

# The Strength & Spirit Awards

What turns an ordinary woman into someone who will be a force for change? Sometimes it's love, sometimes it's loss, sometimes it's a lifetime of lessons leading her to her true path. Meet five women who have found their calling to make this a better world—and let them inspire you to make a difference in your corner of it.

## Opening doors for teens and adults with autism

Linda Walder Fiddle

Linda, who quit her job as a lawyer when Danny was born, had just begun exploring the possibilities for his future when he died unexpectedly at age 9 from what may have been an autism-related seizure. She, her husband, Fred, and their daughter, Ava, then 6, were devastated. Friends thought Linda would walk away from the autism community, but instead, she made it her personal crusade to fight for more opportunities for adults with autism by starting the Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation, in honor of her son. "Autism is not just a childhood disorder," says the Ridgewood, NJ, mother. "It should be seen as a lifespan challenge."

Since 2002, the volunteer-run foundation has awarded grants to a wide range of projects across the country, including residential farms, a cookie-making enterprise, fitness plans, mentoring programs, the first musical-theater program for adults with autism, and dog training classes for teens with autism. In the beginning, so few groups were serving this population that Linda had to push organizations to create autism programming that she could fund. Today, she is flooded with proposals, a measure of the growing need she foresaw as well as the increasing public awareness she has worked to foster.

Linda, now 50, has been instrumental in advising legislators about the Autism Treatment Acceleration Act of 2009, which will require health insurers to cover the treatment of autism spectrum disorders. She also sat on the New Jersey Adults with Autism Task Force; last fall, Governor Jon Corzine followed the group's top recommendation and announced the creation of an Office of Autism Services within the state's Department of Human Services. "It's an important step forward," Linda says. And not a moment too soon: About one child in 150 now has autism. "With the right support systems, people with autism are capable of participating in their communities," she says, "and contributing to them in adulthood." —*Fran Smith*



Linda Walder Fiddle is creating a brighter future for adults with autism.

At age 2, Danny Fiddle was diagnosed with autism, a shock that threw his mother, Linda, into a bewildering new world. Special schools, speech therapy, play programs—Linda poured her heart and soul into getting Danny the services he needed. Yet even as he thrived, a thought nagged her: *What are the lives of my child and his peers going to be like in 20 years?* Already she recognized that services provided to help special-needs kids function in the world end once they become adults.