

# FOCUS MATTERS

FOCUS works to improve the quality of life for individuals and families on the Autism Spectrum

Because of your support, some of this year's highlights include:

- ◆ Governor Rell visits FOCUS to sign important Autism bills
- ◆ Young Adult Services was started in November with a Therapeutic Supportive Housing Group Home that now has 3 clients ages 18-25. This was made possible through funding from DMHAS.
- ◆ The Spectrum Unplugged Panel spoke to Rep. Chris Murphy and other politicians in Washington, DC
- ◆ The Spectrum Unplugged Panel presented 14 times, to over 1,000 people including some from other countries
- ◆ Collaboration with the Wilderness School
- ◆ J. Walton Bissell Foundation gave \$10,000 for scholarships & the Hartford Foundation For Public Giving will be giving \$40,000+ for a hard earned technology grant
- ◆ FOCUS Festival for Autism was a free day of old-fashioned fun for kids and families thanks to our sponsors, donors, and volunteers!

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Dear Friends of FOCUS,

We have had an exciting year filled with organizational growth and many memorable highlights. On July 24, 2008 FOCUS hosted Governor Rell and other state officials in a ceremony to sign the state Autism Insurance Bill. In April of this year six members of the Spectrum Unplugged Panel went to Washington, DC to speak with Rep. Chris Murphy and an autism cohort concerning the issues associated with "life on the Spectrum". The Therapeutic Group Home residents are thriving and the program has now been open for over a year. Also we have opened a Therapeutic Supportive Housing Group Home for 3 young adults on the Spectrum, which begins to actualize our dream of creating an integrated continuum of care for children, adolescents and young adults. In June 2008 we held the first FOCUS Festival For Autism, a free day of old-fashioned fun for kids and families. Please read the newsletter for the "rest of the story" on these heartwarming events.

We are especially grateful to all of you who have continued to believe in our mission, support our current programs and our dreams for the future. We are the "little engine that could" and we keep on track because of your ongoing generosity and commitment to FOCUS.

However, there is ever more to be done, and we ask that you please continue to support FOCUS programs. Your support will allow us to continue to expand our services and to train others to do what we do so well-teach individuals on the Autism Spectrum to be the best that they can be.

Respectfully,  
Donna Swanson, MSN, CS, APRN  
Executive Director

## Wishes Do Come True:

### J. Walton Bissell Foundation Grant

The spirits of many students were lifted this summer thanks to a \$10,000 grant awarded to FOCUS from the J. Walton Bissell Foundation. The grant allowed FOCUS to scholarship over 10 students for full or partial week participation in the Summer Program. Students were chosen based upon their individual family needs and the majority of them would not have otherwise been able to attend the program.

The Summer Program has grown over the years and the students involved truly flourish socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. The structured routine of the social program supports individual needs and allows children to maintain a schedule during the summer. In addition, the nature of the program provides priceless opportunities for social interaction with peers on the Autism Spectrum and well-trained Direct Care Staff. This year the Wilderness School has been added to the schedule. The weekly visit has been an amazing opportunity for our students and staff to experience nature as well as practice various life and interpersonal skills.

The Bissell Foundation has made wishes come true this summer for many of our students and families. The cheerful laughter and bright smiles we see each morning assure that memories are being made that will last a lifetime. Thank you from the FOCUS family!



## FOCUS Hosts Governor Rell Signing the Autism Insurance Bill

FOCUS Alternative Learning Center proudly hosted the monumental signing of the Autism Insurance Bill by Governor M. Jody Rell on July 24, 2008. State representative, Kevin Witkos helped organize the event and joined Donna Swanson, Executive Director in welcoming Governor Rell to FOCUS.

Over 200 guests came to show their support despite the rainy day/flood warning forecasts...this was a proud day for FOCUS and the Autism community and Governor Rell promised to be there "rain or shine"! The signing of the bill will have a huge impact for Connecticut families as the Substitute House Bill #5696 allows insurance companies to cover physical, speech and occupational therapy to children and young adults on the Autism Spectrum.



intuitively felt the pride each FOCUS student radiated and commented that this was the "greatest gift". Prayers have been answered for hundreds of Connecticut families. For years, families have fought for services and advocated for their children with little or no support. Thank you Governor Rell, for making this dream a reality.



The audience, crowded under a large tent, was captivated as Donna Swanson read the heart-wrenching letter written by student Alex Cable. In the letter Alex expressed his personal struggle with Autism, "...when I was nine years old, I said I hated having Autism.

