

The Els Center of Excellence

ClubsHelp, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that helps clubs to fundraise to support deserving local charities, was started in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and got off the ground due in large part to the support of two World Golf Hall of Fame legends—Jack Nicklaus and Ernie Els. Rob Goulet, who has been Els' longtime manager, watched a news story on television in which a New Jersey golf club (Spring Brook CC) stepped in to donate sandwiches to workers at a local hospital. Goulet contacted David Bachman, general manager at Spring Brook and suggested this display of generosity could be extended into a national program.

From that discussion, ClubsHelp was formed. Goulet is the organization's Founder/CEO and Bachman serves on the Board.

When ClubsHelp had the opportunity to support and contribute to Els' great initiative, Els for Autism, it sponsored a hole-in-one contest at the charity's regional tournament series and finale.



Activities at the Els Center include yoga and fun games to play



By Jeff Babineau

There is little more that Ernie Els can accomplish as a golfer. The South African-born Els has competed around the world since he was a teen and always was destined to become something special as a golfer. By age 24, he won a U.S. Open at Oakmont Country Club, and three years later, he would add a second U.S. Open title at Congressional Country Club. Els owns two prestigious Claret Jugs for capturing the Open Championship, becoming “the champion golfer of the year.” In the 2003 Presidents Cup at Fancourt in South Africa, amid the backdrop of his home country, Els was front and center in one of the most thrilling playoffs in the history of the game, dueling Tiger Woods into the darkness trying to secure the Cup for his International team. (The two competitors tied, as did their teams, and they would share the Cup.)

Els was enshrined with a golden bust in the World Golf Hall of Fame years ago. So, yes, he has golf accomplishments covered. At 52, he continues to chase glory and trophies on the PGA Tour Champions. For all the worldwide victories and accolades, Els may make his biggest impact along a road that he never expected to travel. Els and his wife, Liezl, through the Els for Autism Foundation they created in Jupiter, Fla., have watched a bold vision rise from the ground with the Els Center of Excellence. Widely applauded as the leading facility in providing programs and services for young men and women on the autism spectrum, this mission has been personal for Ernie and Liezl. Their son Ben, now 19 and thriving at the Center, was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) when he was 5.



Samantha Els' support for her younger brother Ben inspired a popular siblings support group

A Sister's Loving Gesture

The Els family commitment to autism runs deep

By Jeff Babineau

Ernie Els always has been a global player, winning golf tournaments from South Africa to the United States. So, it is really no surprise that his Els Center of Excellence has produced programs and practices that have resonated around the world.

His #GameON Autism Golf Program, which started with one-hour clinics at Els for Autism Golf Challenge Series events, have introduced golf professionals and instructors around the world to a standardized program to introduce golf to individuals on the autism spectrum. A multi-site study on the program is taking place in South Africa, Ireland, England and the U.S., with a report to follow.

Now Ernie and Liezl's daughter, Samantha, is in the act as well. She is serving as a global ambassador and is one of the founders of Sam's Siblings Stick Together, a support group for siblings around the world who have family members with autism. Sam's younger brother, Ben, was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) when he was 5. Marlene Sotelo, executive director of the Els for Autism Foundation, said the SSST program was inspired by Sam's time at home from college during the pandemic.

"They really are oftentimes the forgotten family member," Sotelo said of the siblings. "The parents are working to pay for therapy, and one of the parents is taking the child all the time and is dealing with the school. So, it's the sibling that can be left behind. And then they are also worrying about when mom and dad are gone . . . Who is going to take care of my brother or sister?"

Samantha and others have hosted panel discussions on different topics that relate to autism and share thoughts, ideas and emotions among a group of fellow panelists who can understand the conversation. The program has a dedicated website: SamsSiblingsStickTogether.com and offers a wealth of resources. There are online webinars offered in four languages (English, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese) and there are free training videos on subjects ranging from medications and therapy to recreation and how to pursue a correct diagnosis—and even addressing the question, what is autism?

"Sam is one of the ambassadors, but she is also a panelist and interacts beautifully with the rest of the panelists," said Caitlin Carlson, marketing specialist for Els for Autism. "They form this really great bond together."

For Ernie and Liezl, the initial goal was a simple one: What could they do to help Ben and aid his development? They knew next to nothing about autism but dived in to create something that would help their son. Their simple quest has transformed the lives of not just their family, but many, both on site and around the globe. Many programs at the Els Center of Excellence have had global impact as best practices and effective therapy—a terrific surprise.

