

Loudonville Neighbors

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Lisa Audi:
**Creating
Community**



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Lisa Audi: Creating Community

By Heather Re | Photos by Mia Ertas Photography and submitted by family

One of the first words that springs to mind when talking to Lisa Audi is community. Lisa currently lives on the same street where she grew up, a few doors down from her parents in fact and although she has lived in other areas for one reason or another, she has always found that there comes a time to return home. She is a team player, both in the figurative sense and the literal sense. And after three decades of experience in marketing and in the business community, Lisa has made bringing people together her life's work.

Lisa lives with her daughter Carabelle and their cat Roxanne. Carabelle is a rising 7th grader at Shaker Middle School. Lisa says that, "She's the kindest, most resilient tween in the world." Although Carabelle is legally deaf, she is fortunate to have a cochlear hearing implant. She also has autism and Lisa is often inspired by the way she handles challenges, "Both my daughter and my niece have handled challenges with resiliency and grace. When you see young people, kids really, overcome big stuff, it really motivates you to do better, be better."

Living so close to her parents has been great and Lisa is watching Carabelle grow up where she did. Carabelle attended Southgate, the same elementary school Lisa went to. With Lisa being a single Mom, Carabelle is also enjoying the additional support of her grandparents. Lisa says that, "Poppy is always ready for a school pick up and Nana with a special dinner."

With her parents being neighbors Lisa jokes that although not often, "It can sometimes be like an episode of Everybody Loves Raymond where they 'pop-in.'" Lisa also remembers spending lots of time with her own grandparents as a child, another way Carabelle's childhood is reminiscent of her own.

As a child, Lisa enjoyed spending time in the neighborhood riding bikes, swimming and running the bases. She was most often outside. Lisa remembers playing kick the can on summer nights, "You had to outrun the mosquitoes to get to the can" she says, "It was awesome."

Outdoor activities are still a go to for Lisa. She and Carabelle like to ride their bikes, walk around the neighborhood and count bunnies. The record so far is 22 bunnies! Right now she's also working on cooking with her daughter. They've made quesadillas, pancakes with chocolate chips and Friday night pizza. Another pastime of theirs is visiting ice cream stands which they do frequently. They particularly like visiting Control Tower because Lisa's niece works there and Lisa says, "Let's just say we get a big heap of grasshopper pie and cookie monster." Lisa also enjoys spending time with her niece. They like to play board games like Yahtzee and Sorry. And "Yes", she says, "We've played Pie Face." The family's favorite places to go are to the beach and Disney World.

Lisa was recently inducted into the Shaker High School Alumni



Hall of Fame highlighting her many accomplishments. Her decades-long career in marketing is punctuated by fostering key relationships. She brought together teams as a key leader of the then Pepsi Arena, bringing Disney on Ice to First Arena in Elmira and booking rock legend Bob Dylan. She is also recognized for her work in the non-profit sector beginning with United Way and currently her own non-profit endeavor as co-founder of Bring on the Spectrum Community Space & Sensory Gym.

Lisa graduated from LeMoyne College in Syracuse after earning a D2 scholarship as a soccer goalie. The National Collegiate Athletic Association Division II offers an intermediate level division of competition that includes scholarship money for competitive players. She remembers that her team nickname and mascot was the Dolphins. She laughs and says, "I'm not

sure how many dolphins are in Central New York but the nickname definitely wasn't intimidating anyone on the pitch."

She is thankful for her time at LeMoyne and remains close friends with her freshman year roommate, Denise. Lisa recently visited Denise and her husband Robert in Salt Lake City to attend the wedding of their eldest son Gary, who was born locally at Bellevue Hospital. Lisa actually met Denise's husband first because he was also a soccer player and their teams started pre-season camp before students arrived.

True to her nature Lisa stays connected with classmates from elementary school all through college through texts and Facebook. "Seeing them and what their lives are and to see their kids is the best part of Facebook", she says.

Although she has been in marketing for her entire career, interestingly, Lisa never took any marketing classes at LeMoyne. She graduated with a major in political science and a minor in communications and history. Straight out of college her first job was at Vernon Downs harness track in Vernon, NY near Syracuse. She stayed for about a year and then began working

for Capital District Sports Management which was owned by Joe O'Hara. At the time he owned the Albany Patroons and the Albany Firebirds but was adding on the Empire State Stallions and New York Kick. Bold and ambitious, Lisa walked right up to Gary Holle on the concourse of the then Knickerbocker Arena (currently the MVP Arena) to ask the former professional baseball player about a job.

It served her well and she interviewed with Joe Hennessy, who was going to be overseeing the Stallions and Kick in Glens Falls. Lisa says the rest is history. "Joe was by far the most influential person in my career." She adds, "Fans saw Joe as the PA announcer for the Firebirds, yelling and screaming. He was the first person to use the phrase 'Touchdown' Eddie Brown." She remembers him as, "Simply the wisest and kindest person. The people Joe impacted is immeasurable. And the ability to mentor people starting their careers, whether it's interns or staff in their first jobs, that is something I've always tried to do." Even earlier on in her career Lisa was eager to

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see others succeed, “I’m always proud to see what they’ve accomplished. It’s really something that each of us can do, should do.”

After working with the Stallions and the Kick, she moved over to the arena-side and joined the Knick’s marketing department at the then Knick/Pepsi Arena. She would stay there for 10 years. She says that she is most proud of being part of the team that brought six NCAA events in eight years including the NCAA Sweet 16 (the regional semifinal round of the NCAA tournament), NCAA Frozen Four and the NCAA Wrestling Championship.

