

Creating better lives

The Autism Delaware staff is on a mission: create better lives for all Delawareans affected by autism spectrum disorders (or ASDs, for short).

And thanks to last year's merger with the Lower Delaware Autism Foundation, all families throughout the state are now within reach.

"We now have a physical presence in both lower and upper Delaware that supports our mission," explains Autism Delaware's executive director, Theda Ellis, MBA, MEd.

For children with ASDs, Autism Delaware continues to run the summer day camp at the Children's Beach House in Lewes, junior golf at The Rookery Golf Course in Milton, and the summer swim program, now at the Rehoboth YMCA.

And for adults with ASDs, Autism Delaware is expanding its employment services. Known as Productive Opportunities for Work & Recreation (or POW&R, for short), the services—now available in New Castle and Kent Counties—should also be available to Sussex County adults by July 2012.

Already available are parent mentoring and social and recreational opportunities, such as horseback riding and sensory friendly movies.

Supporting innovative community programs

In addition to providing programs and services statewide, Autism Delaware awards grants to organizations with new and promising community programs.

"We support balance in the autism community," adds Ellis, "so we support innovative programs with the potential to improve the lives of both children and adults across the state.

"This year's grant recipients meet our vision," continues Ellis, "because they reach every age range, from children to adults, and address a range of needs."

In June, Autism Delaware handed out \$10,000 in grant money to

- Keystone Human Services, a provider of community-based services, to improve the communication skills of 10 adults with ASDs;
- Variety, the Children's Charity, to run an after-school program for students enrolled at the Brennen School;

- Parent Information Center of Delaware to provide five parent-training sessions by Delaware Autism Program Teacher of the Year Dom Squittiare;
- Easter Seals Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore to develop and offer a statewide social-thinking model that will help improve social skills; and
- Very Special Arts (VSA) Delaware to support an artist-in-residence program in Kent County that will help build the confidence of 52 young adults with ASDs or cognitive disabilities.

Supporting outstanding students and professionals in the autism field

Autism Delaware also supports the educational goals of students who want to help create better lives for Delawareans with ASDs as well as the continuing education of autism professionals. In July, annual scholarships and stipends were awarded to six individuals.

Alexander Prohaska is the recipient of the Adult with Autism Scholarship. The \$1,000 scholarship will support Prohaska's attendance at the University of Delaware this fall. The New Castle resident plans to study math and to take a creative writing course. "After I graduate," says Prohaska, "I want to be a writer. I have a lot of ideas, and I just don't want them to go to waste."

Cindy R. Hoffstadt is the recipient of the Autism Delaware Para-to-Educator Stipend. The annual \$1,000 stipend is available to eligible paraprofessionals who, in the past year, completed their education to become teachers of children with autism. Hoffstadt, a former paraprofessional at Star Hill and Stokes Elementary Schools, has been an autism teacher with Kent County Community School since December. Currently learning sign language, the Dover resident will use her stipend for training in the picture exchange communication system (PECS) and autism certification. "My goal is to continue to become more knowledgeable in my field," notes Hoffstadt. "My hope is that I can have a positive influence on the lives of my students."

Four University of Delaware students received the annual Daniel and Lois Gray Memorial Scholarship.

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Helping People and Families Affected by Autism

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Creating better lives (continued)

With hopes of becoming professionals in the autism community, each of the students will receive \$1,000 for the 2011–12 academic year:

Jenna M. MacKenzie (Class of 2012) wants to become a licensed speech-language pathologist and to work as a clinician helping individuals with communication disorders and impairments. Currently majoring in human services clinical studies with double minors in disabilities studies and linguistics, the Felton native also volunteers at Autism Delaware events and practices applied behavioral analysis with a young child with autism. "I have always had dreams of working with individuals with autism," says MacKenzie, "and this career path allows me to help people in a way that I had never dreamt possible."

"My career goal," says Janine M. Navarra (Class of 2012) who is majoring in elementary education with a concentration in special education, "is to become a special-education teacher, and I would specifically like to work with students with autism. I would love to have my own classroom consisting of a small group of students with autism, but I would also enjoy being a special educator in an inclusion classroom with students with autism as well."

Allyson M. Szecsi (Class of 2013) is working toward a master's degree in speech pathology. Currently a junior at UD, Szecsi is majoring in cognitive science with a concentration in speech pathology and double minors in disabilities studies and psychology. "Once I am certified," notes Szecsi, "I hope to work in a school that specializes in students with disabilities, particularly autism. Eventually, I hope to open my own practice."

With the goal of becoming a speech pathologist, New York native Anne M. Yuskevich (Class of 2013) is majoring in cognitive science at UD with a concentration in speech pathology and double minors in disabilities studies and psychology. "I intend to work with children on the autism spectrum," says Yuskevich. "Due to my experience working with [children and adults with autism at Camp Anchor in Lido Beach], I see how greatly they can benefit from speech therapy, and I want to help them."

"Whether they want to become professionals in the autism field or to improve their current skill sets,"

adds Autism Delaware's Ellis, "we support their efforts with scholarships or stipends. It's in our best interest to support these highly motivated and skilled people any way we can."

Providing easy access to information

In addition to expanding services and supporting innovative programs and promising students and professionals, Autism Delaware strives to provide easy access to the most up-to-date information available. To this end, the staff focused recently on two areas: the Autism Delaware website and parent information packet.

The website—According to Autism Delaware's associate director, Teresa Avery, recent revisions to the website arose in response to a member survey that asked Autism Delaware members about ease of use at www.delautism.org.

"We surveyed our membership about using our website with an eye toward making information easier for families to find," explains Avery. "In response, we upgraded our web presence this summer. The home page looks the same, but how the information is organized has changed. We're hoping the entire autism community will now be able to come to our site and enjoy easy access."

Would you like to add your input about the website? Email Teresa Avery at teresa.avery@delautism.org.

Parent information packet—Educating families with children who are newly diagnosed with autism is a priority of the Autism Delaware staff. Aware that the information can be as overwhelming as the diagnosis, we work at providing easy access to needed information. To this end, information is now available on CD as well as in print format and includes contact information for Child Find, Child Development Watch, and Delaware Autism Program sites across the state.

"The parent packet is updated as we receive news or updates," notes Autism Delaware's Asperger's resource coordinator, Heidi Mizell. "We realize that knowledge is power, and we want all parents to feel confident about fighting for their children's rights."

For more, call Heidi Mizell at (302) 224-6020, ext. 205. Or email her at heidi.mizell@delautism.org.



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