



Empowering the autism community for 25+ years

By Barbi Walker-Walsh

Photos courtesy SARRC



Barbi

Two determined Valley mothers with children on the autism spectrum, Denise Resnik and Cindy Schneider, united with their developmental pediatrician over 25 years ago to establish the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center.

In 1997, when Resnik's 2-year-old son Mathew received an autism diagnosis, people initially misunderstood, assuming she was referring to his "artistic" abilities.

That's when she realized that more needed to be done to raise awareness and support those affected by autism, according to an interview with Resnik.

"Needless to say, SARRC was established during a time when options were scarce," said Beatriz Orr, clinical director of the SARRC Community School.

"Despite limited funds, real estate and staffing, our founders were resolute in providing a place for children, teens and adults with autism and their families to turn to for support."

Their dedication led to the creation of a place where their vision—to provide comprehensive support and reliable answers—has brought immense reassurance to families navigating the challenges of autism spectrum disorder, or ASD.

ASD is characterized by social impairments, communication difficulties and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior," Orr said—adding that ASD varies significantly among individuals.

However, it affects all age groups and occurs in all ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

Today, SARRC is an internationally recognized nonprofit organization. Its mission encompasses research advancement by pioneers pursuing groundbreaking research to deepen our understanding of autism.

Their studies inform evidence-based practices and drive progress in the field.

SARRC also provides unwavering support for individuals with autism and their families. From early childhood through adulthood, it offers a lifeline of lifetime services, education and community building.



Building inclusive communities

SARRC provides evidence that it understands research alone isn't enough.

Its work has resulted in a network of comprehensive services designed to empower individuals with autism throughout their lives.

With a flagship school, the group provides a nurturing environment specifically designed for autistic learners.

The school offers individualized education plans, social skills development, and vocational training, aimed at preparing students for success beyond graduation.

Nestled in the heart of Tempe, at 975 E. Warner Road, it leads with innovation and inclusion at its facility. The school's unique preschool blends children with and without autism in the same classroom. This inclusive approach is designed to foster social growth, empathy and understanding.

With individualized attention, the impressive 4-to-1 student-teacher ratio ensures each child receives personalized attention, including a detailed and individualized learning plan for each child.

Here, educators focus on kindergarten readiness and developmental milestones. The curriculum is a play-based, developmentally appropriate program that lays the foundation for academic success.

The school is currently enrolling for the 2024-25 school year for children aged 15 months to 5 years. For more information on enrollment, contact Family Resource Team at 602-606.-806.

With campuses in Tempe, Phoenix and Scottsdale, there is a location that provides services in a wide geographic area.

Research broadens knowledge

SARRC's ongoing research initiatives contribute to global knowledge about autism. Its findings

help shape best practices and empower families. Many families, say the organization's planners, find solace in SARRC's support groups, workshops and counseling services, including a grandparents group. Teens and adults continue to thrive beyond childhood due to services that help them transition from childhood to adulthood with vocational training and social opportunities.

Said Orr:

"The cornerstone of our inclusive model is that it fosters a supportive culture that promotes acceptance and, even more so, an environment where differences are embraced."

Along with community engagement, SARRC continues to build inclusive communities by fostering acceptance and understanding through many programs, including training for law enforcement with VirTra.

VirTra, located in north Chandler, is a global provider of training simulators for law enforcement, military, educational and commercial markets.

It teamed up with SARRC to develop comprehensive training for law enforcement in providing a safer and better understanding of how to quickly assess individuals with an autism diagnosis.

In this first-of-a-kind curriculum and virtual scenarios using actors with an autism diagnosis, videos include a variety of topics to teach communication strategies, recognition and best practices for law enforcement.

More than 300 agency locations will receive this new training.

"Because people with ASD can present a wide range of social, communication and behavioral skills, initial interactions can be particularly challenging for law enforcement officers," Daniel Openden, president & CEO at SARRC, said in a statement.

"This new curriculum highlights specific behaviors to help police officers quickly recognize they may be interacting with a person with autism."

Thanks to the supportive community, SARRC has been able to increase its impact in Arizona and, in some cases, across the country every year. Notable highlights include 6,650 people supported through educational outreach events and training programs, with 100 percent of SARRC's adult clients seeking employment securing meaningful, competitive positions.

"A key component of SARRC's strategic plan is to expand the organization statewide, ensuring that impactful services are accessible to every resident of Arizona," Orr said.

Starting in early 2025, SARRC will open its fifth campus, located at Power and McKellips roads.

The new Kathryn G. Bosco campus aligns with SARCC's plan to operate nine "brick-and-mortar" campuses across the state by 2030.

Tempe and beyond

SARRC's impact extends far beyond Tempe. It hosts national conferences, attracting leading researchers and practitioners to share knowledge and best practices.

It also offers online resources and training programs, making its expertise accessible to a global audience.

As SARRC celebrates its years of service, one thing remains clear: its unwavering dedication to the autism community continues to be an empowering force—not just in Tempe but across the nation.