



AUTISM
BELIZE

LET'S
TALK

About Autism Belize

November 2024



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ABOUT US

WHO WE ARE

Autism Belize is a group of passionate parents working to build a strong and vibrant community of Autism and other Special Needs Families, Professionals Working in the field, and Autism Champions and Supporters.

OUR VISION

A Belize that is educated and accepting of differences will be a stronger, kinder, transformed Belize.

OUR MISSION

Teach Autism
Promote Awareness
Show Acceptance
Provide Support

OUR BOARD

FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE CHAIR




A black and white portrait of Christy Castillo Almeida, a woman with curly hair, framed in a simple black frame. To the left of the frame is a large, colorful ribbon graphic made of horizontal lines. To the right of the frame are three smaller, colorful fingerprint-like graphics, each composed of concentric, curved lines in purple, blue, green, yellow, and red.

CHRISTY CASTILLO ALMEIDA
FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON

Voracious Reader Blogger
Artful Dodger of Social
Obligations

Christy has worked in numerous countries in the Caribbean in Public Relations, Lobbying for Women’s Rights, Tourism, and Event Planning. She has been a public speaker and advocate for inclusion and autism awareness and acceptance for over 14 years. After 18 years of living in the Caribbean, she moved home to Belize and founded Autism Belize in 2020

VICE CHAIR



A black and white photograph of Marisela Craig, a woman standing outdoors in a striped jumpsuit, framed in a simple black frame. To the left of the frame is a large, colorful ribbon graphic made of horizontal lines. To the right of the frame are three smaller, colorful fingerprint-like graphics, each composed of concentric, curved lines in purple, blue, green, yellow, and red.

MARISELA CRAIG
VICE CHAIRPERSON

Innovative Adventurous Soul
Empathetic Mom to “Extra”
Special Son

Marisela Craig has been a teacher at Belize Elementary School for the past 27 years. She has a Master’s Degree in Curriculum Development from the University of North Florida. Marisela is committed to her students’ success and is inspired to promote learning through classroom experiences. She is a self-made expert on Down’s Syndrome as she tirelessly and continuously works to help her son Zayne with his learning and educational journey in innovative but effective ways.



OUR BOARD



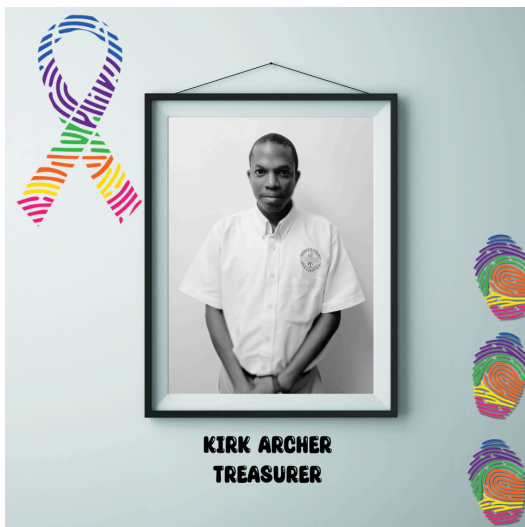
SECRETARY



Dedicated Husband and Father.

Sales & Technical Consultant, Studied business at SJC & Wesley College and SJCJC. He is Dedicated to his wife and Son. Life has taught him much in balancing and understanding the scale of humanity. Along with his wife, Dulce, they work hand in hand to teach their son through the training and experience garnered. He loves travelling, watching movies with his family and helping others. He is not a good chef but is a good learner at it. His life Motto is "Believe" for if you believe and manifest it, it can be done.

TREASURER



Public Officer Church Leader Positive Guy

Kirk has a BA from the University of Belize. He dedicated sixteen years as a public officer at the Tax Department. He is great with numbers and takes pride in ensuring that any task assign to him gets done in a timely manner. He enjoys traveling, watching good movies, and helping others.

DIRECTOR, PROJECTS



Teacher Artist Craft-Maker
Event Planner

Kareesh has a B.Ed from the University of Belize. She has been working in Belize as a teacher for the past fourteen years and has spearheaded several projects and committees. She enjoys cooking, choreographing dances for children, and watching sports games. In addition, she manages her own small craft-making business Thee Aesthetics by Ro where she provides customers with quality classroom charts, party, baptismal and wedding decors.





WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

Back Story

Upon returning to Belize after 18 years with her then 12 year old son who is non-verbal and has Level 3 autism, she quickly learned several things:

- The majority of the population has no idea about autism.
- Even if a parent suspects there is something 'different' with his or her child, he or she has very few options on where to go for information.
- There are only 2 clinical psychologists who have training to do full assessments and evaluations in Belize.
- There are NO Developmental Pediatricians or pediatric neurologists who specialize in this area.
- There was only 2 licensed Speech & Language Pathologists in the country
- There were Occupational Therapists and no BCBA certified Behavioral Therapists in the country.
- There is only one special needs school in the country, but they were inadequately supported and according to their management, in much need of training to be able to support their student population.
- Only 2 schools country-wide are truly 'inclusive'.
- If a child finishes Std. 6/8th Grade and is unable to get into high school, there are very few educational options.
- Belize has no life-skill and job training centers geared to helping those with special needs.
- Outside of the special needs school that will keep children/young adults to age 16, there is no plan/project/program - private or public, educational, sporting or basic life skills or social skills- to help integrate those on the spectrum with autism.

All this motivated Christy to start Autism Belize.

FACTS & OTHER DATA

Sadly, no government or non-governmental agency has any statistics regarding how many persons on the spectrum or with special needs there are in Belize. We have no data on how many have completed grade school, high school or if any have had a chance to get a university degree. We don't know how many currently hold jobs.

What we do know is that in four years, Autism Belize has been contacted by at least 500 families who either worry their child might have some sort of special needs or learning disorder or who have a child/young adult/adult on the spectrum.

We do know that we have had more than 10,000 participants take our training modules. We have done over 70 sensitization sessions to businesses and government offices. We maintain a very active parent support WhatsApp Group with approximately 100 members. Our mailing list is now up to 2,455 parents, teachers and professionals in the field.

We do not have facts and figures, at this time, but what we do have are so many personal stories. Here are just a few:

- The grandmother who took over raising her grandchild when over a year after getting the diagnosis, her son and his wife only kept trying to discipline the autism out of the child
- The aunt in a village in the north who is trying to help her sister understand that she needs to get her son assessed since he is 4 and has no words and troubling behaviors.
- The 50+ children and youths who have no form of communication whatsoever even though some are 13, 14 and 15 years of age.
- The 24 and the 27 year old who only went to school until third grade and now spend every day locked up at home.
- The mom from down south who gave her family only beans every day for three weeks so that she can take a 5 hr bus drive with her son to get a Functional Behavior Assessment done.
- The 13 year old boy who can't get into high school, even though he is good with computers so instead spends his day going on jobs with his father who is an electrician.
- The mom who spends all her free time driving her two daughters age 17 and 20 on the golf cart. She and the daughters have no friends. The daughters never finished high school, even though, one was diagnosed at a Level 1 autism. The younger daughter now is aggressive and the mother doesn't know how she will continue.



LONG TERM GOALS & OBJECTIVES



Accessing The Situation

Recognizing that the needs of this community are so great, Autism Belize organized a panel of special needs parents, persons who worked with and for the Special Education Unit of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, educators with decades of experience and a current university student of behavioral healthcare to analyze the struggles and needs for persons with special needs and for their families and to offer real and sustainable suggestions to assist persons with special needs in the main areas of health and wellness, education and families.

Target Goals & Plans

Out of these discussions, including numerous personal stories from parents across the country, we developed our dream for Belize re: Special Needs, Our Proposed Action Plan, 2020*. We agreed that Autism Belize's main goals **must** be:

1. Greater inclusion for persons with special needs in schools, the workplace, and in society
2. Elimination of discrimination and marginalization of persons with disabilities
3. Provision of support for special needs persons and for their families

Our plan of action then must focus on:

1. Capacity Building
2. Promoting Participation and Inclusion
3. Awareness Raising and Education

*Autism Belize's Proposed Action Plan is available on request

A VERY BUSY START

In The First Two Years (2021 & 2022), We Have:

