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A teacher and student work in one of the two classrooms in the new building of the Comprehensive Learning Center in Upper Southampton Thursday. The classrooms were designed to look more like a professional office to ease students into the working environment later in life. James B. Hale / Staff Photographer

Autism learning center celebrates expansion

By: **MANASEE WAGH**

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The school teaches typical subjects like reading and math as well as life skills to help students integrate into a mainstream setting.

When Joanne Corless' son was little and diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, doctors told her that nothing would help AJ lead a normal life.

But Corless couldn't accept that. With the help of her family, she formed the AJ Foundation for Children with Autism.

"We decided to start a private school. It was a leap of faith," she said. "Our goal was to provide teaching to help children with autism transition to a typical school program or meaningful work by the age of 21. No school like that existed."

After going through a year-long approval process with the state Department of Education, the Comprehensive Learning Center opened in September 2000 to its first three students, housed in a modular classroom on the grounds of St. Bede the Venerable Catholic School in Holland.

On Thursday afternoon, Corless' family, including AJ, now 19, gathered to celebrate the second expansion of the center. Since 2003, it has been in Upper Southampton and since 2004 has provided educational services to children between the ages of 3 and 21.

Children in pre-K and lower elementary grades will now attend school in the original building, and the new 6,000-square-foot building will house upper elementary classes and secondary education for those between the ages of 15 and 21. About 20 kids attend school at the center, from as far away as Central Bucks and Philadelphia School Districts.

The school is funded through tuition, fundraising, private donations and grants.

The new building is "a real boon," said Brian Engard of Falls, who teaches secondary education. Besides additional classrooms, the space includes a bigger kitchen and a dining room, where students can learn cooking and serving skills. Students will also use a better office setup to learn

work skills including assembly of bulk mail, proper telephone use, entering data into spreadsheets, filing and copying.

Just as importantly, students learn many life skills as well, including how to do chores and take a shower by themselves.

During the six-hour school day, they learn regular subjects such as reading and math. There's an indoor gym, where children can learn to roller skate, play basketball and ride bikes, even when it's raining outside.

The intent now is to add an adult life skills program to provide employment training and job coaching for the transition into adulthood, said Corless.

People with autism spectrum disorder are often impaired in many areas of functioning, including expressive and receptive communication, social interaction, play, and self-help skills according to the center's Web site. Licensed instructors use a method based on applied behavior analysis, a scientific strategy that eventually enhances independence, self-confidence and the ability to function well in regular situations.

Teachers work with individual students based on specific needs. Skills are broken down into smaller components and practiced over and over again, said Amanda Heller, one of the center's two directors of education. Students are motivated to learn certain skills and behaviors, and teachers go to students' homes to work with families so the system of learning can be maintained.

"Our mission was to provide (applied behavior analysis) in a school-based setting. We want the children to have meaningful opportunities when they're older," Corless said.

Sherrie Schulcz of Horsham enrolled her son Brandon at the center about a year ago, and she's impressed with his improvement.

"It's changed our life. I don't know where to begin. Brandon was nonverbal and now he's putting sentences together. When I would take him to the pediatrician it was a nightmare - he would freak out. Last time we went he had a full exam. The doctor said 'I've never seen a child change like this.' He successfully went to a birthday party. He rode a horse; he rode a camel at the zoo."

Another parent, Patty Feeney of Chalfont, also gushed about how the learning center has helped her son Connor, 12, who's much happier now, she said.

"It's really helped us to live as a normal family. We can go on vacation, to restaurants, to church, and Connor knows how to behave in all those places. He also plays piano and walks to his lessons by himself," she said.

AJ started the program at age 12 and now attends the center as its oldest student. He works in a paid part-time position in an accounting firm where he performs tasks such as data entry.

"It's really great. I'm learning how to do chores, and how to get a job, doing school work, learning how to cook, and shop for groceries and clothes," said AJ, whose favorite activity is learning how to upload pictures on the computer.

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