

LevittownPatch

The ELIJA School: Making Progress with Autism

The small local school brought the community together for a week of Autism Awareness.

By Nina Ruggiero | [Email the author](#) | April 11, 2011



On the other side of [The ELIJA School](#)'s little blue door on Periwinkle Road, a mural of a tree at sunrise sits against freshly painted bright yellow walls. Soon, green leaves will encompass the mural and reach throughout the hallway. Each leaf will represent a student, teacher, family member, friend or volunteer who did their part to help make the school a sanctuary for children with Autism.

ELIJA stands for Enlightening Long Island's Journey Through Autism, and the not-for-profit private educational school provides Autistic children with one-on-one attention and the opportunity to grow and advance at their own pace.

The school, which serves children ages 3 to 21, has an open door policy, so parents can come in and watch their children progress while learning how to implement the same learning techniques at home.

"We want parents to be as involved as possible," said Director Debora Harris. "It creates trust. We want families to feel comfortable here; this is their home."

Right now, the school is home to 11 students and 15 teachers, including one teacher for each student, an extra trained teacher standing by, two supervisors and a paraprofessional. All teachers go through at least six weeks of intensive training at the school prior to starting.

Students are grouped based on ability, age range and physical size, to create the most beneficial learning environment in each classroom. They are taught academic skills, how to communicate and behave socially and general life skills.

Harris opened the school in 2006, after being encouraged by Dr. Bridget Taylor, a founder of the [Alpine Learning Group](#), a groundbreaking behavior-based program in New Jersey for children with Autism.

With her now 12-year-old son being diagnosed with Autism at just 20 months old, Harris was well aware of the misinformation out there about educating children with the neurological disability. She started a foundation in 2002 to educate families affected by Autism, enlisting professionals from all over the country for seminars and workshops. When Taylor suggested she open a school modeling after the Alpine program, Harris jumped on the idea. In fact, she had the school open in just eight months.

"There was such a need, and the parents were so excited about it," said Harris. "We have a well-trained, tight-knit group of teachers in a mentorship environment. The supervisors support my teachers; having the support of other trained professionals keeps them less stressed out."

Sana Shadded started working at The ELIJA School as a teacher and has now been a clinical supervisor for over two years.

"It's an extremely unique environment," she said of the school. "Deb really understands from a parent's point of view and from a community member's point of view. She's so passionate with everything she does. We really think of ourselves as a family."

Many of the students and staff who spend each day at the school have been like a family for years now, but last week's [Autism Awareness Week](#) brought in an extended family-- volunteers from the community and beyond looking to help the cause.

"All the volunteers-- it's really amazing to me," said Robin Havens, an ELIJA School parent from Port Washington. "Many had no connection to Autism and yet they felt they wanted to come out and contribute. It's really heartwarming."

From gardening and painting to cleaning and donating goods, people of all ages eagerly knocked on the school's door ready to get to work. Local businesses sent food for the volunteers, and employees from [Lowe's Home Improvement](#) in Hicksville spent days transforming the front lobby from a dark, tired hall into a sunny, happy entranceway.

Havens was at the week's concluding barbecue with her son, Jake, who has attended the school since it opened. Jake, 14, suffered from regression and lost some skills in his previous program. His time at ELIJA has helped him regain those skills and start moving forward. Havens said she has also benefitted from the teaching, as she has learned methods to use with Jake at home, keeping his progress consistent.

"He loves going to school now; he can't wait for the bus to come every morning," said Havens. "It's a very warm and loving environment."

Lynne Koufakis, of Manhasset, has two children out of four with Autism. Her 14-year-old son, also Jake, has also been attending The ELIJA School since it opened. He uses a machine to help him talk and has behavioral issues that used to interfere with his learning in less structured programs. He is slowly and steadily making progress, and Koufakis says every little step counts.

"This is a very difficult group to work with, and the staff is so dedicated," said Koufakis. "They really care about the kids, and the kids know it."

Koufakis goes above and beyond in her involvement with the school, organizing a popular golf fundraiser each year with all the money going to ELIJA. This year, it will take place on May 9 at [Pine Hollow Country Club](#) in East Norwich. There will be a day of golf (\$550) followed by a dinner with entertainment, cocktails and a silent auction (\$175).

"It's a nice way to bring people together," said Koufakis. "It's a small school and this opens it up and gets other people involved. Everyone always has a great time."

For tickets or for more information on The ELIJA School, call 516-216-5270 or visit www.elija.org.

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