

# More space for inclusive learning

## Stepping Stones expands

**SARAH TADDEO**

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A former Chase-Pitkin Home and Garden Center is now full of imaginative classrooms, laughing children and new approaches to therapy at the Stepping Stones Learning Center, which just celebrated 20 years of inclusive learning for children across three local counties. A playground replaced the lumberyard and playhouse-inspired classrooms replaced store shelves in the redeveloped space in Irondequoit, which was finished last year, said Don Sinton, the center's coordinator for public relations and development.

The center, which is now a nonprofit organization, started as one classroom in a former Catholic school with nine children of varying developmental levels and ages. It was based on founder and CEO Mariellen Cupini's dream of an "inclusive" learning environment, where typical and developmentally disabled children could learn together, Sinton said. "Regardless of need, kids can learn and grow together, and from each other," he said, adding that the center pushes to innovate new programs to meet unaddressed needs.

"If a child or family needs it, and it doesn't exist, then we'll invent it," he said. The learning center is chartered through the state education department, meaning it is a certified preschool. It is licensed to service children in six counties, but primarily students from Monroe, Ontario and Wayne counties attend programs. Its \$4.2 million building project in Chase-Pitkin allowed for expansion and unique learning spaces — the last major construction project will use an additional \$400,000 to finish the playground, Sinton said.

The center started as a regular preschool for children up to age five, but parents started asking about extra support before and after school, and for more in-depth behavioral issues, he said.

"Kids would do very well in our inclusive morning classroom because we had the knowledge, we had the experience and all the tools to manage and meet his needs," Sinton said. "Then he would get on a bus and he's go to a child care center where he may struggle."

On-site and remote programs for special needs individuals from birth to age 21 are offered through the center, such as occupational and physical therapy and social skills classes, as well as child care programs for varied ages and development levels, Sinton said. Some children with special needs will qualify for year-round care, while typically developing kids

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**Hayley Perruccio and Don Sinton lead kids back to their classroom at Stepping Stones Learning Center in Irondequoit on Friday. The center is now housed in a former Chase-Pitkin Home and Garden Center.**

LAUREN PETRACCA/@LAURENPETRACCA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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### Center

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can sign up for summer care for July and August, he said.

Sinton remembers when his daughter Megan came home from Stepping Stones one day and said she made a friend in class — a girl with Down syndrome who spoke with her hands.

“I remember how I was taught to treat that little girl — she was different from me, she went to different places than me. But my daughter didn’t even notice the disability,” he said.

The center runs an after- school inclusive social skills group four nights a week, which helps high school students with social disabilities learn appropriate social behavior, as well as a life skills class that teaches kids how to use kitchen appliances and shop for food, he said.

University of Rochester researchers have done multiple studies on students with autism at the school, and families have moved from out of state for their children with autism to attend Stepping Stones, said Autism Programs Coordinator Mary Richardson.

The center offers two approaches to autism learning — behavioral, which focuses on outward actions and responses of a child, and developmental, which focuses on social communication — depending on the parents’ preference, she said.

“We want to offer choice to families,” she said. “While they’re both great programs, one of them is going to fall more in line with your parenting style.”

Watching special needs children make breakthroughs in behavior and communication while being educated alongside their typical peers is like “watching small miracles,” said Sinton.

“When (parents) come into one of our classrooms and ... couldn’t tell who the special-needs kids were, we’ll see parents that will break down in tears, because they didn’t know it was possible,” he said.

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**DON SINTON**

COORDINATOR FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT



**Sara Uchal leads her classroom in a song at Stepping Stones Learning Center in Irondequoit on Friday.**

PHOTOS BY LAUREN PETRACCA/@LAURENPETRACCA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



**Stepping Stones Learning Center, a day care center for typically developing and developmentally disabled children and young adults, recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.**

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