

# FUND IT FORWARD



By Jennifer Brozak

## A local mother makes it her mission to help families of children with special needs.

Entrepreneurs start businesses for many reasons. For some, profit is the driving force, while others are enticed by the freedom to be their own boss. But for Rose Morris of Pine Township, entrepreneurship was purely spiritual.

Morris is the inventor of "The Safety Sleeper", a fully enclosed and portable bed that is specifically designed to help children with autism remain in their beds. She is also the co-founder of Fund it Forward, a nonprofit organization which helps parents of special needs children raise money for necessary equipment.

Morris, a former elementary school teacher and mother of three, invented The Safety Sleeper out of pure desperation. Her son Abram, who is autistic, would not stay in his bed at night, which jeopardized his safety and was frustrating for his parents. Morris explains that sleep problems are common among children with autism.

"Getting Abram to sleep was extremely difficult," she says. "He could climb out of anything. He wouldn't wind down. We needed a way to help him calm down and feel safe."



The Safety Sleeper™



*"When we started using the bed, I knew I had something special. I also knew there were other families this could help who couldn't afford to buy one for their own children," she explains.*

explains. "Allowing us to gain control over that one aspect changed our lives."

Abram took to the bed quickly, she says. "He cried for the first day or two, but this experience was no different than when kids cry because they want out of their cribs or rooms."

Abram was about three at the time. After only one week he was sleeping safely and soundly in his own bed. For Morris, though, her journey was far from over...

"After we invented this bed, I knew I had to help other families." Around the same time The Safety Sleeper was patented, Fund it Forward was born.

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Morris teamed up with Jackie Smolinski, a mother from Ohio whose son had a severe form of epilepsy. Together, they carved out the vision for Fund it Forward.

According to Fund it Forward Executive Director Kristin Hasley, the nonprofit is designed to help families of children with special needs execute fundraisers to purchase whatever equipment will improve the quality of their lives – whether it be The Safety Sleeper, an iPad, or an adaptive bicycle. Many of these devices are not covered by insurance and families find themselves at a loss. All the organization asks in return is that each family finds one additional family to help.

"We give our families the tools and support they need to host successful fundraisers," says Hasley. Families then choose what fundraiser will work best for them; some conduct car washes, bake sales, host movie nights or partner with local restaurants for "dine to donate" nights, in which a portion of a the night's profits are split with the families.

"It's all about giving back," Hasley explains. "Once we help families achieve their goals, they become our biggest advocates. If a family doesn't have the resources to purchase this equipment on their own, we can help them feel empowered and valued. We can give them hope."

Fund it Forward has already helped 60 families across the country, a number that continues to grow, mostly as a result of family advocacy. The group also receives referrals from case managers and other nonprofit groups like Autism Speaks. In addition, WTAE anchor Kelley Frey, whose son has special needs, has emceed Fund it Forward events, helping to raise awareness.

"I cannot express the gratitude, love and appreciation that I feel working with these families," says Morris. "To know that we have been able to affect these families' lives – there are no words big enough to describe how it feels." ■



Then, while on vacation, Morris and her husband (who is in the U.S. Air Force) began discussing the problem with family friends.

"I call myself the 'accidental entrepreneur!'" Morris laughs. "We were talking about our trouble with getting Abram to sleep...I knew in my mind what I needed to solve this problem, so I just put in my parameters and then my husband and a family friend, who owns a boat shop, came up with the physical template and design."

The three worked together to create the prototype using sail fabric, which they originally dubbed "Abram's Bed." It worked! Because Abram was not able to access any of the opening mechanisms from inside the bed, he at last remained safely in his bed.

"Before this bed, we were at our breaking point, so words cannot express what a life-changing experience this was for us," Morris