

The Monmouth Journal

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New home to provide hope for the autistic



Volunteers offering their help to clear the property are Justin Einwechter (from left), 15, CBA freshman; George Allen, 16, of Middletown Scout Troop 32; Peter Gaffney Jr., 14, CBA freshman; Michael Chachura, 16, CBA junior and president of French Club; Conor Goetz, 15, CBA freshman; Allen Cuttle, 16, CBA Sophomore; Adam Kershner, 16, CBA sophomore and Peter Gaffney Sr. (kneeling). Photo by Rosemary Daniels • The Monmouth Journal

By Rosemary Daniels
The Monmouth Journal

MIDDLETOWN — The OASIS TRAIL Center is buzzing with activity, just eight short months after its purchase. When opened, the TRAIL center, a name which stands for "Transitional Residential Adult Independent Learning," will provide young autistic individuals (ages 18-27) with the opportunity to move out on their own and experience the world in the same way as their non-disabled peers. Located on Sleepy Hollow Road in Middletown, this farm setting will also provide vocational training and education in agriculture, food, and the environment.

The organization behind this effort is OASIS (Ongoing Autistic Success in Society), a non-profit organization founded in 2007, with the goal of promoting inclusion and acceptance of autistic individuals by the community. Led by organization president Mai Cleary, the group has made astounding progress in bringing the project to fruition.

OASIS brought together many organizations on the state, county, and local level in order to purchase the 25-acre, \$2.9 million property: Monmouth Conservation Foundation, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, NY/NJ Baykeepers and Middletown Township. The four-year effort culminated in the official purchase in August 2011.

As part of the deal, OASIS acquired the house on the property, formerly known as the Coe estate and seven surrounding acres. Middletown Township retains the remaining 18 acres for use as a park, thus expanding the township's preserved open space holdings. Monmouth County Foundation and the NY/NJ Baykeepers also accomplished their goals of helping to preserve wetlands and woodlands in the local area.

Once the property was acquired, there were still challenges. OASIS had to resolve environmental issues with the DEP related to the contamination of McClees Creek, an important tributary of the Navesink River which runs through the property. The property also had to be re-zoned from residential to "Therapeutic Residence." Variances had to be obtained, and the house had to be altered to meet the new zoning requirements for a multiple-unit residence.

The required structural changes were extensive. An internal sprinkler system had to be installed. The second floor had to be re-configured to allow for a central hallway, in order to meet fire codes. OASIS took advantage of the new design to create a second floor porch, which will contain an herb garden for the residents' use. Air conditioning had to be installed upstairs, as autistic individuals are very sensitive to temperature.

The house will be an historical gem once it has been refurbished. Although the old Coe Estate had never received a formal landmark designation, Lee Ellen Griffith, former director of the Monmouth County Historical Association visited the property, and said, "I was speechless and simply amazed when I saw this property that documented the intense significance of the Marquis de Lafayette's tour of the U.S. in 1824." Yet another place in which George Washington slept, the estate once hosted a ball which was attended by General Lafayette after the American Revolution. In preparation for this event, the ceiling of the main room was raised to create a more formal ballroom. Through the second floor today, you notice that the rooms have low ceilings and the windows start at floor level. Griffith continued, "To imagine that a Monmouth County resident would completely and extensively renovate his farmhouse to create a ballroom environment on the level of a French manor house in order to appropriately entertain the Marquis is simply extraordinary. The master craftsmanship of the plaster work adorning the ballroom implies that European craftsmen might have been brought in."

Continental Construction of Red Bank, has been instrumental in the changes and improvements made to the house. According to Amanda Doremus, project manager, they have been happy to provide time and materials at a substantially-reduced rate in order to make TRAIL a reality. Through Continental Construction's President, Frank Losavio's generosity, they have also provided Doremus' project management services at no cost to the organization. Doremus comes out some weekends on her own time to work with the other volunteers.

Doremus said, "Everybody loves working with Mai. It's a great project."

Many of Continental Construction's sub-contractors have gotten involved as well. Delta Heating and Cooling of Ocean was contracted to install air conditioning on the second floor, but then donated additional services like ductwork on the first floor, allowing for the entire house to be airconditioned at a future date. Eye Tile of Long Branch donated the cost of the labor when they installed bathroom tile. MMSI Electrical Contracting of Tinton Falls and Atlantic Highlands Plumbing and Heating also provided all of their services at reduced cost.

Other contractors have gotten involved. Absolutely Energized Solar (www.aesolar.com) donated solar panels so that TRAIL can start to produce some of its own energy. Mike Flynn of Flynn's Tree Service of Middletown has donated many hours to help clear parts of the property, and plant new landscaping.

"It's nice to see something like this take shape," he said. Cleary was in the process of persuading him to come back and help make picnic tables later in the spring. He told her, "I'll be back." Pat Mills and Connie Majeski of Byford and Mills in Little Silver donated their time to select paint colors that will be historically accurate in the 5,800-square-foot-home. Majeski said, "It's nice to see something that has such historical significance preserved."

Non-profits have also contributed. Hope for Children Foundation (www.hfcf.org) paid for a painter to assist with the massive painting chores. Rumson Garden Club will be creating a landscaping plan for the pool area, and they are holding a competition to find the best design. The club is also considering applying for a grant to build a geodesic greenhouse on the property. Eagle Scout candidate Graham

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Wade, of Locust, will refurbish the existing white picket fence and replace the missing portions, along with adding a gate. All of this work would not be possible without the legion of volunteers who visit the property. Liz O'Mara, an OASIS member, coordinates the process by managing their large volunteer database, reaching out to local schools and organizations, and sending out weekly notices about volunteer opportunities.

