

A beautiful day in the neighborhood

West Austin moms launch online resource for special needs caregivers



PHOTO BY YVONNE LIM WILSON

West Austin moms Kim Webb and René Craft launched www.SpecialNeeds-Neighborhood.com to better connect caregivers of special needs children.

By Yvonne Lim Wilson

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A special spark lit up when René Craft and Kim Webb met at the doctor's office. They were familiar with each other from long waits in the waiting room, but on this day they struck up a conversation and realized all that they had in common.

Both are parents of children with special needs, one with apraxia, a speech disorder, and another with autism. While the two diagnoses were different, the two moms found a wealth of information from each other.

From recommendations on therapeutic horse riding instructors to how to handle insurance, and even to hairdressers, these two moms realized how valuable networking can be. That's when they decided to start Special Needs Neighborhood.com, a Web site for caregivers of special needs children to ask questions and share information.

"We're trying to capture this institutional knowledge parents gather that they're happy to share with you, but only if you happen to run into them and ask," Craft said. "This is a neighborhood of your neighbors."

Launched in March, the site is completely run by volunteers. The site creation, design and maintenance was donated, and the two moms are accepting advertising to keep the site free for users.

In the "Ask the Community" feature, users are encouraged

give honest opinions concerning whether a provider was helpful or not and why.

"It took me literally two years to get a dentist who would work with my daughter – on this site there are already six listings," Webb said. "It's getting to that professional who understands special needs rather than treating them as children who need to 'just get over it.'"

In addition to questions and answers from the community, the site also features René's personal blog that talks about life as a mother of a son with autism. She is candid about the ups and downs of her family's experiences and also features interviews – in one case, an interview with a sibling of a child with autism.

"I love René's blog. It lets you know you're not alone out there," Webb said. "A lot of times, our immediate and extended families don't know what we're going through. [Through the site], I can connect with René and others."

The site aims to foster a sharing community of special needs caregivers who can provide the best information out there from those who have been tested and have become experts.

"We want to help people avoid the darkness we felt," Craft said, adding how important is to have good information as soon as possible. "Early intervention is key, and it's about quality of life."

www.specialneedsneighborhood.com