

AUTISTIC KIDS TAKE GIANT STEP PROGRAM GIVES HOPE FOR NEW BREAKTHROUGH

Christy McKerney Staff writer. South Florida Sun - Sentinel. Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Jun 13, 2003. pg. 5.B

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It was dinnertime at the Goldstein house Wednesday and, over her favorite meal of chicken and fries, 11-year-old Stephanie was performing miracles.

"Mommy, more ketchup please?" she said.

"They told us Stepie would never talk," said her mother, Susan Goldstein, pushing herself away from the dinner table to go fetch the ketchup.

On Thursday, Stephanie Goldstein and five other severely autistic children graduated from the Therapeutic Intervention Program at ARC Broward in Sunrise, a program designed to help special needs children transition into society.

They were part of the second graduating class in a program that began in 1997 with the help of Susan and Irv Goldstein of Weston, Irv Goldstein's childhood friend the lobbyist Ron Book, and former Dolphins star Dan Marino and his wife, Claire.

Susan Goldstein helped start TIP after she found her daughter made much better progress when her speech and behavioral and occupational therapists could get together in one room and solve problems together.

"I developed a team," Goldstein said. "I thought, 'Well, everybody should have this team.'" The Autism Society of America defines autism as a neurological disorder that affects learning, communication and social skills. The disability can be mild or severe. Some characteristics may include extreme resistance to change, repeating words that are spoken, aloofness, difficulty playing with others and failing to respond to language.

Susan Goldstein is a former bond trader who gave up that life to help make sure her daughter and other autistic children got services.

Through TIP, severely autistic children learn how to speak, read and function in the wider world of shopping centers, strip malls and schools. TIP combines school instruction with intensive after-school care so parents can work. It also provides in-home care. Each student works one-on-one with a teacher or therapist. Last month, TIP was on the state budget chopping block. Book credited House Speaker Johnnie Byrd, R-Plant City, appropriations chairmen Sen. Ken Pruitt, R-Port St. Lucie and Rep. Bruce Kyle, R-Fort Myers, with saving the program by providing the \$1.8 million funding. Book and Rep. Nan Rich, D-Sunrise, were recognized Thursday.

The significance of graduation is magnified for autistic children, whose progress is often measured in tiny steps, said ARC Broward CEO Dennis Haas. "Some of these kids came here not knowing how to speak, and they're leaving here being able to communicate."

Veronica Migatz's son Steven, 11, is in the same class as Stephanie. He is graduating after three years at the school. Like Stephanie, he is in school five days a week from 9:30 to 6.

Migatz said her son has progressed "tremendously" through one-on-one instruction.

Migatz is a single mother who said she lost her marriage because her husband couldn't cope with her son's autism. She said the stress on families can be overwhelming. Steven has escaped from the house three times over the years. Each time, he runs across a four-lane road without looking and heads for a nearby park swimming pool, where he likes to swim. She's had to call 911 when he's disappeared.

Therapists from the school teach parents to cope with outbursts or self-destructive behavior at home. Those episodes can be triggered by something as mundane as a seemingly harmless word.

For the Goldsteins, moving from Lighthouse Point to Weston underscored how difficult change is for kids with autism. For the first time, they began to see aggression in their daughter.

The urge to hurt herself became so strong, Stephanie was hospitalized while doctors tried to find the right mix of drugs and therapy that would allow her to adjust to losing the home she grew up in and living in a new place.

Stephanie will go to Camp Crayola at ARC Broward this year. Then she'll come back to TIP for a month before slowly easing into a new program somewhere else, her mom said.

Goldstein and Migatz are proud of their children for graduating from TIP and thankful the program has served their families so well. But they're nervous, too, about how their children will cope with leaving.

"When she's happy, we're happy," Goldstein said.

"I'm scared to death," said Migatz. "I dread the first day, what's going to happen. I know [Bright Horizons school] is a good school."

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