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THE SHAFER CENTER

# The Examiner BALTIMORE



P.J. Shafer spends quality time with his 5-year-old son, Hayden, who was diagnosed with autism when he was 3.  
- Patrick Smith/For The Examiner

## A father's gift

By Emily Campbell  
Examiner Staff Writer

When their 5-year-old son Hayden was diagnosed with autism, P.J. and Helen Shafer didn't see defeat — they saw potential.

"Our goal for Hayden is that he will one day be independent, he'll live on his own, he'll be happy. Ideally, we want him to be able to live a happy life, whatever that may mean," P.J. said. "We want him to have those opportunities."

Because of Hayden's late diagnosis — he was 3 before he was officially diagnosed — the Shafers had some catching up to do. They entered Hayden into Kennedy Krieger's Early Achievements Program, but after a successful completion were unsure of the next step. Despite the amazing growth Hayden had achieved during Kennedy Krieger's program, he was also en-

### The Shafer Center

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rolled in one-on-one lessons with speech pathologists, occupational therapists and verbal behaviorists — all in different parts of Maryland.

P.J. decided to leave his job as a lawyer to work for his mother's financial planning business, which would give him more flexibility when driving Hayden up to 100 miles a day to all of his appointments and lessons. That's when Helen had the idea of one place where they could have all of Hayden's needs met without having to travel so much.

"As we were looking at programming, there really wasn't anywhere that would fit all of Hayden's needs. Our mission was to let him enjoy his childhood, but also push him to start

bridging the gap," Helen said. "Baltimore has so many rich educational opportunities for neurotypical children, but most people don't spend a lot of time developing for developmentally challenged children."

The couple founded the Shafer Center, which provides resources and treatment for autistic children and their families during the critically formative years — 18 months to 5 years. The center utilizes a whole-child approach, with lots of one-on-one attention and individualized education plans for each student.

P.J. still works in financial planning, but most of his attention is focused on Hayden and his 7-year-old daughter Serena. He reads stories, gives baths, plays tag, helps with homework and still manages to cook dinner for the family almost every night.

"My husband is an amazing man," Helen said. "He changed his entire life. His leaving the law practice and changing his career allowed all of us to be able to do this, to live out and accomplish this dream for Hayden, which to me is just a priceless gift."

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