

# HOUR

DETROIT

24/Seven  
// INTERVIEW

AN  
HOUR  
WITH...

## Rachelle Vartanian

FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT,  
LIVING AND LEARNING ENRICHMENT CENTER

BY STEVE WILKE // ILLUSTRATION BY LARRY COONEY JR.

**WHEN RACHELLE VARTANIAN COULDN'T FIND PLACES TO** help her teenage son who has autism, she sold her house and took a buyout from her job to start the Living and Learning Enrichment Center. The Northville-based nonprofit provides social and job skills training for teens and adults on the autism spectrum — developmental disorders that causes problems with communication, social, verbal, and motor skills.

### HOURLY DETROIT You started as a teacher?

**RACHELLE VARTANIAN** My degree was teaching for the emotionally impaired, and I had been working with troubled youth. That was my passion. I was always for the underdog. ... I had [also] worked in a juvenile lock-up facility

### When did you get involved with autism?

When my youngest son was diagnosed ... Now he's 17. When they said: "Asperger's Syndrome," I'd never heard of that. Like every parent, [I started] looking for resources. I heard that Madonna University was coming out with a master's program for autism, so I decided to go back [and] took out enormous debt and student loans ... so I could understand what this was and advocate for this kid. There was not a single person in his school that had a degree in autism. [We were] going to every therapy there is ... and it's expensive and insurance doesn't pay for social skill groups. ... That's what they really need ... how to have friendships and how to have conversations. I decided to rent a [library] room out on Sundays and have social skills groups. And I didn't charge parents. ... Then these groups got bigger. I started thinking this needs to be happening more. So, I took a huge leap of faith and quit my job of 20 years

### The combined unemployment and underemployment rate for individuals with autism is 90 percent?

Yes. Our huge focus is social skills and job skills. We work with area companies to get employment for our individuals. One [client] had been hospitalized for depression [and] hadn't left his house in quite a while. Then a local Fresh Thyme [store] hired him. ... It's been almost a year now ... it changed his life.

### You focus on older individuals?

Once they're out of the [school] system ... there's not a lot out there and they end up just ... living in their parents' basement.

### Interview skills are key?

People that have graduated from college can't get jobs. They call it a spectrum because [it's said] if you've met one person with autism, you've met *one* person. Some have very high IQs, yet their social skills are really low. A pretty common trait is they can't pass their interview skills.

### Like making eye contact?

Or maybe slouching. You and I are having a conversation. It's very natural. No one had to teach you to pause, then let [me] talk; you listen.



*"People [with autism] that have graduated from college can't get jobs. Some have very high IQs, yet their social skills are really low."*

— RACHELLE VARTANIAN

### What are your sources of funding?

The major source has been *me* [laughs]. We became a nonprofit [in 2017] and [have received] individual and [some] corporate funding. ... We're looking for grants. People can donate time [and] we need a van.

### What type of employers are you looking for?

Anyone that would be patient [and] wants to work with people that want to work but might need a little bit of support.

### You also have a support group for parents?

The older kids get, the harder it is to find resources. Once a month we have a support group and it's free. We bring in a local speaker [such as] an attorney [to] talk about wills and trusts ... because this is what no parent wants to talk about: "What's going to happen when I die?"

### That their child may not be able to function in an independent living situation?

Right. My son has Asperger's and ... I hope. But none of us know, so we've got to be prepared. Friday night you come in here and it's for teens and young adults. And all of them are living in their parents' basement. None of them are living independently, even the highest functioning. Northville is a perfect place where this could happen. It's walkable, and there's pockets all over town of apartments where they could live ... maybe [all] it would take is someone checking to make sure [they] took [their] meds. ... I think we forget that these people want a life, too.

### There's a huge strain on parents.

The only way this is going to get better is if we help each other. This is the forgotten population. Everyone knows someone that's on the spectrum or has a related challenge. Many people just need a little bit of support. There was a young man [in the Friday night group] that said: "Can you die of loneliness?" As they get older, and for *all* of us, the older we get, the harder it is to make friends. Now he's coming here, and when he walked out the door the other day, he said: "I never knew a place like this could exist." ■

## RESUME

### NAME

Rachelle Vartanian

### EDUCATION

- Bachelor's Degree in Teaching for the Emotionally Impaired, Eastern Michigan University
- Master's Degree in Educational Psychology, with a concentration in Personality and Development, Eastern Michigan University
- Master's Degree in Autism Spectrum Disorders, Madonna University

### EXPERIENCE

#### 2015-Present

Founder and President of Living and Learning Enrichment Center, Northville

#### 2014-2016

Lecturer at Eastern Michigan University — College of Education Introduction to Inclusion and Disability Studies in a Diverse Society

#### 2006-2012

- Teacher of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Teacher of Children with Severe Emotional/Behavioral Impairments
- Teacher of Students with Severe Emotional Impairments

#### 1996-2006

Teacher of Adjudicated Youth Boys and Girls Republic — William E. Miller School Farmington Hills

### FAVORITE BOOK

*Forgotten Fire*, by Adam Bagdasarian