

UPPER SOUTHAMPTON

# School for autistic celebrates first graduation

By MANASEE WAGH  
STAFF WRITER

Overwhelming odds can be just the right trigger for success.

Joanne Corless said she proved that to herself and her family after her son was diagnosed with a severe form of autism before he was 3.

A doctor told the family that they should put AJ in an institution because there was no way he would be able to function normally. Corless couldn't believe that. She said she found instructors who could work with kids with autism and founded the AJ Corless Foundation for Children with Autism. She later went on to open the Comprehensive Learning Center, a nonprofit private school for kids with autism.

After going through a year-long approval process with the state Department of Education, the licensed private academic school opened in September 2000 in Holland. It moved to Upper Southampton about two years ago. The pre-k to high school facility has 24 students. The facility is funded through tuition, fundraising, private donations and grants.

Now age 21, AJ was in cap and gown Tuesday to get his diploma as the school's first and only graduate. He plays the piano and works two part-time jobs. Soft-spoken, yet confident, AJ said he's about to start a third job this summer.

"I'm going to be an office



**AJ Corless is congratulated** by Cindy Murphy after his graduation ceremony Tuesday at the Comprehensive Learning Center in Upper Southampton. Corless, 21, is the first student to graduate from the school.

KIM WEIMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

assistant at Adelphi Research By Design in Doylestown," he said. "I learned how to do real math, and at my job, I learned how to pull invoices, type, complete bulk mail and enter information on Excel spreadsheets. I also started bank statement

reconciliation this year. I do a variety of clerical tasks. At home, I use a lot of living skills. I play the piano, iron clothes, do the trash, buy clothes online."

"I was fighting for my son's future," Corless said. "I wasn't

about to sit back and just accept less. He deserves quality education the same as my two typical kids do. All of these kids deserve it. They have a right to it."

People with autism spectrum disorder are often

## Want to know more?

Visit the website of the Comprehensive Learning Center at [www.clcschool.net](http://www.clcschool.net).

impaired in many functions, including expressive and receptive communication, social interaction, play, and self-help skills, according to the center's website. Licensed instructors use a method based on applied behavior analysis, a strategy designed to enhance independence and self-confidence. Academic and life skills are broken into smaller components and practiced over and over again. Teachers go to students' homes to work with their families as well.

Marita Williams, a trainer at the center, said: "We're really excited that (AJ is) as independent as he is. It's because of the staff's hard work and dedication to the program. He'll be in a good place next year. He'll be using skills he learned as well as acquiring new ones. We've given him the tools to do that."

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