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“Autism Awareness Advocates”

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“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.” Dr. Suess. This is especially true for the fifth grade class at Garrison Forest School in Owings Mills. As a part of their summer reading assignment the students read “Rules” by Cynthia Lord, a book about a young girl with a brother who has autism. Throughout the book she tries to define what is “normal”, learns to accept her family and not to be afraid of what others think. The simple reading assignment has grown into lively class discussions, concern, research and real life experience for the fifth grade girls at Garrison Forest. This topic was especially personal for one student, Serena Shafer, whose younger brother was diagnosed with Autism. The class invited Helen Shafer, Serena’s mother and founder of The Shafer Center, for a visit to Garrison Forest on October 4. After the meeting the students unanimously decided to adopt the cause of Autism Awareness as their yearlong community outreach project. They have given themselves the name of “Autism Awareness Advocates”.

The “Autism Awareness Advocates” will be visiting The Shafer Center on November 1st. The Shafer Center for Early Intervention was founded in 2006 by Helen and P.J. Shafer to serve preschool through second grade students who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The Shafer’s created The Center to help children reach their maximum potential; it began with nine students including Hayden, Helen and PJ’s son who was diagnosed with autism and now serves 55 students. The center provides classroom instruction, one on one Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy and provides support to students within schools throughout the area. The Shafer Center uses a team approach which includes: special education teachers, speech language pathologist, occupational therapists, physical therapists and ABA therapists in order to best serve each student’s individual needs. The Shafer Center provides a caring environment for children and their families by focusing on “the can” rather than “the cannot.”

During their visit to the Shafer Center the “Autism Awareness Advocates” will observe classroom instruction, one on one ABA therapy sessions, participate in presentations as well as assist in making materials for the Center. The “Autism Awareness Advocates” are passionate about spreading their knowledge about autism and volunteering at various autism events throughout the community. Marion Wright Edelman says “You really can change the world if you care enough,” and now that autism is an issue that each fifth grader at Garrison Forest cares about, they can make a difference for children with autism in the future and that is a powerful inspiration.