

# Miami Herald

## A father's plea: Support South Florida's autism community | Opinion

November 26, 2024

By Cristian LaCapra



The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities at the University of Miami held its ninth annual Job SEEKers program, which teaches pre-employment skills to adults with autism.

The day our son Nico was diagnosed with autism opened up a chapter of our lives filled with unexpected challenges and extraordinary triumphs. Like many families facing this journey, my wife Gianni and I were awake at night, overwhelmed with questions about our son's future. How would he navigate school? Would he make lasting friendships and relationships? How

would he find his place in the world? When we discovered [the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities \(CARD\)](#), we found more than an organization – we found a community that transformed our concerns into confidence and showed us a positive pathway forward.

Under the steadfast leadership of Michael Alessandri, CARD has become an indispensable resource for South Florida families navigating the challenges of autism. It serves over 17,000 families across Miami-Dade, Broward and Monroe counties, offering support services that address autism's complexities throughout every stage of life.

With one in 36 children in the U.S. identified as being on the autism spectrum, [according to the CDC's 2023 data, CARD's work serves as a vital lifeline for families.](#)

Since its founding in 1993, CARD has been a cornerstone of the South Florida autism community. Its mission is broad, yet deeply personal. Its unique capacity to support individuals and families through every life stage sets it apart. It is not just a provider of services but also a hub for public awareness, early diagnosis, education, and long-term community inclusion.

CARD is invaluable in guiding Gianni and me, from the initial transition into understanding the complexities of autism to navigating challenges and accessing essential resources.

As we raise our family, CARD remains integral to our support system. I now see the organization as the bridge to Nico's future. It represents the hope that Nico will grow up in a community where he can find his place, his purpose and his version of a fulfilling life.

CARD benefits from the Florida Legislature's state funding and its affiliation with the University of Miami, but these sources do not fully sustain it. While state statute requires CARD centers to serve persons of all ages, state funding primarily supports grades pre-K-12.

To meet CARD's mission and extend services beyond school years, the organization relies heavily on community donations to sustain its free services and meet the growing demand driven by rising autism rates.

With autism rates on the rise, CARD's resources are stretched thin, and without sustained community support, its ability to meet the increasing demand can be jeopardized.

The work of CARD exemplifies the transformative power of community involvement. Its partnerships with families, schools, businesses, and government agencies extend its impact far beyond its walls.

For my family, supporting CARD is part of a broader commitment to building a stronger Miami through philanthropy. Like our involvement with Big Brothers Big Sisters and the United Way, supporting CARD aligns with our belief in collective action and shared responsibility.

Investing in CARD doesn't just improve individual outcomes — it benefits our community and society.

By providing efficient, coordinated care, CARD mitigates these costs, reducing long-term financial burdens on families and society.

A call to Action: Join CARD in supporting families with Autism. To ensure CARD can continue its vital work, the annual Tropical Nights Gala on April 5, 2025 stands as its signature fundraising event, aiming for a record-breaking \$1 million goal. My wife and I are the event's co-chairs.

Meeting this milestone will allow CARD to expand its services further, reach more families, and deepen its impact in underserved areas, including Black and Haitian communities in South Florida. CARD has shown my family what's possible when a community stands together.

Through grassroots efforts and continued support and engagement, we can ensure South Florida continues to be a place where children and adults with autism find their path to thrive. Together, we can create a brighter future for them.

You can help us reach this ambitious goal by donating CARD or by attending the CARD gala, visit [TropicalNights.card.miami.edu](https://TropicalNights.card.miami.edu).

*Cristian LaCapra is a senior wealth strategist at Northern Trust. He also volunteers with the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Miami and United Way of Miami-Dade.*



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