

# ASSERT Program Hosts Natalia Vodianova, International Supermodel, Philanthropist, and Founder of Naked Heart Foundation

04/25/2024



Vodianova with a student in the ASSERT classroom

In honor of April's World Autism Acceptance month, USU is hosting Natalia Vodianova, international supermodel, philanthropist, and founder of the Naked Heart Foundation (NHF). Vodianova is visiting the Autism Support Services: Education, Research, and Training (ASSERT) classroom and learning from founder Tom Higbee, professor and department head of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, and his highly skilled early childhood educators. She hopes to bring awareness to autism and evidence-based programs like the ASSERT model. NHF is planning to expand its educational programs in Europe in the next two years, and Vodianova has spent the past two weeks at the ASSERT program learning firsthand about the evidence-based techniques used to support children with autism and their families. This experience will better prepare her for the foundation's future work in Europe.

Housed in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, the ASSERT program was founded in 2003 and is celebrating 21 years of supporting families with children on the autism spectrum. The primary goal of ASSERT is to improve the lives of children who are on the autism spectrum and their families through its three-fold mission of education, research, and training.

Twelve years ago, Vodianova and Higbee met through two Russian healthcare professionals who were working with children with disabilities. Vodianova founded the NHF in 2004 to build all-inclusive playgrounds for children in her native country. Higbee was consulting at the time with the pair of Russian healthcare professionals on a separate project that focused on working with children on the autism spectrum.

"Natalia was looking for other ways that her foundation could support families of children with special needs," says Higbee. "We had the idea to create model classrooms in schools and sites where we could take the ASSERT principles, export them to Russia, and train Russian teaching professionals on how to implement them effectively. Through the generous support of the Naked Heart Foundation, we translated the ASSERT curriculum and training materials into Russian, and we hosted a group of Russian professionals who came to USU and spent two weeks learning with us in the ASSERT program on the USU campus."

The mission of the NHF is to build an inclusive society that is open to people with disabilities and special needs. After learning about ASSERT, Vodianova felt that creating an educational center to support families would be the next initiative for the foundation. The Naked Heart Foundation currently supports eight evidence-based educational programs and centers in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Nizhny Novgorod for children on the autism spectrum and other special needs children based on the ASSERT model. To date, the NHF has provided family support and services for more than 27,000 special needs children.



Natalia Vodianova, founder of the Naked Heart Foundation, and Tom Higbee, founder of ASSERT

ASSERT and NHF have been collaborating for over a decade, working together every week to provide resources to families in Russia and neighboring countries. Higbee explains, "Learning about a different culture and learning how we adapt our intervention procedures to a new context is fascinating because, while the principles we use to teach children are universal, the way we apply

them varies depending upon the place where the ASSERT model is applied.”

Vodianova grew up in Russia with her sister Oksana, who is on the autism spectrum. When her sister was young, the government encouraged parents to place special needs children in government-operated institutions. Vodianova’s mother refused to place Oksana in an institution and chose instead to raise her in the family home.

“Oksana was my angel and my teacher,” says Vodianova. “She taught me that we can find the strength to smile during the most difficult times. Having her in my life gave me a purpose that makes me happy to wake up every day knowing that we are making a difference in the lives of families like ours who are raising children with special needs.”

Despite international barriers, the NHF strives to ensure that nothing is left to interpretation. “We have a team in Russia that runs the day-to-day operations at the foundation,” explains Vodianova. “We try to keep absolute fidelity. We have native speakers who translate everything and follow the principles. Culturally adopting the program is very important to us. We also offer additional programs to the parents. Global data says that 1 in 34 children born will be on the autism spectrum. The need is great.”

“The international work that we have done and continue to do is, honestly, some of the most important work that we have ever done,” adds Higbee. “While our program at USU is relatively small and can only directly impact 20 or so families at a time, if we can take this work internationally, it can have a much larger positive effect. We use a train-the-trainer model that allows the effects of our training efforts to have an ever-expanding impact. As a scientist, it’s interesting to see how we can adapt the techniques that we have developed here at ASSERT to other cultures. I feel an ethical responsibility to take the evidence-based strategies we have refined at ASSERT and spread them as broadly as we can in order to help other programs succeed.”

Since its inception, ASSERT has worked with over 50 graduate students and more than 500 undergraduates at USU who have learned how to implement research-based interventions through the model classroom at ASSERT. Higbee feels strongly that one of the reasons for the success of the ASSERT program is the support and interest of the graduate and undergraduate students. “ASSERT is teaching special education students using hands-on training by working in the classroom,” he says. “Learning how to provide effective instruction to pre-school aged children on the autism spectrum is some of

the greatest preparation for students majoring in special education.”

Vodianova shares, “The Naked Heart Foundation has done a lot of work with parents and families to help them be informed about disabilities. It was emotional when teachers from the Naked Heart Foundation were able to visit ASSERT at USU and learn the principles from observing the students and instructors working in the classroom.” She continues, “This work has changed my life. What is beautiful is where we are today. We are in a place where scale is possible. It’s a matter of resources. The most important tool is training specialists to become master trainers.”

While more of her time is now dedicated to working with her foundation and spending time with her family, Vodianova continues to work as a model. She has graced the cover of international *Vogue* a record 86 times over the span of a 20-plus year career. Vodianova is also a member of the Special Olympics International Board of Directors. In 2021, she became a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador.

“It’s amazing that Natalia took the time to personally come to USU to train with the ASSERT team,” says Higbee. “Her wonderful Naked Heart Foundation is not only giving financial resources to support children on the autism spectrum and their families, but also she is dedicating much of her life to this work. Natalia chose to take time away from her family to come and learn about the life-changing work that is done at ASSERT. Now, when she has conversations with people about making change in the lives of children on the autism spectrum, she can give them a first-hand account of what this work looks like. This says much about her character and how passionate she is about these issues.”

For more information, visit [ASSERT](#) or [The Naked Heart Foundation](#).