

Coral Gables

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School helping solve mystery of autism one child at a time

BY LINDA FEFFERMAN

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have called autism a national public health crisis — its cause and cure remain unknown. According to the latest CDC statistics, Autism Spectrum Disorders are diagnosed in one in 150 children in the United States.

The Combating Autism Act (CAA), signed into law by President Bush in December 2006, authorized \$920 million in federal funding over the next five years to fight autism through biomedical research, surveillance, awareness and early identification.

However, since 1999, the Carrie Brazer Center for Autism & Alternative Approaches Inc., located at 7425 SW 42 St. in Miami, has played a significant role in the lives of more than 250 children by providing a place for children with autism and other developmental delays to learn, to interact, to communicate and to have fun.

The program consists of a highly structured, consistent, behavior-based instruction combined with opportunities to generalize new skills and behaviors through participating in community-based outings, relying solely on the principles of positive reinforcement.

The center is open six days a week, 50 weeks a year, providing a full day school and a full range of therapies, including behavioral, cognitive, speech, music, and occupational therapy. A "Transition to Adulthood" program is offered for older students to develop life skills such as job training, job interviewing, cooking and laundry, and participating on outings to practice using public transportation. Job placement is available for the children who successfully complete this program.

On Saturdays as well as most holidays and teacher workdays, the center is open for field trips to local attractions including Miami Metrozoo, bowling, horseback riding, swimming with dolphins and other fun-filled locations. During winter, spring and summer breaks from the regular school calendar, the center operates a Day Camp which includes activities at the Biscayne

Executive director Carrie Brazer and David Lawrence Jr., chair of the Children's Trust, observe teachers' aides Fredy Pabon and Guillermo Queris work on the Chat PC with students.



Nature Center in Key Biscayne and stimulating field trips. After school programs also are available at the Carrie Brazer Center.

The State of Florida, through the McKay Scholarships for Children with Disabilities Program, provides subsidies for eligible students to attend the day school. The center accepts Medicaid and private insurance as full payment for all therapies. Out of school programs are generously funded by the Children's Trust, an independent special district of Miami Dade County committed to funding programs that offer the highest possible quality services, with the goals of implementing best practices and improving the lives of children and families in the community.

Currently, through a generous grant by the Children's Trust, the center has purchased 11 augmentative communication devices. The "Chat PC-M3 is an essential tool for children who cannot speak to assist them in communicating their wants

and needs. This powerful palm-top computer is intended for individuals who primarily use symbols for communication. This model has all the features necessary to use and create vocabulary sets using symbols and photographs.

The device also allows for spelling of words and phrases and provides synthesized speech with a choice of over five different female/male "voices." This innovative device will allow the child with autism void of oral language an opportunity of a lifetime to communicate with others that may not know him or sign language.

"As you know, the Chat PC was introduced into Jonathan's life in 2006. As a result, for the first time in 19 years, Jonathan has a voice," said one parent. "It truly has been a blessing to him and allows him to communicate with others who do not know him. My only regret is that it was not available when he was a lot younger. I truly believe it will be a life-changing tool for the younger chil-

dren at the center who do not already have one."

These computers will enable children who have never spoken to communicate with their families. The Carrie Brazer Center for Autism & Alternative Approaches Inc. is one of the few centers in the area to implement this innovative program for autistic children and offers training to the parents as well.

The ultimate goal is for the current research to provide a cause and a cure for autism. In the meantime, the Carrie Brazer Center will continue to enhance the quality of life, stimulate and educate children with autism and other developmental delays all year round in a warm, friendly, nurturing environment.

For information about the Carrie Brazer Center, visit the website at <www.cbc4autism>, call 305-262-5999 or send email correspondence to <cbrazer@cbc4autism.org>.