



### **The Origin of the Purple Pumpkin Project**

While on a drive one Sunday morning with his family, founder Ron Lamontagne was brainstorming ideas on how to spread epilepsy awareness. The local pumpkin patch provided the solution. Since kids would soon be carving and decorating pumpkins, he thought why not make one purple and tell people about epilepsy when asked “Why is your pumpkin purple?”

### **Why is Ron’s pumpkin purple?**

Ron’s youngest son was diagnosed with Epilepsy in 2009 at the age of four. Since the diagnosis, Ron has seen how epilepsy impacted his son. Although he appears like an average kid on the surface, his son has experienced major challenges academically, physically and socially. Additionally, the stigma of epilepsy has impacted relationships in the family.

Although Ron has been outspoken about the challenges his son faces, many people still choose to keep their seizures private. By raising awareness, Ron hopes to support those people and increase overall awareness of epilepsy.



### **How did it start...?**



The Facebook page and social media are the primary communication method for the Purple Pumpkin Project (PPP). The Facebook page was started on September 2, 2012. Within two days, the page had likes in all 50 states, achieving 554 likes within three days of creation. Ten days later the page had over 1000 likes and photos of many people’s purple pumpkins started pouring in. The interest in the Facebook page sparked participation of the PPP in a local scarecrow event, with three different families creating purple scarecrows in support of the PPP and Epilepsy Awareness. In a short time, Purple Pumpkin events started popping up unexpectedly and without any direct connection to the founder. Two events were created by the Northeast Regional Epilepsy Group, who hosted events in Hackensack, New Jersey and Middletown, New York. The PPP also inspired St. Michaels Elementary School in St. Michaels, MD to host a decorating event in support of

one of their students. Some events did have a more direct link to the founder, such as the events hosted at the Farmington Alternative High School in Farmington, CT, as well as awareness events at Farmington's elementary after school program, which included education about seizures and pumpkin decorating.

By mid-October, 2012, the majority of the followers for the page were located in the United States of America.

However, there were also quite a few followers from the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. The PPP Facebook page even reached a few people in the countries of Ireland, Germany, Romania, India, Mexico, Sweden, Singapore, Spain, Italy, Hong Kong, Denmark, Belgium, Bangladesh, Uruguay and even Cape Verde and the Marshall Islands.



On October 21, 2012, Ron and a few friends from the Epilepsy Foundation of Connecticut's parent support group organized the first official Purple Pumpkin Project Event. The event brought in many more people than was expected. State Senator Terry Gerratana stopped by and personally wished the PPP well. NBC 30 News also sent a crew to interview and video for a news clip for the evening news. The event unexpectedly raised roughly \$800 for the EFCT through unsolicited donations.

These events sparked people to share their own stories. People spoke about the positive impact of their brain surgery and about keeping their seizures secret out of fear. A family in Northern New England shared about the difficulties they were experiencing with their daughter's school and about not getting the services she needed to be successful in school. People talked about relatives who struggled with seizures and even spoke about family members lost due to seizures. After seeing her school support the PPP, a high school junior was brave enough to start sharing with her friends about her absence seizures and need for extra help instead of writing it off as being a "ditsy blonde" as she had for so many years. PPP events presented an opportunity to talk about the stigma of epilepsy and the impact epilepsy has had on each person's life.





Currently, almost 2 years later, the page has over 4700 likes, Several local epilepsy foundation affiliates including our own Epilepsy Foundation of CT follow the page and promote the ideas of the Purple Pumpkin Project. In addition, other epilepsy related organizations have been sharing the Purple Pumpkin idea. Several local were events held the fall of 2013. The Farmington Alternative High School held their second annual decorating event on October 24, 2013. After decorating their pumpkins, the school delivers their pumpkins to local businesses to raise epilepsy awareness.



The PPP was once again featured for the second year at the Berlin Scarecrow Festival on October 12. A new PPP event last year was held at the Shepard Salem Free Mason Lodge in Naugatuck, CT during their annual open house. A "Play for Purple" Field Hockey game was hosted by Farmington High School on October 8. The team painted approximately 40 pumpkins, as well as hosted bake sale, raising over \$400 with all proceeds going to the Epilepsy Foundation of CT. Hero's Grill and Bar in Berlin agreed to sell paper purple pumpkins for two weeks, and gave all proceeds to

the Epilepsy Foundation of CT raising almost \$200. Our final event for the fall of 2013 was the Second Annual Purple Pumpkin Decoration Event in Berlin on October 27. The event included children's games, music, snacks, a bake sale and of course a large pumpkin patch so each person can decorate a purple pumpkin for home to inspire the conversation about "Why is your pumpkin purple?" Our 2<sup>nd</sup> annual event had an increase in attendance by 150% and left us all in awe while 160 purple pumpkins made their way to front porches across the state. It was an amazing day of creativity and awareness, but the one thing that stands out from that day was the outreach. 2 newly diagnosed families came out because of an article about the PPP in the Hartford Courant and for the first time they realized they were not alone in their journey.

This Halloween, on the eve of Epilepsy Awareness Month, turn one of your pumpkins purple and encourage others to do the same. Host a purple pumpkin decorating or carving event at your home, school or workplace to raise Epilepsy Awareness and help your community get seizure smart. How will you answer "Why is your pumpkin Purple?"

