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EDUCATION

Fast-growing school for autistic children makes move

By Bryna Zumer
bzumer@patuxent.com

A burgeoning center serving children with autism now has an office of its own.

The Shafer Center for Early Intervention has outgrown the classrooms it was using at St. John's Episcopal Church, in Glyndon, and moved last week to a 7,000-square-foot space on Business Center Drive, off Main Street, in Reisterstown, said Helen Shafer, who founded the business three years ago with her husband, PJ.

After an initial graduating class of nine children, the center now has 60 enrolled attendees, Shafer said.

The children, who have various stages of autism and are between the ages of 2 and 7, participate in a variety of services and programs that are customized for each family.

The new space will give the company individual classrooms for services such as speech pathology and occupational therapy, a bathroom in each room, a library, a playground and a family room with wireless Internet where parents can watch their children via television.

Because the office will house all the center's specialists under one roof, "we will be able to address any type of issue," said Shafer, who was enthusiastic about the center's progress. "I am thrilled for the kids, I am thrilled for my own child, that we could really create a space to focus on their needs."

The Shafers, who live in Owings Mills, began planning the center after their son, Hayden, now 6, was diagnosed with autism in 2004. He is now at Chatsworth School. They also have a daughter, 7-year-old Serena, at Garrison Forest School.

"There really are not a lot of programs in the area that focus on early intervention. None of the private schools have a program geared at students on the autism spectrum," she said, explaining that she was looking for the quality of a private-school education for her son.



STAFF PHOTO BY MATT ROTH

Staff members of The Shafer Center, from left, Angela Brad, an applied behavioral analyst from Ellicott City; Karen Wells, a speech pathologist from Perry Hall; Jamie Mindeo, a teacher from Pikesville; and Brooke Poklemba, an applied behavioral analyst from Taylorsville, open boxes of toys and teaching aids in the new "Launch Room," a classroom dedicated for young children with autism. The Shafer Center, a school for autistic children, relocated Aug. 30 to larger quarters on Business Center Drive in Reisterstown.

'I really wanted to have a program where the focus was on the kids...'

Helen Shafer,
founder of The Shafer Center

Most parents pay between \$20,000 and \$40,000 per year for the center's specialized services, she said.

"I think we are unique in

terms of the flexibility and adaptability we have within our programming," she said. "I really wanted to have a program where the focus was on the kids and the excellence in programming."

Program director Christine Accardo, who has been with the center since its inception, said the space will give the center an opportunity to serve more children and will be more flexible because there are different-sized rooms to suit different needs.

The center "has grown so much," she said. "It has been incredible, the amount of families that have come through."