

HEROES NIGHT

'I Have a Voice and I Want to Make it Heard.'

From the Basketball Court to the Bully Pulpit, Ianni Emerges as Advocate for Autism Services for Affected Families

Anthony Ianni describes a strange coincidence that frequently occurs when he visits schools to speak out about bullying. A popular motivational speaker for the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, he runs a participation segment in his "Relentless Tour" in which he randomly selects students to join him on stage. Before dismissing them, he looks them in the eye, and challenges them to "go out and be the change you want to see in the world." It's a moving experience, and one that typically packs a gut-check for the participating students.



Anthony Ianni

Afterwards he learns that one or more of the students he picked were among the biggest bullies in the school.

If Ianni is working hard to transform lives – for the bullied and bullies – he's aided by the fact he's not just another celebrity spokesperson. There's authenticity in this advocate's voice. A proud Michigan State University alum, former celebrated MSU basketball player Ianni's childhood was marked by run-ins with school bullies for being vulnerable. When he was four, he was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder, which is on the Autism Spectrum. The initial medical diagnosis was bleak. His parents were told he'd likely live out his adult years in an institution.

"People on the Autism Spectrum don't get the respect they rightly deserve. People think right away they're not going to do much with their lives. I'm not going to sit here and tell you I'm ashamed. I'm damn proud to be on the Autism Spectrum."

Ianni is one of this year's Heroes Night honorees named by Michigan's Children for his work advocating for system changes to support families impacted by struggles with autism.

Raised in Okemos in suburban Lansing, Ianni defied others' expectations and did graduate from Michigan State University in 2012 with a degree in sociology. It's also where he was a star basketball forward, a two-time Big Ten Champion, Big-Ten Tournament Champion, and member of the 2010 Final Four team. He was the first athlete on the autism spectrum playing at that level.

An offer to address a gathering of the Autism Alliance of Michigan over six years ago helped launch Ianni's second act. It was just a short speech, but afterward he told his wife he had found his calling. At first, he spoke to small groups, a few middle schools. But after a year and a half, he was taking his message to national audiences. Six years later, he's traveled the country addressing hundreds of schools.

and tens of thousands of individuals. “When they hear me and I see their responses, it tells me I’m doing my job. A lot of them (students) point out they’re sick and tired of seeing all the disrespect and bad attitudes in their communities and schools. It takes someone like me – and I wouldn’t consider myself a celebrity – to show I’ve earned a lot of respect for how much I’ve overcome,” he said.

“As a speaker, my goal is to inspire at least one person, one life, every day.”

And the job has given him lots of opportunities to do just that. One of those highlights happened just last month after giving a talk in Lake Orion Schools when a young boy with autism, who typically keeps a comfortable physical distance from others, approached him after a school talk and gave him a huge hug. “His teacher said he never does that with anyone,” Ianni said. “I call people on the Autism Spectrum an elite group. They can do extraordinary things and people don’t know about it.”

Backstage at a conference two years ago, he met a woman who would become his mentor. She had just completed the keynote address. Her name – Temple Grandin, the prominent author and speaker on autism and animal behavior. Actor Claire Danes portrayed Grandin in a film about her extraordinary life. “Other than Temple Grandin, name one other person who is a big hero and role model for the Autism Community? I’m going ahead to be that guy and follow in her footsteps.”

He’s also gotten a kick from running into former childhood contemporaries, including one of his elementary school bullies. He met the individual, now a grown man, on the stadium ramp at MSU after a game. The man asked for his autograph, and Ianni obliged. He tells that story now so that today’s youth realize “be careful what you do and say to others.”

Ianni has written a book geared for those working in athletics – coaches, student athletes and team managers - on how to work with individuals on the Autism Spectrum. His literary agent is in the process of locating a publisher. He’s also given a lot of thought to writing a children’s book or series of books for kids living about Autism.

Over the years he’s become a strong advocate for services for families with autism that can give their children a chance for improved outcomes in school and life. He has not been silent about recent political wranglings over the state budget and Governor Whitmer’s multiple line item vetoes including cuts to autism services. “If you can understand what a family affected by autism is going through or what a child goes through, how can you make a decision like that?”

“I have a voice and I want to make it heard,” he added. “It’s on me and other advocates for the Autism Community to spread awareness on how importance services and resources really are for people to be successful. Representing the Autism community is a big deal for me.”

“When I talk about teamwork, I talk about unity and family. Don’t make it just about one person. You’ve got to stick together. Families are going to need help.”

“In unity, greater things are going to happen.”