Michelle Smyth: Q-C writer was inspired by her life story

[Robin Paulsen](#) The Quad-City Times | Posted: Tuesday, March 27, 2012 6:00 am

Happiness comes in many forms and the path to getting there can look different for each person. For Shawnelle Eliasen and Michelle Smyth, two Quad-City area women who have never met, their personal journeys share a common distinction: Both of their stories have been published in the book "Chicken Soup for the Soul: Find Your Happiness."

Eliasen's part of the book, "It's What We Do," is one of 11 inspirational stories she has had published in the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series.

Smyth's story of hope and encouragement was written by a longtime friend and freelance writer, Sheri Zeck of Milan. Zeck, who has had stories published in The Secret Place, a devotional magazine, and Good Old Days magazine, believed that Smyth's story would be a good fit for the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series.

The editors at "Chicken Soup for the Soul" agreed. "My Detour to Destiny" chronicles how Smyth found her unexpected purpose in life through her son's autism diagnosis.

Extensive research left her and her husband David with little hope. "Book after book contained the same phrases that children with autism may never speak, to prepare yourself for institutions, lifelong disabilities and financial devastation," she said.

Smyth says it was in only one of the books she read, "Applied Behavior Analysis," that she found a small glimpse of hope:

"Applied behavior analysis is based on over 60 years of research and teaches children with a diagnosis of autism skills through positive reinforcement, motivation and encouragement."

Once Smyth discovered applied behavior analysis," she was faced with a new challenge: finding a specialist in the Quad-City area who could help. This particular treatment would call for many hours of therapy per week, and no one in the area offered it because the service was just too costly.

That's when Smyth knew that if her son was to receive that form of therapy, she would have to be the one to provide it. So, she set aside her successful career in sales and began educating herself with every bit of information she could find about applied behavior analysis.

The basement in the Smyth home became a therapy room in which she spent her days teaching their son, Jayden, new skills. Smyth shared her experiences with members of a local support group for families affected by autism. Through word of mouth, more and more families became interested in what she was doing and wanted to learn about the particular form of therapy.

Smyth then began to see a future in helping children and their families who are affected by autism. In 2005, she founded the Quad-Cities Autism Center, a nonprofit organization that provides individualized teaching strategies and behavior plans to children with autism as well as providing education and resources to their families.

Helping others by bringing hope to families who are touched by autism has become a family business. Michelle's husband of 17 years, David, recently stepped into the role of operations manager at the center, overseeing the ongoing building operations, maintenance and financial ends of the business.

The couple raises their children, Jayden, 12, and Caitlyn, 10, and operates their business as well with the biblical philosophy of Hebrews 11:1. "We have great expectations and hope that what we see today is only just the beginning of what is to come," Smyth says.

"This center offers messages of hope to the community, parents and families affected by autism," she adds.

"I believe Michelle has an inspiring story, and I was glad to be able to help her share it with others," Zeck said. "I think anyone, but especially those who have children with special needs, will find hope and encouragement from Michelle's story."

For more information about the Quad-Cities Autism Center, visit the website, qcautismcenter.org.