

The Hilliard/Harper Family

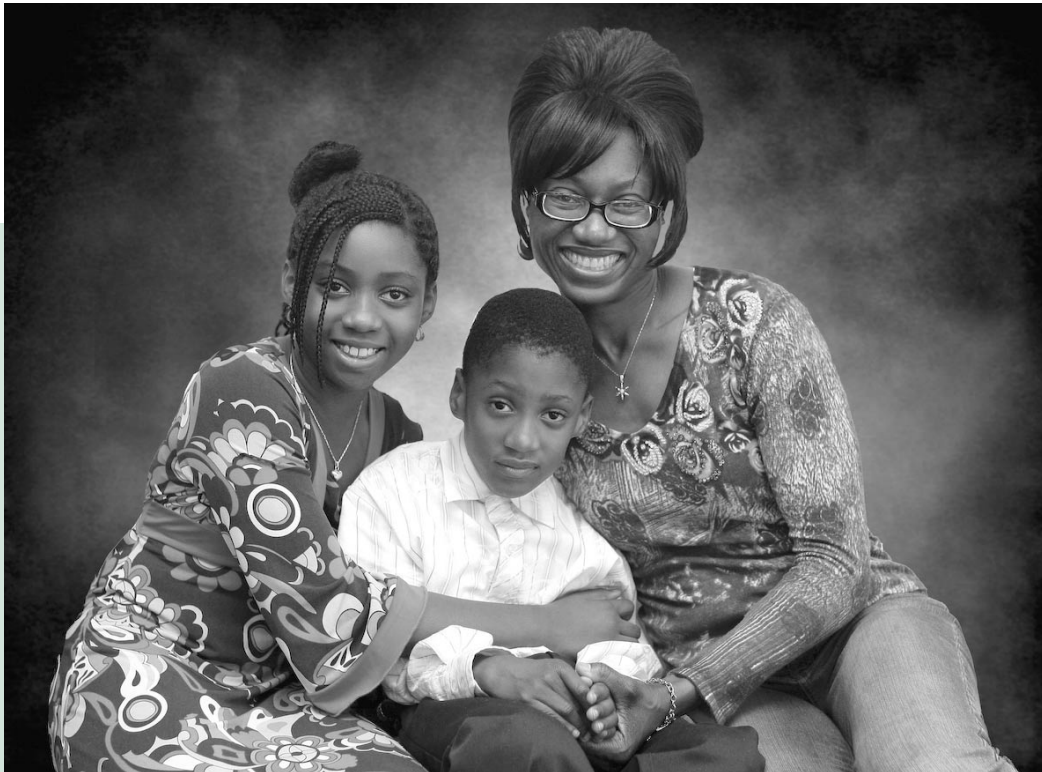


PHOTO BY SPECIAL SHOTS UNLIMITED

(LEFT TO RIGHT) ASHANTI HARPER, ZAIRE HARPER AND WANDA HILLIARD

DECEMBER 2007

DEAR COSAC FAMILY AND FRIENDS:

I doubt anyone is prepared for the diagnosis of autism. I certainly wasn't. When my son, Zaire, was born 13 weeks premature, we were confronted with months of operations and happy ups and scary downs, but he persevered. His triumphs over his early challenges made the diagnosis of autism even more devastating.

It was my mother who first suggested Zaire might have autism. I resisted her insinuation, chalking up his developmental delays to being premature. Little did I know that my mother's intuition was correct.

I'll never forget the words of the neuro-developmental pediatrician who evaluated Zaire in 2003: "I know you must think this is a temporary problem for Zaire and that it will go away, but this is a lifelong disability. Zaire has autism." I became numb and started to cry. However, the words were not a complete shock, because of what my mother had suggested.

That very same day, the doctor's assistant recommended I call COSAC, telling me the organization would supply information that would answer my questions and help me better understand Zaire's diagnosis. I immediately called COSAC and within a few days received a thick packet in the mail filled with information.