"This is something that happened to us, and something where we felt we wanted to help our son," said Els at the PGA Tour Champions' TimberTech Championship in November 2021, played near to his home in South Florida. "We just had this desire to build something really proper for Ben and for autism. We looked around the world, and there is nothing that's comparable to what we had envisioned, and ultimately built. That is gratifying to see. Anyone looking to do anything (in autism), take a look at our place, and if you do better than this, brilliant. But we really feel that this is the benchmark."

The Campus

The Els Center of Excellence is an 84,810-square-foot facility that rolls across 26 acres. There are two education wings on Campus: the Rupert Education Wing hosts The Learning Center, a nonprofit, tuition-free school serving students with autism ages 3–14; the Shanken Education Wing hosts The Learning Academy, which serves students with autism ages 14–21. The O'Donnell Pavilion is a classroom and studio for art shows and has a catering kitchen; an administrative building is home to the Els for Autism Foundation offices, as well as a 300-seat auditorium and meeting rooms for training and educational sessions. The campus, which has a small university feel to it, is bustling with activities that keep the students busy and engaged. There are yoga classes and music classes in



the afternoon as well as a par-3 golf course, with nine holes on three greens, and play courts for basketball and tennis court. Kickball was a popular and trendy sport last autumn, played on the golf course until funding is secured for the gymnasium and sports field.

“There is something for everyone, and I think each participant really finds his or her niche here, and what their activity is,” said Caitlin Carlson, a marketing specialist working for the Els for Autism Foundation. “I’m thinking of one person right now who loves yoga and is really great at it. Who knew? There are so many programs and services here, from early intervention to adulthood. There is always that opportunity for growth.

The Fundraising Machine

Els is quite proud of what the foundation, and what The Els Center of Excellence has been able to accomplish in a little more than a decade. He also has learned this: It truly takes a village. Running a world-class operation, and longing to grow and expand The Center, is hardly an inexpensive exercise. Fittingly, the foundation’s main fundraising arm has been through golf and the Els for Autism Golf Challenge regional event series, which in late Oc-

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tober concluded with a celebration for top fundraisers and sponsors from across the U.S. and Canada. Golfers played the same golf course (PGA National’s Champion) that is host to the PGA Tour’s Honda Classic. There were 19 regional events staged throughout the U.S. and Canada beginning in April 2021, leading into the Grand Finale at PGA National.

The Golf Series has raised just less than \$30 million, with \$3.4 million raised in 2021. Els also hosted his annual Els for Autism Pro-Am on December 6, sponsored by Wine Spectator and Cigar Aficionado, an invitation-only event at Old Palm Golf Club in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. The pro-am, which includes PGA Tour,

Champions Tour and LPGA pros, was expected to deliver more than \$1 million. At this event several years ago, Rickie Fowler borrowed a club and ball and took a swing at a par-3 contest. His ensuing ace resulting in a \$1 million windfall for the Els Foundation, earning Fowler a bear hug from Els.

“We raised \$3.4 million this year (with the Golf Challenge Series), and last year, during the pandemic, we raised \$2 million,” Els said. “The people who have supported us, it’s been amazing. People all over the country. Unbelievable. All that effort from everybody, and it goes straight back into the school, into the Center.”

Private Club Affiliate Events

Playing a key role in the foundation getting to \$3.4 million in 2021 were the many private clubs choosing to conduct their own Els for Autism fundraisers, known as affiliate events. Affiliate events are often golf tournaments, but also can include charity auctions, 5k walks/runs, casino nights, fashion shows, galas and more. Leading the way for successful affiliate fundraisers in 2021 were Black Di-

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amond Ranch in Lecanto, Fla., (\$123,571); Princess Anne Country Club in Virginia Beach, Va., (\$118,890); and famed Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y. (\$73,125). In all, affiliate events would help the Els for Autism Foundation raise \$445,910 as the organization soared past its goal of \$2.7 million. A nice perk: Affiliate events that raise \$15,000 or more qualify to send two people to the year-end Grand Finale and gala.

At a recent gala at The Pelican Club, in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., Ernie and Liezl Els saluted Isabelle “Izzy” Piwnicki from White Plains, N.Y., as the 2021 Els for Autism Spectrum Award Winner.



