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Community needs to be more inclusive

By Ronald John San Nicolas

It has been eight years since my youngest son was diagnosed with autism, a pervasive developmental disability that, according to estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, or ADDM, affects 1 in 88 children. Autism spectrum disorders, according to the ADDM, are almost five times more common among boys (1 in 54) than among girls (1 in 252).

My family's journey in understanding the complexity of autism spectrum disorders has been both a blessing and a challenge to learn about and cope with this growing public health issue. A major lesson that I have learned is that people who live with a developmental disability desire to be part of society.

Unfortunately, there remains the stigma or negative perception that people who live with a developmental disability have nothing to contribute. This is far from the truth as the developmentally disabled are more than their diagnosis and are invaluable members of society who can teach others about perseverance and resiliency.

Children first learn that they are loved, capable and a valued member of society through their parents' love and commitment. That is why children with or without disabilities need parents and adults who understand their unique needs and abilities, provide appropriate support when needed and plan for activities that promote social skill development and create accepting environments.

The ultimate goal in supporting children living with developmental disabilities is to create inclusive settings where they can learn and use appropriate communication, socialization, and self-help skills.

But inclusion is not just about an educational strategy, government program, public accommodation or a legal mandate. Inclusion is a way of being. In every community there is a need for an inclusive-oriented vision that values the dignity and worth of every person regardless of their disabilities.

As parents, we work to nurture our child's unique and positive sense of who they are so that they will one day hold at their core the awareness that they are a valued member of the larger family of the human race.

Just as a family includes, values and champions each of its members, an inclusive community is a sacred reminder that all individuals with or without disabilities uniquely contribute to society. Thus, community inclusion of the developmentally disabled becomes a life worth living.