

Autism school to celebrate new home

West County Times

January, 05, 2005

By: Mary Reiley

The A Better Chance School has been up and running for seven years, but now that teachers and students are settled into their new facility, an open house and dedication ceremony are planned for Thursday.

Principle Briggin has been with the school since it opened. It is a place where children and young adults who have been diagnosed with autism or a similar developmental disability can reach their full potential. Briggin's philosophy is to focus on positive learning and not the student's negative behaviors. "Some say it takes a lot of patience," Briggin said. "More importantly, it takes a lot of creativity and passion."

Students who do good work or behave appropriately in the classroom may get to spend time in the school's highly popular Sensory Zone, an occupational therapy room with large cushions, a swing and other intensive activity choices. "For them it's a therapy, but it's also a positive reinforcement," Briggs said. When Briggin started working with autistic children in 1972, on in 10,000 children were diagnosed with the disability.

Statistics now show one in 250 children have some degree of autism, she said. A nonpublic school, ages 8 through 22, who comes from throughout Contra Costa County, as well as Berkeley, San Francisco, Oakland, San Rafael, Castro Valley and Rohnert Park.

Most autistic children are served by their own school district, Briggin said, but ABC offers

specialized service for those who need more than their district can provide. ABC School is one of the many services provided by the California Autism Foundation, which also operates nine group homes; supported living services; educational, life skills and vocational programs for people up to age 59; a supported employment program; and transportation to and from school and work.

The school offers individualized education, plus speech, language and occupational therapy, and other social skills development "to help integrate our children back into the community," Briggins said.

The open house will be from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Thursday, and the ribbon cutting and dedication will be from 5 to 7 p.m. The school is at 4138 Lakeside Drive, Richmond. For more information, call 510-262-1500. Funding for the California Autism Foundation is through school districts, California's Regional Centers, grants and fund-raisers.

The next fundraiser will be a dinner, wine and chocolate celebration Feb. 12 at the foundation, 4075 Lakeside Drive, Richmond. Tennessee Titans defensive end Travis LaBoy, a graduate of Marin Catholic High School in San Rafael, will be honored at the dinner for his support of the foundation.

The deadline for the tickets is Feb. 9. The cost is \$100 per person. For tickets or information, call 510-758-0433, Ext.333.