- hosted 16 LIVE Guest Speaker Events and 19 sensitization presentations to companies and organizations
- facilitated 23 Parent & Teacher Trainings to over 500 parents and teachers
- launched Special Education Needs Teacher Training Modules (The first trained 300 teachers on IEPs)
- held 23 Monthly Parent Support Meetings
- produced 14 Monthly Newsletters & weekly blogs
- assisted in countless Parent Support Sessions
- organized and/or participated in numerous Advocacy Sessions with GOB & other Stakeholders
- assisted with the planning and running of the first National Disability Conference
- developed a Proposed Action Plan for Special Needs Persons in Belize
- developed and facilitated a 20hr certification course for Paraprofessionals and so far have 32 graduates.
- conceptualized and facilitated an MoU between the Government of Belize and Therapy Adventures to provide free Occupational, Behavioral, and Speech and Language therapies to Belizean families year-round starting early 2022
- started the first special needs summer camp (FREE) offering Occupational, Speech and Behavior Therapy
- started the Out of the Box Art
- launched an extremely successful national Light It Up Blue Campaign for April- Autism Awareness Month, a first for Belize. We encouraged Belizeans, Companies, and Government Offices to:
 - **Light it up Blue:** Light your buildings with blue light bulbs in April.
 - **Wear Blue:** Encourage your staff to wear blue every Friday in April to show support.
 - **Share Blue:** Post on social media using the hashtags #LightItUpBlueBze and #AutismBelize
 - **Spread Blue:** Tell others about the campaign and what it means.
 - **Teach Blue:** Invite Autism Belize to give a short virtual presentation on autism.
 - **Walk Blue:** We asked Belizeans to come out and run, walk or dance wearing blue on the last Saturday in April across the country. We had 9 of these events happening across the country on the same day.





CURRENT PROJECTS

More recently in 2023-2024:

- Represented Autism Belize as a Commissioner on the National Commission for Families and Children
- Represented Autism Belize as a part of the Disability Bill Task Force which included assisting with National Consultations, review of suggestions/proposals to the Draft Disability Bill, and now planning for the implementation of the Disability Bill
- Participated in panels and forums with UNICEF on Social Protection, with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology on Development of the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact, with the Ministry of Human Development on Social Protection and on Early Childhood Development Strategic Plan, and with UNCHR on Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Attended the Caribbean Disability Forum in Guayana and is participating in the development of a White Paper and on the Development of a Caribbean Disability Network
- On the Technical Working Group for the Development of a National Education Alliance
- Assisted with training of CEMO workers
- Organized & facilitated 19 sensitization sessions. with businesses and government officers
- Led the organization of Autism Awareness Month activities which included country-wide walks in 2023 & 2024
- Organized Autism Belize Family Day in 2023, 2024 & Christmas Parties for children with disabilities in 2023
- Developed a new Paraprofessional Course for High School
- Hosted 3 paraprofessional trainings - 2 in Belize City and 1 in Independence
- Work with Happy Ladders to provide support for families with children 0-3
- Organized 4 training sessions for Day Care Providers
- Organized 18 parent and teacher trainings sessions - many with multiple modules
- Organized activities for National Disability Week in 2023 and 2024
- Provided guidance & support to numerous families as now public hospitals and pediatricians refer families to us

FUTURE PROJECTS

Depending on grants and community support, these are a few of the projects we want to bring to our families.

Friend Finder App & Program:

One of the biggest concerns for parents with children/youths/young adults with special needs is that they also struggle with being alone and having no friends. Moreover, Belize lacks capacity in so many fields related to this area mainly because our young adults are not exposed to the special needs community. They have no clue about possible job options in this field. We then plan to:

- develop an App that can pair special needs/disabled kids/youths/young adults with volunteers (high school/junior college students) based on location and interest. Using an app ensures a level of privacy and ensures that volunteers are trained and screened.
- train the Trainers (National Resource Center for Inclusive Education officers) to train/sensitize volunteers (mainly students).
- launch Nationwide Campaign to encourage families with special needs and disabilities to sign up.

The plan is to:

- develop App
- develop Sensitization Training and Train the Trainers (MoE would partner with us to do countrywide training since most volunteers would be high school/junior college students)
- launch Media Campaign to encourage persons with special needs and disabilities and volunteers to take part.
- create a Social Event at the end of the program (we are planning September to March to run once a year.)





Active Citizens Program:

Another huge gap in our system is the lack of assistance with transitioning and life skills programs. For those youth with disabilities who age out of high school or do not even get accepted to high school, there are extremely limited options for them. Many end up just being locked up at home or end up wandering the streets. The goals of our Active Citizens program are:

- to help promote and sell products made by persons with disabilities or items that are made to raise funds for persons with disabilities at a booth in the tourist village
- to provide job & life skills training experiences to youths with disabilities
- to offer retirees meaningful volunteer opportunities

The plan is to:

- launch campaign to get retirees to volunteer
- sensitize and train volunteers
- work with the office of the Special Envoy to identify youths who (i) have products to sell and/or (ii) can be able to help with selling products with an aide/volunteer to teach and guide them
- rent booth in tourist village at discounted price
- pair volunteers with youths with disabilities (from the Special Needs school and out of school) to sell at the booth
- pay the artists and sellers with disabilities with funds raised.

