

Simple idea led to Autism Center

More families are getting support, their needs met with programs, a camp

BENNETT J. LOUDON STAFF WRITER

Two years ago, Jen Hackett and her professional colleagues simply wanted to give a few families of children with autism an opportunity to take a vacation, something that's nearly impossible with a child who depends on a consistent schedule and feels uncomfortable in new environments.

"Kids with autism like to have a lot of routine, and sometimes when their routine is different for them, it's really hard to handle," said Hackett, a special-education teacher in the Webster Central School District.

But helping just five families enjoy a getaway in the Adirondack Mountains in 2013, at what they named Camp Puzzle Peace, grew to 10 families in 2014, and is expected to double again next summer.

The more Hackett and her fellow special-education teachers, therapists, psychologists and other volunteers worked with the families, the more they discovered unfilled needs, which led to more and more eve

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Art teacher Kate Clemont goes over color samples with Allie Hobbs, 12, Webster, as she paints rainbows in their art therapy class at the new Family Autism Center on University Avenue in Rochester.

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Music therapist Megan Smith holds her guitar as she plays a game of 'Knock, Knock, Knock' with Andrew Vaden, 8, Webster, in her music class.

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ning and weekend programs.

Their nonprofit organization, now serving about 200 families yearround, will hold a ribboncutting ceremony Wednesday at its 2,300square-foot Family Autism Center at 1150 University Ave., where programs have been offered since October.

The Family Autism Center charges for the programs they offer, but many of the professionals don't accept pay for their work, Hackett said. The center is supported by the fees, fundraising and grants, such as awards from Autism Speaks and the Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation, which paid for the center's equipment.

"The whole thing that is just amazing about this is that we're classroom teachers," Hackett said. "When we started out, we were just doing this camping trip. Now we're doing all sorts of programs, and two years ago, we had no idea we were going to be doing this. It's just been quite a journey."

Support is key

Kerry Vaden, whose 8-year-old son, Andrew, is severely autistic, said before the Family Autism Center programs started, her family "really did not get out much." "He can be difficult at times. He's completely non-verbal. So the Family Autism Center allows Andrew and our family to get out and to socialize with others," said Vaden, of Webster.

Vaden and her husband, Dave, take Andrew to programs at the Family Autism Center two to three evenings a week. He participates in a music and social skills class and a volleyball camp.

"These programs that the Family Autism Center has provided for us gives our family the opportunity to bring Andrew somewhere to learn to socialize with his peers and to have fun. He loves it," Kerry Vaden said.

The Family Autism Center offers services not found elsewhere, she said.

"I didn't feel like there was anything out there that I could take my child to and have the support there, and that's the key," Kerry Vaden said. "At the Family Autism Center, there are teachers and educators and psychologists, music therapists, art therapists that are there actually helping and giving their advice and helping. Their experience is invaluable."

In the beginning, Hackett and co-workers realized that the families of many of her students couldn't take a vacation because of the difficulties of leaving their home for several days with a special needs child whose behavior is closely tied to a predictable routine.

Hackett and other teachers created the nonprofit organization called Camp Puzzle Peace and started taking families on vacations to

a camp near Lowville, in Lewis County. Those trips included an adaptive physical-education teacher, a psychologist and other professionals, so the vacation became an extension of the classroom in the Adirondacks.

"We set up all the supports for families. They come and they don't have to worry about if their kid has a problem or there's an issue. There are supports there to help them," Hackett said. The four-day, threenight vacation costs about \$800 per family and is allinclusive.

Hackett said some of the families who went to Camp Puzzle Peace have tried other vacation options, but they didn't work as well because they didn't have the support staff. "Behavior is really communication, so any time the child is using some sort of behavior like a tantrum if something happens, it's usually because they're trying to communicate that there is something wrong," Hackett said.

Inspired by Larry Glazer

In addition to the Adirondack trips, they saw the need for additional programs. At first, they used space in the Webster school district, but as their programs grew, they decided they needed a permanent home with plenty of room. Last March, they started renting a 175-squarefoot office at 1150 University Ave., a building owned by Buckingham Properties.

A board member who knew Larry Glazer, founder of Buckingham, suggested they ask him for help in finding a better space and he agreed to a breakfast meeting with Hackett in August.

"It changed the whole course of our organization," Hackett said. "He was so amazing. He gave me homework."

Glazer told Hackett to develop a business plan and gave her the names of others she could call for help.

"He totally put everything in motion. He inspired me as a leader of this organization," said Hackett, president of Camp Puzzle Peace.

Sadly, she never had another meeting with Glazer, who died in September with his wife, Jane. They were flying their own plane to Florida on Sept. 5 when the aircraft apparently lost cabin pressure, lowering oxygen levels and rendering the couple unconscious. The aircraft eventually ran out of fuel and crashed into the sea near Jamaica.

But the wheels set in motion with Glazer's help landed Hackett's organization in the larger space at the University Avenue address.

"The Family Autism Center came out of Mr. Glazer hearing our story and saying we need to make this happen," Hackett said.

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Cailin Huggins, an art therapy student at Nazareth College, works with Ryan Grosser, 7, Brighton, as he creates paint and glitter rainbows in the art therapy class.

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