

Sisters' relationship helps others

Author writes book about autistic child and sibling, inspired by daughters



Lori DeMonia

Her head didn't even turn to look at who was calling out her name.

When DeMonia got close to Leah to read her a book, the toddler became agitated.

Day after day, incidents like these played themselves out.

"Her whole personality was gone," DeMonia said.

When she and her husband, Matthew, received two requests from two day care centers asking that Leah leave, they sought out an early intervention program in Summit County.

It was that agency that referred the couple to Rainbow Babies and Childrens Hospital in Cleveland.

Leah was diagnosed with spectral autism disorder.

Putting it into words

DeMonia is the author of "Leah's Voice," an award-winning children's book about the relationship between an older sister with autism and her younger sister who does not have it.

"I'd written my first book in 1998, but never got it published. It was called 'Fat Raccoons Can't Jump,' about self-esteem," DeMonia said.

"I sent the owners of Halo Publishing International an idea for a second book about siblings dealing with autism," she recalled. "It would be a fictional story based on my experiences with my daughters, Leah and Sarah, to shine a light on what siblings deal with. My publisher said, 'That's what you should be writing now. It would be beneficial to people.'

"We hung up. That night, I thought about it. The next day, I wrote pretty much all of the book. I spent two months editing it. I started in June of 2012."

In it, she depicts Leah's relationship with younger sister Sarah, who is called Logan in the book.

In August, the publisher chose a children's illustrator, Monique Turchan, an alumna along with DeMonia, of Cleveland State University.

"Leah's Voice" is a finalist in the Readers' Favorite Awards, an international contest hosted by the Miami International Book Fair.

"I am one of eight authors in the category of 'Children from Kindergarten through Third Grade.' One of the other authors is Henry ('The Fonz') Winkler," DeMonia said.

"My girls liked the book. Sarah was real excited and gave a copy to her teacher. Sarah told me, 'You're going to help a lot of people because of your book, mommy.'"

Handling autism

When the DeMonias were first told of Leah's diagnosis, each member responded differently to the news.

"I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. My husband didn't want to believe it or that it was serious, that it was something she'll grow out of. But it was not temporary," she said.

Autism is a disorder of neural development characterized by impaired social interaction and verbal and non-verbal communication, and by restricted, repetitive or stereotyped behavior.

Through early intervention, speech therapy and occupational therapy, subtle, positive changes gradually began to occur in Leah's life.

"Slowly, her words started picking up. Leah's now 12 and in fourth grade. Sarah is 8. At a recent talent show at school, Leah and her girlfriends put on a skit, a dance they called the 'Cupid Shuffle,'" she said.

DeMonia is a Brookside High School graduate, class of 1986. In 2005, the DeMonia family moved to Oxford, Pa.

After graduating from Brookside, DeMonia went to CSU and earned a bachelor's degree in marketing.

"While I was attending college, I worked at Our Lady of the Wayside in their supportive living home called the Croft House," she said. "Working there was very rewarding and, looking back, it prepared me for my own special needs child."

Improving over time

"Leah's Voice" has been added to the Autism Speaks book resource library, and has recently been given an honorable mention at the 2013 New York Book Festival.

Savvy Kids magazine named it "Book of the Month" in their special needs edition in January. It received a Mom's Choice Award in the children's book category of developing social skills. The Sibling Support Project has included it in their amazon store's recommended reading list.

Leah is an award-winning artist, receiving an art grant from the Lane Arts Council and Kindtree — Autism Rocks Productions for five consecutive years.

While there is no way for a person with autism to break free of it, there are effective tools to deal with it.

"Hopefully, Leah's resistance to change will fade and she'll be able to cope better. Over time, her dealing with things has gotten a lot better," DeMonia said.

DeMonia's advice to parents who are concerned about the possibility of autism in their children is to have their child examined by a physician.

