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THE SHAFER  
CENTER  
FOR EARLY INTERVENTION

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### localnews

# Heroic Measures

Center for children with autism celebrates its first graduating class.

**Rochelle Eisenberg**  
Staff Reporter

**W**hen their son, Haydn, was first diagnosed on the autism spectrum several years ago, Helen and PJ Shafer wondered what his future would hold. Low expectations seemed to be the prevailing prognosis, but Mrs. Shafer refused to put those expectations and labels on a child who was "only 2 or 3."

Today, as Haydn gets ready to enter Chatsworth School's inclusion program as a first grader this fall, it is the Shafers' tenacity and refusal to give in to this so-called "wisdom" that has made a major difference in Haydn's life.

Unhappy with existing programs and determined that their son gain the skills necessary to live a productive life, the family established the Shafer Center for Early Intervention for children on the autism spectrum.

"I wanted [Haydn] to have the ability and opportunity to make a choice later on if he wants to go to college and live independently,"

said Mrs. Shafer. "I looked at my husband and said, 'If I don't try to do something, I will regret it for the rest of my life.'"

Based at St. John's Episcopal Church at 3738 Butler Road in Reisterstown, the Shafer Center offers youngsters ages 2-7 the chance to gain the needed social, verbal and academic skills to be part of inclusion programs in the educational arena. The center opened in Aug. 2006 with nine students, and now boasts 50 students and 12 faculty members. Last week, it held its first class graduation.

The center's mission, according to Mrs. Shafer, is for autistic children to receive the services they need so they can mainstream by first grade. The center features a multi-disciplinary approach, incorporating a variety of methodologies to work on speech and language, verbal behaviors and sensory integration techniques.

Students receive a half-day classroom experience taught by a mastered special educator and a mastered speech and language pathologist.

Shafer Center founders Helen and PJ Shafer, with their son, Haydn, bask in the success of a first graduating class.



PHOTO: LOUIS ROSENSTOCK

Young children are grouped by skill sets, and each child receives individualized goals. Children in "tupper" classes receive weekly pre- and post-tests on lesson plans. The center is modeled on what Mrs. Shafer calls a "typical" preschool, with circle time, outdoor play, reading, even field trips to such sites as pumpkin patches and zoos.

The center also provides additional one-on-one speech services and social groups offering play-based activities through its resource center.

According to the National Institutes of Health's Web site, autism affects approximately 3-6 children out of 1,000 per year. Males are four times more likely than females to be diagnosed with the disorder.

Wendy Klausner, whose son, Parker, graduated last week from the Shafer Center, cannot control her enthusiasm when she speaks about how far her son has come. According to Mrs. Klausner, Parker, who has a high functioning form of autism, was enrolled in a slew of programs, including special education through Baltimore County Public Schools and the Kennedy Krieger Institute, as well as a mainstream preschool program at the Jewish Community Center. At one point Mrs. Klausner recalled, she was driving Parker to three programs a week.

Since enrolling Parker at the Shafer Center, Mrs. Klausner has seen huge changes in her son. "He now talks about friends he has made at school, and his language has grown immensely. The other day, he said a 13-word sentence," she said.

Said Mrs. Shafer: "When someone tells you that your child has developmental disabilities, it is really scary." Yet, seeing the results of her labor can be incredibly heartwarming, she said.

Today, Haydn, who once was not talking, is socially engaged and expressing himself. Recently, while Haydn played with his father, Mrs. Shafer said she heard these special words from her son: "Daddy, you're my hero."

For information on the Shafer Center, check out [shafecenter.com](http://shafecenter.com) or call 410-517-1113.