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The ELIJA School: Empowering Long Island's Journey Through Autism

Levittown School Serves as a Model For Educating Autistic Children

By Rachel Shapiro

From Monday, April 5 through Friday April 9, volunteers from the community lent a helping hand to The ELIJA School in Levittown for Autism Awareness Week. They painted the inside and outside of the building, weeded the flowerbeds, planted flowers and removed clutter, all in the name of philanthropy and community building.

Debra Harris and Nicole Dibra founded The ELIJA School in 2006, a school dedicated to improving the quality of education for children with autism. The school, whose name stands for Empowering Long Island's Journey Through Autism, held its weeklong event to spruce up the building and grounds but also to connect with the community and reach out to residents.

"The whole purpose of this is to build bridges with the community," Harris said. "So we pounded the pavement and got the community involved."

Starbucks, Boy and Girl Scouts, Home Depot, Wal-Mart, Target, Division Avenue Deli and Two Brothers Pizza are just some of the businesses in the community that donated time, food and resources, Harris said. They're hoping to make the spruce-up an annual event.

The weeklong event served as an introduction to the school for some and a chance to know the school better for others.

Harris, also a mother of an 11-year-old autistic son in the school, said the school takes in children "that other schools give up on." Dibra's son is also an 11-year-old boy with autism.

When the two met several years ago, they were both very frustrated with the services their sons were getting.

They came across a lot of professionals from their own research, Harris said, and brought an autism expert to speak to them and their families. The number of people interested in hearing that



Girl Scouts and other volunteers plant flowers in the gardens at The ELIJA School in Levittown during Autism Awareness Week.

the two decided to bring in a speaker for a conference every month or so after that. Soon after, they started ELIJA Foundation in 2001 with the goal of educating parents about autism.

"We did a full-day conference where people were able to network with and create a database of people," Harris said.

In 2006 people suggested that Harris and Dibra open a school for autistic children, so they did.

Using Alpine Learning Group in New Jersey as their model, the two women consulted co-founder and Executive Director Dr. Bridget Taylor who they used as a consultant.

Mike Giangregorio is the president of ELIJA's school board and is also the father of Nicholas, a 9-year-old, non-verbal autistic boy. He said what he learned from Harris and Dibra helped him immensely with raising his son.

"I would not have been able to

them," he said.

The two women asked him to serve on the board and he agreed because of the commitment they made to his son.

"The public school system can't properly handle the kids; the ratio needs to be one to one," Giangregorio said. "There are children in here who have made remarkable improvements."

The school has 12 children and 14 teachers. The teaching is one-on-one with a couple of extra teachers on hand. There are four children to a classroom, four teachers and the children rotate through the teachers in that classroom.

The school requires their teachers to have at least a bachelor's degree, if not a master's, but more importantly, Harris said, is that they have had interaction with autistic kids, have a certain high energy personality, are willing to deal with challenging behaviors and are willing to learn.