Mobile Therapy Bus:

Autism Belize is extremely proud to have facilitated the partnership between Therapy Adventures and the Government of Belize so that our special needs families in Belize City and the Belmopan area will be able to get consistent Occupational, Speech and Behavioral therapy. While this program focuses on capacity building and hopefully will be self-sustainable as it grows and expands, there are still so many other families in rural areas that still need support.

The plan is to:

- source a large capacity school bus and retrofit it so that it can be a mobile sensory/occupational therapy gym with storage areas for manipulatives and equipment for speech and behavior therapy as well.
- using the existing partnership (signed MoU) with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous People's Affairs, the Ministry of Youth, Sports and E-Governance, the University of Belize and Therapy Adventures, we'd be able to take the certified professionals, graduate students and interns to rural areas to provide services. Speech and Behavior Therapies can be done in classroom spaces, but Occupational Therapy would need the equipment and set-up of this mobile gym.





Life Skills Training Center:

Horizon Academy, since its start 10 years ago, has been fully inclusive. This school offers a dynamic holistic academic and expressive arts and sports program. With over 20 percent of the student population having a range of special needs from Down Syndrome to ADHD, from visually impaired to Autism Spectrum Disorder, the school has had to create an entire Special Needs Department to provide a range of services for these students. They have recognized that it is not enough to just identify the student's special learning need, but that it is also critical to determine how best to respond to that need. Some of the services they now provide are Assessments, Individual Education Programs, Support Teachers, Shadows, Curriculum Modification, Skill Training, and Pullouts.

Horizon's founding principles are: Child-Centered, Holistic, Inclusive, Progressive (CHIP). They have been steadily CHIPPING away at barriers to inclusion for all students. Horizon Academy has seen an increase in referrals for children on the Autism Spectrum in the last 5 years, but sadly have had to turn away approximately 15 children due to lack of space. The other challenge too is for many of your kids who finish 8th grade, but do not achieve a diploma, they have been unable to access secondary schools. This is why Horizon Academy is willing to work with potential partners to try to raise funds in the hope of building a full Life Skills Center to be able to provide more much-needed services to children and teens with Special Needs.

The plan is to:

- obtain a Mennonite home to be set-up at Horizon Academy and furnish it accordingly to look like a small home and have a room for a classroom setting.
- purchase appliances and other household items to include stove, washing machine, sewing machines, iron, cooking utensils, first aid kit, etc
- purchase manipulatives, computer, printer, laminator, projector, etc
- Horizon already has an Alternative Education Program plan to focus on 3 main areas for :
 - Core Academics (Language, Math, Expressive Arts and Sports)
 - Life skills and Independent Skills
 - Occupational Training

National Sensitization Campaign:

Autism Belize recognizes that we must promote awareness. This campaign must be all encompassing. It needs to:

- teach about special needs and disabilities
- help families recognize warning signs and know where to go for assistance
- educate those with special needs and disabilities to understand their rights
- demonstrate the power of inclusion at all levels of our society

The plan is to:

- engage GoB, Media and other stakeholders to ensure the campaign is thorough and impactful country-wide
- develop and implement a 2- level workshop in the Train the Trainer model to sensitize all government workers countrywide about disabilities and to teach them about the value of inclusion and how to be inclusive.
- develop and produce a series of Public Service Announcements (PSAs) to sensitize Belize about Disabilities and Inclusion
- create & distribute information cards about warning signs and who to contact/where to go for assistance. These cards will be distributed to Doctors' Offices, Hospitals Countrywide, social workers and educational field officers
- develop and produce a complete public campaign to teach persons with disabilities about their rights (once a policy has been created)
- train and include Youth Disability Advocates to become involved in this program



BECOMING AN AUTISM CHAMPION



There is much to be done in Belize for persons on the autism spectrum and with special needs. We recognize that the road ahead is long and will not be easy. Our plans are ambitious, but absolutely necessary for our community - for Belize.

Our aim is for a stronger, kinder, transformed Belize - A Belize that is truly accepting and inclusive. We are passionate about this.

We are special needs parents. We know the value of a strong foundation. We will never give up on the struggle for our children and for all those with special needs. Our level of determination and drive knows no bounds.

We have proven that we are not afraid of hard work and have made it a priority to network and advocate. We know that to achieve our goals we must work together in partnerships with other organizations, Government, and Civil Society.

Will You Consider Joining Team Autism Belize And Partnering With Us Today?



CONTACT US!

If you are interested in becoming a partner and joining Autism Belize; if you would like to assist in any of these projects; or if you have questions, concerns, or need further information or a full project proposal on any of our future projects, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

For More Information:

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SOCIAL MEDIA

AutismBelize

