

12-year-old Mariyah McKnight Spreads the Word that Autism Rocks

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12-year-old Mariyah McKnight and Lori Davie, program manager for The Autism Program (TAP) at Easterseals, have a special bond, and Mariyah has a special art project that has traveled the globe.

An inspiring friendship

12-year-old Mariyah McKnight and Lori Davie, program manager for The Autism Program (TAP) at

Easterseals, have a special bond. They like to say they're "twins" because of their shared love of purple, basketball, and the Rockford IceHogs.

Mariyah, who has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), first met Lori five years ago. Mariyah's Nana, Shelley, had reached out to TAP about enrolling Mariyah in a Social Skills Group where she could interact with other kids with ASD and focus on strategies like friendship-making, teamwork, and building focus.

The relationship between Mariyah and Lori has only grown from there. In fact, Lori keeps a photo of herself and a smiling Mariyah in her office and recently gifted her a giant rainbow sloth donated by the Rockford IceHogs to be given to "someone who deserved it."



"I am so proud of Mariyah and what a beautiful, talented young lady she is and continues to grow into. We like to stay in touch through TAP events like the Autism Awareness Night with the Rockford IceHogs and the upcoming Bunny Hop," says Lori, "but we also check in informally, sometimes through texts or an in-office visit."

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When you ask Mariyah what she likes most about Lori, she says simply, "Everything."

Lori and the TAP program have not only been a support for Mariyah, but also her caregiver and Nana.

Shelley says, "I reach out to Lori for advice all the time, particularly around bullying. I've never met another person who has a bigger heart than Mariyah and sometimes, other kids take advantage of that. Lori is always there to support me with tips and upcoming events to get Mariyah amongst friends, and I have taken part in a TAP Parent Support Group that has helped me with resources, advice, and a space to share struggles and successes with other caregivers."

While Shelly hates that Mariyah has to deal with any meanness or bullying, she says that a special project that Mariyah started in 2022 has helped boost her confidence tremendously.



Autism rocks that span the globe

When stress, sensory overload, and bullying started to overwhelm Mariyah, she found an outlet through art.

Mariyah loves to paint. A couple of years ago, she began collecting rocks and painting them bright patterns, colorful dots, hearts, flowers, and her favorite theme, the Autism puzzle piece. On June 25, 2022, Mariyah, with the help of Shelley, started a Facebook Group called [Mariyah's Journey Rocks](#). On the back of each rock is the message: "Find on FB Mariyah Journey Rocks" so that discoverers of her rocks can keep them traveling around the country and the world and share the journey on her page. It's also been an avenue to spread the word that "Autism rocks" and "kindness matters."

Mariyah's page currently has hundreds of followers and her rocks have been everywhere from the shores of the Great Lakes, on a volcano in Hawaii, and in states as far from each other as Florida and Alaska. They've traveled across continents, landing at the Colosseum in Rome, on an African safari, at the tube station in London, and near canals of Venice. One of her rocks has even left the earth—on a hot air balloon!

"Mariyah's art and her rock project is her outlet, especially when bullying gets intense. My heart shines and breaks for her all at once," says Shelley, "but I am always so proud to be her Nana. I know when she gets older and looks back on this project, she will know just how amazing she truly is!"

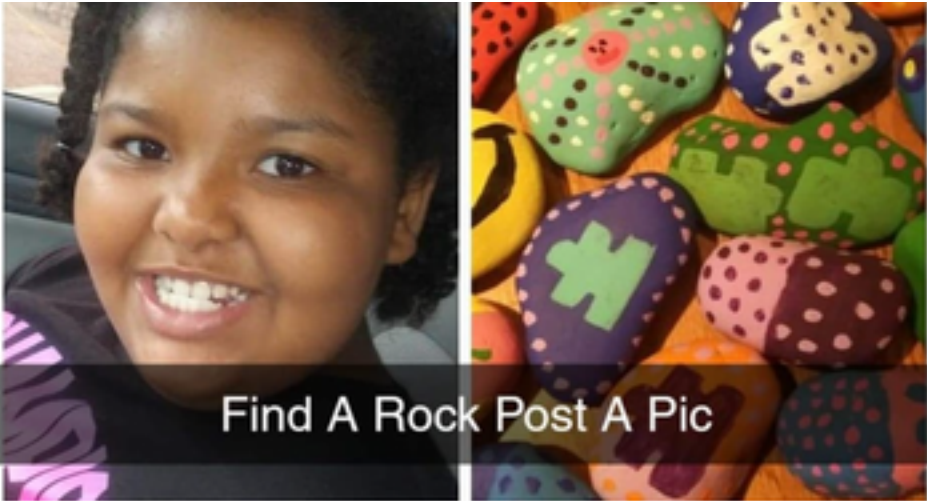
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We are not the only ones who think Mariyah is amazing. She appeared on the radio with Steve Shannon on 97 WZOK and on [Stateline News](#) in July 2022.



This summer, Mariyah and Shelley are hosting a rock-painting party and they've invited the hundreds of friends who love and support Mariyah.

"So many people from the group and beyond have expressed that they want to join the painting party and that their kids have been inspired to paint rocks because of Mariyah," says Shelley. "The support of Mariyah makes me so happy; she is truly my blessing."



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Find A Rock Post A Pic

SATURDAY, JUNE 24, 2023 AT 2 PM – 4 PM EDT

MARIYAH'S ROCK PAINTING PARTY

Atwood Forest Preserve

Mariyah will also be joining the TAP program for a resource fair on June 10 at Hyundai on Perryville where she will be painting rocks with attendees to send them on the journey.

You can learn more about Mariyah and her Autism rocks on her [Facebook page](#). You can connect with Lori and The [Autism Program \(TAP\)](#) at Easterseals on our [website](#).

You can help kids like Mariyah embrace their abilities and expand their opportunities. Give today!