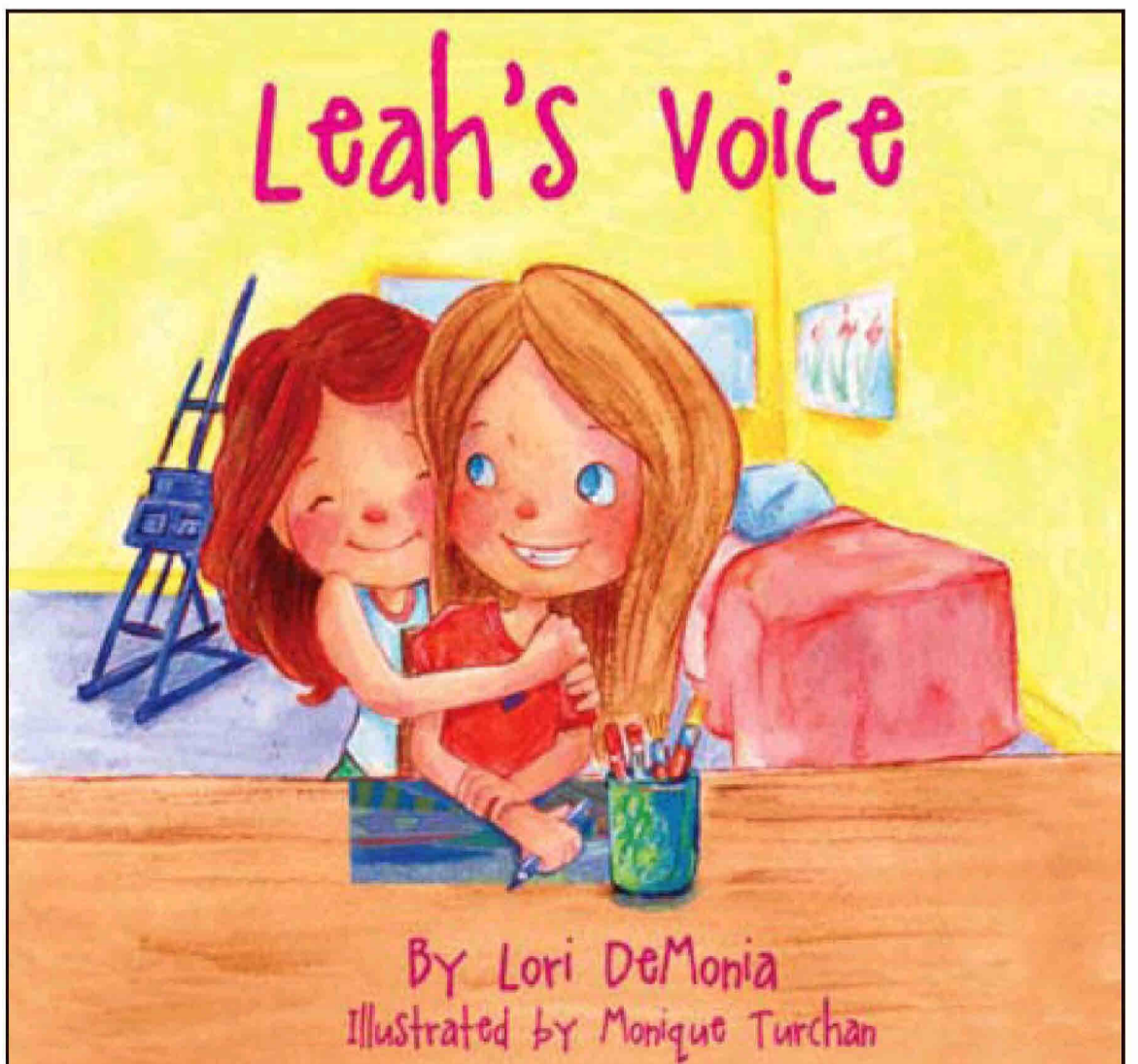
"If you have any suspicions, don't put it off or live in denial. Get results; the sooner, the better," DeMonia said.

For further information on "Leah's Voice" or to purchase a copy of the book, visit leahs-voicethebook.com or go to Facebook Leah's Voice.



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE MORNING JOURNAL

Leah DeMonia, left, and her sister, Sarah, play prominent roles in their mother's book of fiction, "Leah's Voice," about the relationships of siblings when one of them has spectral autism disorder, as Leah does.



"Leah's Voice," above, written by Sheffield Lake native Lori DeMonia, is an award-winning book about the relationship between an older sister with autism and her younger sister who does not have it.