

Farms, Fundraisers, and Flying High with the Bluebirds

How one mother and marketer built a grassroots organization from the ground up.



Founder and president of 3 Bluebirds Farm, Erin O'Loughlin.

A typical day at 3 Bluebirds Farm is never a predictable day. Routine is replaced by the occasional runaway chicken, many paint spills, but also a lot of laughter.

Founded in 2012, Erin O'Loughlin created her classroom with a vision. After graduating from Wake Forest University and entering a successful career in marketing, her life trajectory changed following the birth of her son, Marcus.

When Marcus was diagnosed with severe autism at age three, O'Loughlin saw and experienced first-hand what many families impacted by autism face. A lack of resources for individuals on the spectrum and inadequate training in the classroom to handle the various social, physical, and emotional characterizations of autism that vary from child to child. With limited options, in July of 2015, O'Loughlin made the difficult decision to place her son in assisted living due to his serious aggression, but the decision was made with a promise.

“My son continues to get older and older and he’s the one, at the crux of all of this, why I started all of this and why 3 Bluebirds Farm was created,” said O'Loughlin.

The goal was simple: to create a sustainable agriculture community for autistic individuals across the spectrum to learn new skills and lead meaningful lives. O'Loughlin started small with day camps for school-aged children and worked tirelessly to spread the word about 3 Irish Jewels Farm, which was later renamed to 3 Bluebirds Farm, and its goal to create a permanent residential farm community for autistic adults. With each passing year, she saw the

classrooms get bigger, new faces being introduced, and slowly the farm found itself with enough growth to require families to join a waitlist.

The need was there in the Triangle as members from the community came to the farm for its unique location and professional staff. Facing similar challenges, many families sought an alternative for their autistic children who had aged out of unprepared school systems unable to handle children with specific learning disabilities. 3 Bluebirds Farm has since grown to expand to a brand new 28-acre farm on the outskirts of the Triangle, even amid an unprecedented pandemic. While shut down during a nationwide quarantine, O'Loughlin sat down with her staff over video calls to discuss the next steps.

It was obvious to everyone what the next steps had to be. For autistic individuals, the restriction of stay-at-home orders drastically affects their sensory and emotional needs not only for themselves, but for their families equally effected by a new work from home and virtual childcare routine. But change and challenge weren't unfamiliar to O'Loughlin, her staff, or their bluebirds. As such, the farm was determined to keep in contact and do anything they could for their community.

Armed with toys and many emails, the staff hand-delivered sensory bags and resources to families as they prepped for a reopening once state clearance was approved. The new barns and gardens were organized for social distancing, rotational schedules were implemented to limit large gatherings, and classrooms were cleaned to welcome back the children.

"This is a community. Each child with autism is different but the goal for all families is the same; we are not alone and I do this for the families who have been with us since the beginning," said O'Loughlin.



O'Loughlin and staff during a special Halloween "Trunk-or-Treat" event in 2020.

Now, over half a decade later, 3 Bluebirds Farm has grown to encompass both track-out programs and day camps for over a hundred families for children and teens. From a Halloween drive-in "Trunk-or-Treat" to events co-hosted with local vendors, the farm has continued to persevere with each new challenge. As this year's annual Bluebird Ball fundraiser approaches, O'Loughlin reflected on how the farm has come from its days as 3 Irish Jewels Far, to planning a fundraiser entirely virtually.

"The first year we hosted the Bluebird Ball we made \$13,000, to last year in 2019, year five, we made over \$125,000 as a small grassroots organization," said O'Loughlin. "That's what pushed me to keep going instead of saying it's too hard. We are growing, making an impact, and when I see my son playing with the chickens, the dogs, and going outside I remember exactly why I started this. Everything is coming together even if we have more work ahead of us than ever. The hard part is only beginning but it was worth it to get to where we are."