"Most of our volunteers come from the local high schools. We have had volunteers from Middletown North and South, CBA, RBC, Red Bank Regional, and Ranney," said O'Mara. On a recent volunteer day, several students from CBA were hard at work, clearing debris from the yard. Peter Gaffney Jr., a freshman at CBA, was accompanied by his father Peter Sr. Mr. Gaffney thought it was a great opportunity for the boys.

"In a small amount of time, you can really see a difference. We will definitely be back," Gaffney Sr. said.

A very special contributor has been Tony Sloane, 52, who describes himself as a "small farm infrastructure engineer." Not at all limited by his own Aspergers, he has been invaluable to the staff by planning out garden design, irrigation and plans for a deer fence. Cleary became involved with helping the autistic community after her son John, now 23, was diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum. In 2000, she and other parents started working with the Middletown Township Board of Education to enable the schools to better address the needs of a growing autistic population. The organization which they formed, IMPACT (Improving Middletown's Program for Autistic Children Together), was instrumental in having the board of education hire an autism coordinator, and produce annual autism awareness assemblies throughout the school system.

OASIS was the natural offshoot of IMPACT. Once autistic students "aged out" of the school system (public education is provided by the state up to age 21), they found there were no programs available to address the needs of autistic individuals. Cleary and her group now turned their attention to the young adults whose needs were not being met. Thus IMPACT OASIS was formed.

At the anticipated September 2012 opening, Cleary expects to welcome four full time residents to the OASIS TRAIL Center. The four-year co-educational program is run on a college-like timeframe, from September to May. During that time, the participants will adhere to a strict weekly schedule, which includes fitness, math and language skills, vocational training, social skills, and personal hygiene, while still leaving time for recreational activities. Residents will be expected to help with meal preparation and animal care. They will focus on how to grow food in the organic gardens and how to care for livestock, as they seek to create and maintain a sustainable farm. Once the TRAIL Center is up and running, they will focus on teaching these "students" how to grow food in the organic gardens and how to care for livestock. Cleary is planning on bringing chickens, goats, and even a couple of cows to the property. The staff will also work on social skills, hosting a formal tea each week in the main room, and encouraging group interaction.

The goal is to increase independence and functional communication, while exposing these men and women to different vocational opportunities. It is Cleary's hope to employ the students in the summer to continue to care for the gardens and the rest of the property. Residents of Middletown and neighboring towns between the ages of 18-27, who are on the autism spectrum and who are no longer in high school, are eligible. Applications can be found on their website www.impactoasis.com. Cleary encourages qualifying individuals in the local community to apply at their earliest convenience. One of the volunteers who attended Volunteer Day, Kristen Kiley from Aberdeen, plans to apply to be part of the program in September. Mom Suzanne says while Kristen has a job, she is bored with its repetitive nature, and looks forward to the chance to learn new skills at the TRAIL Center.

In addition to functioning as a nine-month transitional residence, OASIS plans to hold support group meetings throughout the year, and to offer a summer camp for younger children. Future plans may also include a sleepover camp for adolescents. They also want to interact with their surrounding community. Mai wants to invite people in frequently for "pizza days", and other events, which allow both the autistic and non-autistic communities to learn about each other.

House parents Lauren and Jerry Ryerson and a volunteer will comprise the on-site staff. Lauren, who is a special education teacher at Fairview Elementary School in Middletown, worked for several years with students with disabilities at Middletown North High School. She is excited at the prospect.

"I have worked with autistic children in a school setting. I am really looking forward to working in this environment," she said. The TRAIL Center hopes to welcome an additional four individuals in September 2013. IMPACT is the manager of the project and pays the employees out of its budget.

Recently, Middletown Mayor Anthony Fiore proclaimed April to be Middletown Autism Awareness Month, and noted that autism has become frequently diagnosed. (A recently released report by the CDC indicates that autism prevalence is now one in 88 nationally; one in 49 statewide.) He commended IMPACT OASIS for "spearheading awareness effort in order to educate parents, professionals, and our community about autism and its effects."

Cleary said, "I would really like to send a special thanks to honorary OASIS board member Nancy Mulheren and J.A.M. Anonymous Foundation. I feel so fortunate to work with the board members that we have. The hard work and dedication to this project is beyond compare. I think I can speak for our entire board in saying that we have been empowered by the constant stream of support from the community. We are also very much comforted by it. It is proof in the inherent goodness of people and shows us that our children will be loved and accepted, fulfilling our hopes and dreams for a brighter future for people with different abilities."

Upcoming events include a grand opening party on April 28 at 2 p.m., where the community will be invited in to enjoy music, eat homemade pizza, and see the remarkable renovation of the house and the property. OASIS will be registered at stores such as Bed Bath and Beyond if visitors would like to bring a "housewarming" donation. There will also be a golf tournament at Trump National Golf Club on June 14 from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. The center will also be holding volunteer days on April 10-12 from 9 a.m. -2 p.m., and on select weekends in April, May and June from 1-4 p.m.

For more information: www.impactoasis.com.

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APR 12 • Wonderfully written article! Wonderful cause and very inspiring to get involved with Oasis! A great opportunity for young adults who want to be part of society but don't have the necessary skills to feel comfortable.

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