People didn't understand me, but I didn't understand them either. It was like being stuck in a daydream. How would you like to live in a world where no one understands you? It's lonely and scary! You really don't have any friends". His letter goes on to say that he is in the right school now where there "aren't any bullies" and that he has "his FOCUS program to make friends and have fun". "Now I like having Autism because people understand me and know how to help". Alex is now looking towards the future, "My life is better, but every day I worry about growing up". FOCUS worries as well as Alex and that is why it is so important for all of us to continue to fight for services for people of all ages with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

As promised, the Governor further demonstrated her kind-hearted nature by retreating inside FOCUS to speak with the children from the Extended Day Program, as well as adolescents from the Group Home and Young Adult Services who wanted their voices heard. They all gathered around her with anticipation and they shared their high point and low point for life on the Autism Spectrum as well as their delightful personalities. The Governor gently acknowledged the struggles that they and their families face each day. She recognized the vast social, behavioral, and emotional accomplishments the FOCUS students displayed through personal interaction with them. She

## 2008 FOCUS Festival For Autism

The traditional "FOCUS Festival For Autism", previously known as the "FOCUS Funfest", was another success! Despite the heat and humidity, over 300 people attended the Festival, including FOCUS families and staff, vendors, and families from all over the state with children on the Autism Spectrum.



The day was designed for families to let their kids "just be kids". Needless to say, the dunk tank, Sprinkles Soft Serve Ice Cream and the Tulmeadow Farms ice cream sandwiches were a big hit!

Six years ago, FOCUS began the festivities on a small scale. Since then, various vendors, events and traditions have been integrated. The FOCUS Festival For Autism 2008 featured the annual pet parade, pony rides, dunk tank, bounce house, face painting as well as live entertainment by Sweetheart Mountain. In past years, the festival was a fundraiser. This year, games and events were free and operated by FOCUS staff from all three FOCUS Programs who willingly donated their time to make this day possible. Prizes were awarded to everyone for participation. In addition, a silent raffle included an array of prizes donated by various businesses from surrounding towns. Adam K, from our Therapeutic Supportive Housing program worked very hard to set up the Festival and even designed a solar powered cash register for the event! Donations and sponsors were very generous and truly appreciated. They helped make the day a success! (please see the enclosed insert for our donors and sponsors).

Save the date for next year, **Saturday June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009!** If you are interested in donating, being a sponsor, or volunteering in next year's festival, please contact **Jamie Cohen** at (860) 693-8809. Help us make this Festival for Autism a memorable event for years to come!



## Spectrum Successes

For the adolescent boys in our Therapeutic Group Home the journey can be difficult. Many of our boys have long histories of institutionalization and are forced to confront some difficult personal issues. Like most clinical programs our home focuses on individual treatment plans and the setting and achieving of short-term and long-term goals as one way to help overcome these obstacles and learn tools for their future. For Mike (age 15), who is now our senior Shannon House resident, setting and achieving goals is taken seriously. Mike has a unique way of identifying the issues he needs to work on and is able to articulate them clearly. He is also quite upfront regarding his road to realizing these goals. "It can be bumpy!"

Mike is now a FOCUS Counselor In Training (CIT) and in preparing for this new role he was able (all on his own) to identify the following as his goals:

1. I will control my anger.
2. I will keep my boundaries.
3. I will work on listening to staff during my video games and TV.
4. I will work on using appropriate language.
5. I will work on time management.
6. I will work on talking about my feelings.
7. I will work on starting any activity so I don't get bored.
8. I will control my energy.
9. I will make good choices while I am angry.
10. I will work on my verbal boundaries.
11. I will do the activity even if I don't want to.

And guess what? Mike is doing a fabulous job with each and every one of those goals. He is doing so well that he recently asked to speak with the Executive Director about "his future with FOCUS, both short-term and long-term". Mike stated "he is in this to the end and wants a job at FOCUS when he is ready for it, even if that is not until he is 21 years old". This is what a continuum of care provides to these children—the hope of a future and a sense of belonging to the FOCUS community, where everyone is valued and understood. Keep up the hard work Mike! We are proud of you!

## A Professional's Testimonial: FOCUS Summer Program Reflection

By: Irene Urko

With many years of experience both working in a public school as Director of Guidance and summer camping programs in Connecticut and New Hampshire, this was my first experience working at a summer program for children (ages 6-18) with Autism. I have gained a new respect for the highly trained professionals who are caring individuals and can reach children with Autism, including the hard-to-reach children. Seeing the understanding staff make a difference in their summer experience and lives has touched my heart.

