

Positively Impacting Lives

An Interview with Keith Wargo, President and Chief Executive Officer, Autism Speaks

EDITORS' NOTE *Keith Wargo joined Autism Speaks as President and CEO in October 2021. He brings a unique and diverse background to Autism Speaks with nearly 30 years of business building experience at leading global financial institutions including Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank, BMO Capital Markets and Mizuho Securities. In the year before joining Autism Speaks, Wargo combined his business expertise and personal values when he became an owner of Monarch Cypress, an industry-leading amenity manufacturer and supplier with a mission to employ autistic individuals. He and his wife, Anne, are parents of two adult children, one of whom has autism. Wargo holds a bachelor's degree in finance from Boston College and earned an MBA degree from Harvard Business School.*



Keith Wargo

When Autism Speaks announced it was searching for a new leader, I pursued the opportunity.

As the father of an adult on the spectrum, I have been part of the Autism Speaks community for a long time. My family has experienced all the critical life stages with our son – from diagnosis to intervention; from school placements to, most recently, transitioning to the workforce. Just like my family did, the entire autism community needs support in reaching each of these milestones and I want to

help make that support more readily available, reliable and accessible for all. I am committed to moving the organization forward in addressing the needs of those with autism and their families.

How has the work of Autism Speaks evolved and will you provide an overview of Autism Speaks' initiatives?

Since we were founded in 2005, a lot has changed. At that time, less was known about autism and the way it impacts people and their families. In fact, in 2006, the prevalence was 1 in 110 and today the prevalence is 1 in 44 – a 156

percent increase in 15 years. Importantly, today over 2 percent of children are being diagnosed with autism.

In 2016, we refocused our mission to better serve the autism community and to reflect what Autism Speaks represents today. We approach each of our mission objectives with an eye toward making the most meaningful impact for the most people on the autism spectrum – from those for whom autism may be a great strength, to those who require significant support just to remain safe. Each person on the autism spectrum is unique, and we aim to address these diverse needs.

On the back of our business card, it says, "We're here to help," and we are. Last year our Autism Response Team made contact with over 70,000 individuals looking for advice or guidance. The support provided ranges from referrals to local clinics or doctors to assistance in finding employment resources. We also offer vast amounts of information and resources to the community. Last year over 1.3 million people downloaded one of our more than 42 free toolkits and over 20 million people have accessed our curated online database of nationwide autism services and resources. The breadth of our initiatives continues to grow as we

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Autism Speaks (autismspeaks.org) is dedicated to promoting solutions, across the spectrum and throughout the life span, for the needs of individuals with autism and their families. It does this through advocacy and support; increasing understanding and acceptance of people with autism; and advancing research into causes and better interventions for autism spectrum disorder and related conditions.*

You recently assumed the role of President and CEO of Autism Speaks. What excited you about the opportunity and made you feel it was the right fit?

In late 2020, as the world was beginning to see signs of progress with COVID-19, I decided to make a change and left the investment banking industry after 27 years. Pretty quickly thereafter, I found the opportunity to become an investor in Monarch Cypress, an industry-leading amenity manufacturer and supplier that services the hospitality industry. In this new role, I made it a company mission to employ individuals with autism. We quickly saw success in this effort, and I witnessed first-hand the positive impact that providing meaningful work provides to the autistic employee and the overall workplace culture. Every member of Monarch Cypress feels more engaged and committed to the business. This sparked an interest in me to take this effort much further.



An Autism Speaks Walk in Atlanta

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are aggressively tackling employment challenges through our Workforce Inclusion Now™ (WIN) program, as well as Delivering Jobs, the inclusion campaign dedicated to creating pathways to one million employment and leadership opportunities for people with autism and/or developmental differences by 2025. We actively advocate to protect the rights, services, and support of people with autism including insurance coverage, education and housing. Finally, we partner and support research to improve the lives of people with autism by investing in science that will allow more personalized treatments and therapies. We also fund research into better treatments of medical conditions that often accompany autism, such as GI issues, sleep disorders, eating disorders, anxiety and seizures.

disorder to ensure policymaking benefits individuals across the spectrum, increasing funding for autism research at federal agencies, ensuring that autistic individuals have access to the healthcare they need, irrespective of whether a private payer or a public payer such as Medicaid pays for their healthcare costs, and improving the quality and accessibility of employment-focused training systems. These are only a few of the highlights of our work. We are also committed to enhancing support services and assistance that address the unique risks and challenges, including those resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, faced by individuals with autism and their families.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your leadership style?



A participant in the Workforce Inclusion Now program at Lee Container in Centerville, Iowa

What are Autism Speaks' current advocacy priorities?

Our advocacy aims to protect the rights, services, and support of people with autism. As an example, we funded advocacy efforts to pass legislation to have autism insurance benefits covered for 204 million people in 50 states.

Currently our priorities include educating legislators and regulators on autism spectrum

I am a strong believer in transparency and collaboration. As a leader, I believe you should spend at least as much time listening as you do speaking. I have found in my career that very often, the best ideas come from the team and I am in a position to afford the ability for everyone to voice their ideas in order for the organization to be its best. At the same time, it is a leader's job to set the tone and be transparent about the direction and expectations of the organization.

I have been blessed to work in several financial services organizations that instilled in me a belief that you need to deliver excellence in what you do. At Autism Speaks, we are addressing a broad community with diverse and urgent needs. One of the questions I consistently ask the team is whether what we are doing is best in class or can we do it better, because our community deserves our absolute best.

Did you always know that you were attracted to this type of work and that this was your passion?

Throughout my career, I have looked for opportunities where I could bring my skillset, my energy and my passion to projects for which I believed I could have real impact. In my finance career, this meant building businesses and setting strategies. I joined Autism Speaks because I saw the opportunity to apply 25 plus years of learnings to a leading organization that is serving a very large community with real needs. Clearly a great deal of my motivation to join Autism Speaks was driven by our personal journey with our son, but I also passionately believe in our mission and our opportunity to have tremendous impact.

How do you measure success of Autism Speaks' work and how important is it for the organization to take moments to celebrate the wins?

This is something I think about a lot. We work to invest in initiatives that do the most good for the most people and we measure our success through the positive impact these initiatives have on the community. Listening to and understanding the needs of our communities, then directing our efforts to make advances in these areas and thus improving lives, is our success. We have many stakeholders, so our success is ultimately driven by understanding their needs and delivering solutions.

I think it's critical to celebrate wins. For 16 years, Autism Speaks has driven awareness and acceptance of people with autism. Over 20 million people have turned to us for information and resources. We have invested \$222 million in scientific grants. We have successfully advocated for autism insurance benefits covering 204 million people in all 50 states. These are wins. They are wins because they positively impact lives. We will have many more wins and I am excited for that. ●