(TOP) Family Moment: Golf legend Ernie Els is flanked by his wife, Liezl (left), their son Ben, and their daughter Samantha

(BOTTOM) At the 2021 Grand Finale Gala, Ernie and Liezl Els saluted Isabelle "Izzy" Piwnicki as the year's inspiring Els for Autism Spectrum Award honoree

(RIGHT) Ernie Els (left) with NCA President & CEO Henry Wallmeyer, who played in an affiliate fundraising tournament and attended the gala at The Pelican Club.



“Together, they lift each other up . . . the tutelage that they get there, the people are amazing with the kids . . . there is a lot of love there. It’s a good place.

—Ernie Els, Els for Autism Foundation co-founder

Piwnicki, 25, was diagnosed with autism at age 2, and worked hard to get through high school and to attend classes at Westchester Community College. She and her mother created a New York boutique called GirlAGain that has helped women on the autism spectrum train for employment in areas from inventory to bookkeeping. Currently, Isabelle works at Sephora, and her brief acceptance speech was the biggest hit of a great night at The Pelican Club.

Next Up: The Adult Center

At the Els Foundation, there are always next steps, big goals and work to be done. The next big project at the Els Center of Excellence will be to construct and open an Adult Services building. Most programs that deal with disabilities take a student up to his or her 21st birthday, and then many of the programs end. It’s an abrupt halt to a student on the spectrum who suddenly is missing a routine that he or she has known for years.

“After 21, there no longer are any services,” said Marlene Sotelo, executive director of the Els for Autism Foundation. “A lot of these individuals, they’ve been in school for their entire lives, they turn 21, and now they are sitting at home without anything to do, or they are going into programs that aren’t specialized for people with autism.

“That’s what makes our program so unique. Everyone here specializes in autism and understands the communications deficits that these individuals have. We also train them in vocational skills and find them jobs. We send job coaches out to the work site to be able to support them and train the employer on how to continue to be natural support to them so that they can be independent.”

The yet-to-be built 20,000-square-foot Adult Services building will be dedicated to those who age out of school and are seeking employment training as well as recreational and social activities. Sotelo said there will be a café with a working drive-through and adults with autism will be trained in the food industry. The foundation has a capital funding push to get the Adult Services building started. High costs of construction and labor shortages during COVID-19 have increased the original construction projections by 30 %; though \$3.7 million for this project already has been raised, the foundation needs additional funds to break ground. The architectural designs are complete, and all the required permitting is being processed.

“When we get the money, it’s green light, go!” said Sotelo. “The [overall] facility is beautiful, and that’s the way that Ernie and Liezl wanted it. They wanted a place that is special, that afforded all the high-quality services, equipment and buildings for all these individuals to thrive, including the staff that support them and teach them every day, to feel that they are coming to a place that has state-of-the-art technology and state-of-the-art materials. With that comes high costs of operations, and so we are always fundraising to be able to continue having this facility.”

A Light in Ben

Liezl Els can remember days when her son didn’t want to go to school. But now that he can attend a specialized school in a place that understands him so well, and where he has so many friends on the spectrum, Ben gets excited when morning breaks and another day at school beckons him.

“He is with his people, and I see all the kids, all their friends there,” Ernie said. “It’s life changing, it really is, not only for the student, but for the family.

In November 2021, 287 students were enrolled at the Els Center of Excellence, nearing the capacity of 300. The Center has been life-changing for lots of people, not just the Els family. Ernie sees it in the faces of parents all the time, and not a word needs to be spoken. “They know they are in the right place,” he said.

Golf has given Els a global audience and a platform to speak up and help Ben and others on the spectrum. Through him, a good deal of the funds to make the Center run are raised. But he is quick to celebrate his wife as the one who had the vision to create something so special, so magical. Ernie’s early intuition was to invest in autism research. He wanted to know the science of it all. *What is going on with autism, and why does it continue to happen, affecting so many families?* Liezl had a different vision. She was driven to find a place where Ben would feel safe and be surrounded by others that he could relate to. Her idea: Build a school where all can thrive. She has been hands on, starting with the beautiful architecture one finds when walking through the campus. Even during the pandemic, the Center has found a way to be impactful. Through teleconferencing, Ben was able to sing along with his chorus, and have meaningful interaction with a music teacher of whom he is quite fond.

“Now you have a child who is at his comfort level,” Ernie said of Ben. “Together, they lift each other up . . . the tutelage that they get there, the people are amazing with the kids . . . there is a lot of love there. It’s a good place.”

“To be around there, you just feel . . . *happy*. That’s the only word for it.” 

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