After my initial denial and confusion, I knew I had to deal with the diagnosis and make important decisions. Zaire has autism. What do I do and where do I go to get help for my son? I didn't want my denial to delay Zaire from getting that crucial early intervention that is key for the best prognosis for a child with autism. My message to all the parents out there who may be feeling the same despair and denial that I did is simple: *You are not alone! I understand and feel your pain, but time is of the essence. Please help your child...now!*

continued on back

The COSAC FUND

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Coping with Zaire's autism as a single parent has been challenging, to say the least. Raising children alone is a difficult job and when you also have a child with a disability it makes it even harder. That is why COSAC is so important. COSAC is always there to help families like mine deal with and understand this mysterious puzzle. I attend a COSAC-sponsored family support group that meets monthly at the Jewish Community Center in Bayonne. The meetings are always very informative and allow parents to share their stories and vent their frustrations to other parents who understand their situation. It's funny how I didn't realize what I was going through with Zaire until I saw another mother dealing with her child with autism. When you are living with autism every day, it seems normal to you — it's just a part of your world. When you see yourself in other parents, it's like looking in the mirror.

My daughter, Ashanti, has been corresponding with other siblings who have a brother or sister with autism through COSAC's Sibling Pen Pal program. This has helped her realize that she is not alone and there are other children going through the same things that she is experiencing. As the "big sister," Ashanti is an enormous help to me with Zaire. She loves her little brother and is very protective of him, but I know at times she feels neglected and acts out because she is looking for attention. It's hard to juggle my time between both children because Zaire requires so much of my attention. To my daughter, Ashanti: *I'm sorry if it seems like I'm not there for you at times, but I always hope you know that I understand and appreciate you dearly. I love you so much! You are mommy's little angel!*

Ashanti and I both have participated in COSAC's Autism Awareness Ambassador program to help spread awareness during April, National Autism Awareness Month, in our communities. Ashanti spoke to her school at an assembly to help explain her brother's disability. We also gave a speech to our church's congregation. Being able to spread awareness about autism helps empower us both. COSAC has given us the tools to do so.

Zaire is now 5 years old and is a sweet, lovable boy. Even though he is non-verbal, he is very vocal and loves to sing; he is singing from the moment he wakes up to when his head hits the pillow at night. Still, everyday I encounter different battles whether it be cutting his hair, washing his face or brushing his teeth. Sometimes it's a real struggle just to get him dressed. At times, I get tired but I try to stay strong and positive knowing that one day it will all get better. I have faith in that and I pray daily for patience and strength to get me through this.

Oftentimes, that strength comes from my mother who is a great help to my family. She helps me with Zaire throughout the day, puts him on the school bus in the morning and is there to meet the bus when he comes home from school. She loves my children equally and is like their second mother. To my mother: *You are very much appreciated. You are a blessing to me!* Any resistance I may have felt when she first suggested he might have autism is gone. Family is so important and I am grateful to Ashanti and my mother, as well as for the support I receive from relatives who are not as close to home.

I also thank the COSAC Family for providing us with the support we needed. I ask each of you reading this letter, as members of that extended support system, to consider making a donation to The COSAC Fund. Your tax-deductible contribution will go far to helping families like mine face this difficult diagnosis, and triumph.

Thank you for your support.



Wanda Hilliard



About COSAC

COSAC IS NEW JERSEY'S AUTISM RESOURCE, to which parents and professionals can turn for information, advocacy, support and training. With more than 42 years of expertise, COSAC provides assistance at all stages of an individual's life — from first diagnosis through early intervention systems, education, transition issues and adult services. The COSAC Fund is our annual fund drive, which provides valuable support for COSAC's efforts on behalf of families like Zaire's.

For more information about COSAC or autism spectrum disorders, contact our help line at 1-800-4-AUTISM or visit www.njcosac.org.

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