The children at The FOCUS Summer Program were able to experience the classic summer joys of swimming, various indoor and outdoor games, wilderness activities such as canoeing, rope climbing, mountain climbing, nature walks, and field trips to The Gran-Val Scoop Ice Cream Shop, McDonald's and tag sales. Smiling, happy, bright, and creative children participated in the program with ease and had fun interacting with each other. Through new "Challenge by Choice" fun and exciting adventures, everyone uncovered hidden strengths and abilities.

The FOCUS Summer Program is an inclusive, nonjudgmental and child-focused program that allows all children to thrive as individuals. As an educational professional, it was gratifying to see children develop their strength of character, confidence, build friendships



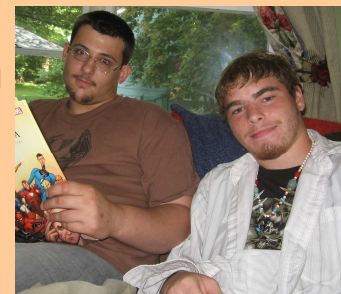
and grow by challenging themselves in unique environments of indoor and outdoor recreation. Creativity, respect, safety, positive behaviors and relationships were encouraged daily—and mostly to have fun!

## The Miracles Keep on Coming...

### Three Young Men on the Autism Spectrum Find Hope and Opportunity – and FOCUS Helped!

As a huge part of our effort to increase our level of service to young adults on the Autism Spectrum, we are pleased to announce the opening of a Therapeutic Supportive Housing Group Home in November for three males ages 18-25. The State of CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) fund this clinically intensive program.

They are learning life skills, vocational skills, and have become incorporated in the FOCUS community. At last these young men feel they belong somewhere and they are thriving as a result. One young man stated that the day he moved in to the group home was the happiest day of his life. It is a chance for them to practice being a young adult and receive a lot of guidance and mentoring along the way. Good job guys!



## The Wilderness School: "Challenge By Choice"

"Fred...French Fry"! Laughter roars as the FOCUS staff assigns silly nicknames for each other while attending the staff in-service at the Wilderness School. The Wilderness staff prepared an educational and fun filled day for staff that only touched upon the priceless opportunities the FOCUS students would experience this summer.

The Wilderness School is located in beautiful East Hartland, CT and has facilitated support services for children and adolescents for 34 years. Each Wednesday morning for six weeks, our students pour out of the vans with excitement and the fun begins. The Wilderness program incorporates the teaching of countless social skills in each activity, including self-awareness, interpersonal skills, teamwork and compromise. Each activity begins and ends in a large circle, encouraging the opportunity for the students to express their feelings, both positive and negative.



"Challenge by choice" is the underlying theme of the camp, however, the break area is usually sparsely populated. Within the first week, students participated in the low ropes course requiring them to trust peers to support them on beams and ropes. In the following weeks, activities involved a canoe trip, rainy day scavenger hunt

and various teamwork activities. In addition to all the fun, students are learning practical life skills. Safety is discussed weekly as well as respecting nature and encouraging students to widen their comfort circle to try new things. We are very proud of all our students' accomplishments and thrilled with the addition of the Wilderness School to our summer program. Our special thanks go to Tom Dyer and Kim Thorne-Kaunelis for making this possible.

For more information on the Wilderness School please visit this website:  
[www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2539&q=313850](http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2539&q=313850)

### How FOCUS Helps:

Treatment for Autism Spectrum Disorders is scarce. FOCUS offers a cost-effective, least restrictive, community based program that works. Around the state people are impressed with how related our kids are and the insights that they share. The skills they learn translate across homes, schools, and communities.

Our **vision of the future** is to be able to reach more kids and families throughout the state.

### Some of our goals are to:

- ❖ Develop a Training Institute to train others on our Model of Care™
- ❖ Continue to increase awareness on our Model of Care™. It works!
- ❖ Continue to expand our Young Adult Services such as: Supportive Housing, Supplemental Employment, Transitional Living Facilities
- ❖ Develop our own School that specializes in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

### How you can help:

**We are busting at the seams and really need your help!**

FOCUS has grown and we are in need of a building expansion. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is willing to help but we need to match funds. Please help us now!

Your tax-deductible dollars can help us realize our vision in providing the services desperately needed for the 1 out of 150 individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

It's now easy and safe to donate at:  
[www.focusalternative.org/donations.htm](http://www.focusalternative.org/donations.htm)

Why should you give to FOCUS? Because with your help, FOCUS can continue working to improve the quality of life for individuals (and their families) on the Autism Spectrum.

