



CHILD'S FOURTH ANNUAL CHILDREN'S CHAMPION AWARDS

They come from diverse backgrounds—advocacy, the arts, education, medicine, and philanthropy—but the six remarkable individuals we honor here have much in common: All are working to improve the lives of the next generation through their passion, dedication, and inspiring refusal to accept the status quo.

By Erin Quinlan

Bob and Suzanne Wright

♦ **HONORED FOR:** Founding Autism Speaks, a national nonprofit dedicated to raising public awareness of autism, assisting families, and marshaling resources for research. In its first year alone, the organization raised \$40 million.

♦ **HOW AND WHY THEY GOT STARTED:** In 2004, when their grandson, Christian, was diagnosed with autism at age 2, the Wrights were shocked to find that despite the prevalence of the disorder—it affects one in 150 children, according to the latest research—there was little understanding of autism in the medical community. “It wasn’t clear what causes autism and there was no agreement on therapies,” says Bob, the former chairman and CEO of NBC Universal. To make matters worse, many families were living under a veil of secrecy. The Wrights, who had the resources to get the best possible care for their grandson, could have also kept it a private matter. But in their hearts they felt that going public with their family’s story would benefit others. Says Suzanne, “People were saying, ‘I don’t want my child to know he has autism; I don’t want others to know.’ We wanted to get autism into the national vocabulary.”

♦ **THEIR BIGGEST HURDLE:** Staying strong despite the emotional demands of speaking out on behalf of children with autism. “It kills you to see a child slipping away, and it’s heartbreaking to hear the families’ stories,” says Suzanne, who, with her husband, travels around the country, making speeches and raising money. “Our challenge is to stay focused on getting the word out there and making sure every child has access to interventions.”

♦ **THEIR GREATEST TRIUMPH:** The ratification, in December 2006, of the Combating Autism Act, a law that increases federal support for autism research, treatment, and education. “Autism Speaks was involved in a lot of lobby support for this legislation,” says Bob. “We were able to bring together many organizations on this issue.”

♦ **THE NEXT STEP** Getting grandparents involved in the fight against autism. “Grandparents have a difficult time with this because they’re grieving for both their children and their grandchildren,” says Suzanne. “But grandparents can provide invaluable support and be a big part of these children’s lives, so they need to be galvanized.”