

Albany Nonprofit Living Autism Out Loud Focuses On Serving People of Color

Danyale Sturdivant, mom of a son with autism, launched the nonprofit to help others



Danyale Sturdivant, founder of Living Autism Out Loud on Tuesday, March 1, 2022, in Guilderland, N.Y. LAOL aims at decreasing and eventually eliminating cultural barriers that Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) parents face when accessing services and supports for their children with Autism and/or Intellectual Developmental Disabilities. Will Waldron/Times Union

Whenever Danyale Sturdivant has a tough day, she channels the sound of her mother's voice in her head. The quote that repeats over and over contains the words she translates into the energy to keep going.

"My mother would say, 'You can get down, but don't stay down because you've got work to do,'" Sturdivant said. And as a single working mother of a child on the autism spectrum, she's embracing the work to be done to improve the quality of life for her son, and to help other families of color navigate what can be an unexpected, difficult path forward.

"The journey with autism can be so isolating," said Sturdivant, of Albany, who founded Living Autism Out Loud, a nonprofit created to decrease the cultural barriers faced by parents who are Black, indigenous and people of color, while accessing support for children with developmental disabilities. Her son, now 12, was diagnosed to be on the autism spectrum at 2 1/2 years old.

Sturdivant started the nonprofit in January. She consults and educates service providers on how they can better engage with BIPOC families and their children, through presentations and speaking engagements. That education, in turn, is meant to share her lived experience and help to smooth out the process and provide a layer of education in an area where it is lacking.

"It is comforting when parents can speak to professionals of color or those who understand our history, struggles and barriers," Sturdivant said. "However, in my experience, there are very few providers of color available, and so the next best thing is to ensure medical and social services providers can offer a culturally responsive environment."

Sturdivant is a licensed clinical social worker, and her education from Russell Sage College and Columbia University's School of Social Work has helped her develop a plan to implement services she says are deeply needed. She has participated in more than two dozen speaking engagements and seminars, tackling topics related to her perspective on parenting a child of color on the autism spectrum at conferences and events from New York to North Carolina. 

The culturally responsive environment Sturdivant aims to educate people about – and to achieve in medical and educational settings – involves all parties understanding of how racism, implicit biases and microaggressions have an impact on BIPOC children with developmental disabilities.

“My goal is to offer assistance to providers in shifting their thought process, and acknowledging the past and present experiences by BIPOC families who are seeking services for their children with autism or other intellectual developmental disabilities,” Sturdivant said. “When this happens, honest conversations can take place between providers and parents, ultimately leading to better service outcomes and culturally sustaining partnerships.”

While her role as a mother is a critical part of the organization’s foundation, she is conscious of the way she presents her story in new conversations, which are happening daily as the nonprofit begins to take off in the first of its three startup phases. The parent voice plays a large role in improving overall family engagement with medical providers, human services and educational institutions.

“As a single black mother of a male son with autism, I ensure to communicate there are additional fears and anxieties that go along with raising a Black boy with autism,” Sturdivant said. “It’s imperative I continue to collaborate with service providers in the area so that we can more effectively meet the needs of BIPOC families in this space.”

Initially, Sturdivant struggled in making connections when she began her nonprofit, similar to the way she did while scheduling appointments and securing the support she sought for her young son after his diagnosis.

“I’ve learned the importance of allyship, communication and collaboration,” Sturdivant said. “I started out not knowing where to look, but with the help of familiar members who had experience in nonprofits, I was able to move past these barriers quickly.”

As Living Autism Out Loud continues to accelerate and build its programs and partnerships, Sturdivant is already looking to what’s next. She hints at phase two of the startup journey, which involves becoming more involved with the BIPOC families served by her organization, and to expand her network to include college and university partners in phase three.

“I don’t want to reveal much too soon besides that LAOL will continue to grow,” said Sturdivant. “I’d love to have college students majoring in special education research become involved with the organization, and for them to visit my website to learn more.”