

## School Helps Give Autistic Children A Future

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, April 23, 2015 4:30 pm



Tammy Hosbach, a teacher with the Comprehensive Learning Center in Upper Southampton, works on motivational skills with a student at the school on Thursday, April 23, 2015. The nonprofit program educates and trains individuals with autism.

As a pediatric oncology nurse, Joanne Corless knew how to advocate on behalf of children.

Two years into the life of her oldest child, that work paid off big-time.

When AJ Corless was diagnosed with autism, the prognosis was not good. “They told us he would be institutionalized,” she said. “It was clear they did not know how to work with kids with autism.”

That was in the early 1990s, when one in 10,000 children were diagnosed with autism. Today, she said, the numbers are one in 68.

In her zest to champion her son’s cause and help others facing a similar challenge, Corless created the [AJ Foundation For Children With Autism](#). The nonprofit’s mission is to support quality educational programs that are based on the principles of applied behavior analysis (ABA), a strategy designed to enhance independence and self-confidence.

She later went on to open the [Comprehensive Learning Center](#), located in Upper Southampton. The nonprofit private school for people with autism is now in its 15th year and serves 30 students ages 3 to 21.

Corless said her son didn’t talk and wouldn’t make eye contact before his ABA training. AJ, now 25 and the school’s first graduate, today has three part-time jobs.

“We’ve been so fortunate with the progress he’s made,” she said. “Everything he’s done they’ve taught him here.”

Amanda Flavell, the CLC’s program director, she said the school is achieving “very significant results” as students are often able to transition back to a regular school setting and hold jobs with little to no support.

The cost to educate a student at CLC is more than \$100,000 annually, Corless said, and tuition doesn’t cover the bill. To make up the difference, the foundation holds several fundraisers.

On Saturday, [Central Bucks CrossFit](#) in Warminster is hosting its second Amrap for Autism at 1800 Mearns Road. All proceeds go to the AJ Foundation. Last year, more than 100 Crossfit athletes participated.

AJ and Connor Feeney, a student at CLC, are among those competing.

“I’ve had the pleasure of training them a few times,” said Dan Clancy, a coach at the gym. “It’s the best part of my day. They teach me more than I teach them. They’re always happy. They always listen and do what they’re told. They don’t judge. They’re just caring, loving people.”

People with autism spectrum disorder are often impaired in many functions, including expressive and receptive communication, social interaction, play, and self-help skills, according to the center’s website. Academic and life skills are broken into smaller components and practiced over and over again, Corless said. Teachers go to students’ homes to work with their families as well.

Students learn work skills, including assembly of bulk mail, proper telephone use, entering data into spreadsheets, filing and copying. They also learn many life skills, including how to do household chores and take a shower by themselves.

During the six-hour school day, they learn regular subjects such as reading and math. There’s an indoor gym where children can learn to roller skate, play basketball and ride bikes.

“You can teach children with autism,” Corless said. “They have challenging behaviors that really impede them from learning. Any changes in routine can cause a tantrum. But when you get those behaviors under control, they can learn.”

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