [my son’s] back.”

Nine months later, her son was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder, a mild form of autism.

While researching the condition,

Hanley, now 49, found a league of mothers who were blamed for their children’s symptoms, such as self-isolation and speech difficulty, from the 1950s through the ’70s—well before autism was identified as a neurological condition.

Doctors told mothers that their unemotional coldness was causing their children to become pariahs, and so they were dubbed “refrigerator mothers.”

The term became the title of the 2002 PBS documentary that Hanley produced in conjunction with Chicago’s Kartemquin Films. It was broadcast nationally and won 12 awards.


The painful and trying experience with her son led Hanley, a former securities trader and freelance media producer, to find her true passion: advocating for people with disabilities. Her latest venture, JJ’s List, is a nonprofit that empowers people with disabilities to be their own advocates and encourages businesses to reach out to these individuals.

While schools are required to integrate students with disabilities as inclusively as

possible, “a wasteland” awaits these individuals after high school, Hanley says. As adults, they have almost no regular access to community living, work and fun.


Like other consumer reviews sites such as Angie’s List and Yelp, JJ’s List, which went live in March, lets people with disabilities rate businesses on whether they provide flexible, welcome and respectful service and/or a workplace to individuals with disabilities.

More than 250 Chicagoland businesses have been reviewed so far by more than 200 users, and every business that’s reviewed is contacted by JJ’s List, which also offers free disability awareness workshops. Businesses that demonstrate a commitment to disability-aware practices become “Bridge Builders” (for free), receiving a full listing and special recognition on the site.


“We’re all about building bridges between people and the community so that [people with disabilities] can live and work,” says Hanley, whose 100 percent-volunteer-run business is based out of her basement. 

Tips for positive interaction with people with disabilities

1. Talk directly to the person with the disability, even if there is a companion with him or her.
2. Talk in a normal voice—don’t shout or talk down.
3. Slow down and be patient. A person with a disability may need more time to answer you.

LEARN FROM JJ If you need a little coaching on how to interact with people with disabilities, check out her Top 10 Tips sheet online in our Make a Difference section:  makeitbetter.net/make-a-difference



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