

Grace Kertz

Markle Film

Markle 'rides the wave' of autism while promoting a short film

Sarah Markle hopped off the Long Island Railroad into Montauk, New York, hoping to grab a good seat at the movies. She had made the ride one day earlier than she anticipated just for this, the premiere of "Rocco Up."

It wasn't like her to go to the movies, she had far too much on her plate. Markle, a mother of three, had two children with autism waiting for her at home, yearning to be smothered with kisses from head to toe. She found it difficult to find time for herself amidst changing diapers, driving to therapy daily, and charging speech tablets. But she knew she had to go, if not for herself, for Milly and Mack.

For the next 22 minutes, Markle watched Rocco, a non-verbal boy with autism, learn to surf as he simultaneously gained independence.

When the credits rolled across the screen, and the lights went up, moviegoers freed themselves from their seats, except for Markle. She looked around and couldn't believe people were leaving. Had they all seen the same movie?

In that film, Markle saw her own family. She saw Milly and Mack. She saw an inspiring story that she knew everyone needed to see. And that's exactly what Markle decided to do.

"Let me show 'Rocco Up,'" Markle messaged Ben and Sara, Rocco's parents.

She wouldn't take no for an answer.

While still juggling everything at home, Markle wanted to put on her own premiere for everyone in Westfield, New Jersey. The movie would run at The Center for Creativity at the

Rialto on April 26 and 30, wrapping Autism Awareness Month up in a neat, silver screen bow. The newly renovated theater, initially built in the 1970s, wasn't large, and the chairs yellowed with age, but it would do the trick.

As she finalized the dates, set up a live virtual auction, and plastered "Rocco Up" promos across all her social media platforms, Markle found herself reflecting on her own journey as an autism mother.

It felt like she was playing house with her first child, Morgan. No one gave her the Parenting 101 Rule Book, but she learned quickly not to compare her kid to others. She was the kid you didn't need to baby-proof.

"Don't touch the stove, Morgan," Markle said.

So, Morgan didn't.

When she fell pregnant with Milly in 2014, she felt confident with her newfound mom skills and open mindset.

Markle knew very quickly that the two were different. Milly wouldn't nurse. Looking back on it, Markle now knew this was an early indicator of Milly's apraxia.

"This is a new kid and a new set of rules to figure out," she thought to herself.

But Milly was chill and went with the flow. An "easy baby," if you will. Yet, something told her Milly wasn't typical. A nagging feeling began to grow.

It grew even more when Milly began to miss major milestones. Her pediatrician told her not to worry about it; Milly was a girl, and she even made eye contact.

Eighteen-month-old Milly went into sensory overload at family pictures some short time later. She screamed and kicked and cried in the contrastingly serene, wooded forest. Markle had tried to predict the best time of day for Milly's temperament, and the pictures still failed.

She felt like she still failed.

Whatever this was, she would get to the bottom of it.

The doctors told Markle that Milly had autism.

Then came the early intervention. It would help Milly with her developmental delays, and along with her speech therapist, occupational therapist, special education teacher, and others, Milly would be able to speak.

Except it wasn't that easy. Milly needed daily behavioral therapy as well as occupational therapy two times a week. Even with all the help, she still missed milestones.

"You know what? Screw milestones," Markle thought.

When she carried her youngest, Mack, Markle knew she was now a full-time advocate for her kid, Milly needed her and could no longer work for corporate America.

Celebrating the small wins saved Markle. She no longer expected her kid to play with Play-Doh by rolling it into snakes. Milly pressing it into her palms was enough. It fine-tuned her motor skills.

Flash forward to 2023. It's showtime, and Markle needed to get her and her family's butts moving. They could not be late for "Rocco Up." Now, it was their story as much as it was Rocco's.

So, Markle yanked the tablets out of their charging ports and off the counter, and with a plethora of sticker books in hand, she was ready to go.

Markle greeted each one of the people who attended the Westfield premiere as if it was her life's mission to let everyone know that "Rocco Up" was her "Rocky." Out of those people, she could spot Westfield civilians looking for a good flick. They had no idea what they were in for.

But she could also spot her fellow autistic mothers who found solace in the film. Some even bring their children with them.

Everyone wiggled around in their seats, with kids buzzing with energy and their parents shooting their sharp looks. The theater was packed.

Markle and her family sat in the front row. To her, right? Rocco and his parents. They had made the drive down to be present for their life story.

To her left? Milly, with her hand placed in hers.