In addition to the sports teams, Lisa also marketed big name musicians such as Garth Brooks, Tina Turner, Rod Stewart and Billy Joel. After spending 10 years in marketing, she was promoted to General Manager in New Haven and oversaw the

inaugural season of their arenafootball2 franchise, the New Haven Ninjas. Unfortunately, only a year later the city decided to close the arena. Lisa worked on the liquidation of assets before the arena was imploded. “Yes”, Lisa says, “I’ve sold a Zamboni.”

From there she moved to Elmira where she spent two years. Her niece Gabby was born during this time and Lisa says that she was ready to come back home and get back into marketing. Lisa says, “I was fortunate to join the legendary Ed and Maureen Lewi at their PR firm where I stayed for 10 years before trying the non-profit world with United Way. All of which led me to Bring on the Spectrum. I’ve appreciated every experience that I had and truly enjoy the ability to connect with people, see challenges and search for solutions.”

Inspired by her daughter Carabelle and a strong desire to create community, Lisa took a leap of faith and co-founded Bring on the Spectrum Community Space & Sensory Gym located at 71 Fuller Road in Colonie in 2022. Also known as BOTS, Bring

on the Spectrum’s mission is “To support neurodiverse individuals with opportunities to achieve their best quality of life as a respected member of the Capital Region.”

Lisa says that she saw what Carabelle and her peers were going through as neurodiverse individuals and sought solutions. While things were challenging enough, Lisa says that, “COVID exasperated things for neurodiverse individuals.” She also attributes BOTS to fate. “There was a sensory gym in Latham that closed pre-Covid. And my group was interested in doing something but at the same time, we saw a larger need.” When COVID hit, Lisa and her group spent a lot of time talking to parents, agencies and schools. “Listen and learn was our motto.” Her marketing experience paid off, “After all of these conversations we had a ton of research and information.” Lisa says.

She also credits, “Two strong women who created awesome non-profits doing outstanding work” for their input. Lisa had conversations with Tracie Killar, founder of the South End Children’s Cafe, who she met while she was working with United Way and Jennifer Lawrence from the S.E.A.T. Center. Both women served as sounding boards to help Lisa further develop the concept of BOTS. Looking for advice on the right timing, Tracie told Lisa, “At some point you have to take a leap of faith.” Only a few weeks later while attending Our Lady of the Assumption Church, she heard Father Burke say, “Live your life worthy of your calling.” It was at this point that Lisa said, “Bam. It was go time.” It was time for her to take a leap of faith.

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The results speak for themselves. BOTS' sensory gym is unique with space and physical activities for children, young adults and adults. Sensory swings can hold up to 300 pounds and the slides can hold up to 200 pounds. They also have corn hole, Jenga, Connect 4 and the "uber-popular" air hockey table. Price Chopper's Golub Foundation Sensory Room is dedicated to sensory experiences designed specifically to help individuals feel calm, supported and focused.

While the sensory gym caters to all ages, Lisa says the Community Space "is the game changer. It is reflective of what the community wants. Integrated activities include art, Zumba, yoga, cooking classes, fitness, STEAM, music and more." Lisa explains that, "Lifestyle activities bridge worlds, build collaboration skills and make friends." She also thinks, "It's important that people understand that while spectrum is in our name, we really intended that to be the spectrum of ages, the spectrum of diagnoses and the spectrum of diversity and inclusion." She points out that they have worked with the JDRF (Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation), the Epilepsy Foundation, Spina Bifida organizations and others.

She also points out that "many children in our schools today feel marginalized, don't feel comfortable or connected. BOTS is for them too. Our staff wears t-shirts that say, 'Come As You Are' and 'You be You.' That's what we stand for." The warm and welcoming environment is a place where elementary school kids, middle and high school youth and young adults feel like they can come and try an activity and while they are there, they realize they have a shared interest with others. And it's the first step to make a further connection.



Lisa says that, "Knowing someone 6 or 14 or 22 or whatever age can come into BOTS and know they are seen and accepted brings me great joy. I have said this since day one. It is THE community's space. Whatever the community wants us to host, we can give it a try. We are here to serve." The metrics Lisa uses echo the outreach that she engaged in before they even opened their doors. Listening to their members, "Do they want to come back? Were they upset to leave? Did they leave with a smile?" Lisa says this is the "measurable" every day.

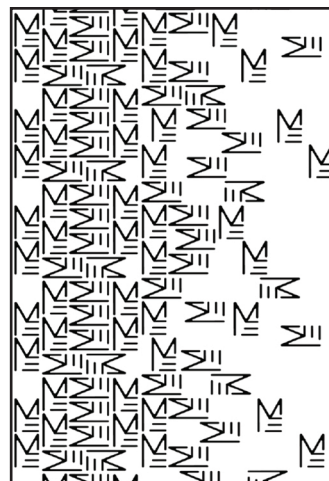
Lisa also points to some of the challenges that neurodiverse individuals face, "to live independently and their best life." She says, "The shortage of direct support professionals is a huge issue. The low employment rates of our population is mind-boggling. There are individuals who can and are ready to work." She adds, "And affordable and supportive housing." Lisa says that all three are critical issues in need of solutions and these are the challenges that she and others are working to help solve at BOTS.



Lisa is proud to be one year into operation and being where they are. She's also excited knowing what they want to accomplish in year two and year three. She says that year two is, "Creating access to our space for those in the BIPOC community. It's why we are located where we are. Equally distant from downtown Albany and downtown Schenectady. All means all."

Lisa's parting words are simple, "Be kind. Two words. Six letters. We never know what someone else is going through whether it's sickness in their family or struggles at work or home. I would love for people to be more patient and empathetic."

For more information about Bring on the Spectrum Community Space & Sensory Gym and for classes and programming, please visit www.bringonthespectrum.org




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