

Winter 2010

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

- 10th Anniversary!
- FOCUS On Art
- Our Day Program Works!
- The Spectrum Unplugged Panel Rocks!
- FOCUS on Autism TV available on YouTube
- FOCUS Improves Plans In The Making
- FOCUS Needs
- Please Help Us Reach Our Dreams

Mark your calendar:

FOCUS on FOLK
March 6, 2010

10th Anniversary Celebration
April 30, 2010

Festival For Autism
June 5, 2010



We will see you there!

FOCUS Alternative Learning Center
126 Dowd Avenue
PO Box 452
Canton, CT 06019
860-693-8809

www.focusalternative.org



FOCUS MATTERS

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

Come Celebrate 10 Years of FOCUS

FOCUS is entering its 10th year as a non-profit organization and we hope that all of you who have supported FOCUS during these 10 years will come and join in the celebration of this milestone on April 30th at La Trattoria Restaurant in Canton, from 6:30 to 8:30 pm. This event is one of many events that FOCUS is planning for our 10 year celebration and we will be sure to send out "save the date" flyers. **Truly without your faith and support in FOCUS, none of this would be possible!**



Other events include a FOCUS on Folk concert on March 6th, also at La Trattoria Restaurant, from 7-9pm. The music will be provided by our very own talented Caroline Jestin and her group, "Another One Night Stand".... so come on down for some good old-fashioned fun and tunes. We hope to see you there!

FOCUS on ART

Many have been amazed by the intriguing artwork that now decorates the entrance of our building. Three talented students currently have their artwork displayed and have received countless compliments on their ability. A large number of our students are extremely talented artists whom we have long admired. Fred Evans, our Associate Director, was especially impressed and felt the artwork should be enjoyed by everyone!

Ben Carroll was our first artist displayed. Ben began his life in an orphanage in Bulgaria until he was adopted by a loving family. He was diagnosed with Autism and spent countless sessions in Speech and Occupational Therapy while being homeschooled. When he was 10 years old he was featured on the cover of the *Journal Inquirer*, which told the story of his life and advertised his one-man art show. Ben currently attends the FOCUS Extended Day Treatment Program and has made immense progress with his social skills. We are proud of Ben in so many ways, and thank him for sharing his beautiful artwork. Ben will also be featured in an art exhibit at the Charter Oak Cultural Center from March 4th to 26th. The Gallery opening is on March 4th from 5:30 to 7:30pm. For more information go to www.charteroakcenter.org.

We will continue to rotate the artwork of our students over the next few months. Currently Mary Bresee and Ana McGlory are also featured, along with Ben.

Although a sight to see, it is more than just art. The majority of us know how to express ourselves through our words and emotions. This helps to stabilize us and get us through hard times. For those on the Autism Spectrum this is often difficult and sometimes impossible. FOCUS artists use their artwork to communicate their feelings and to express their emotions. Let their gifts inspire you!



The Day Program Works!

Our Day Program is a wonderful work in progress and is successfully meeting the complex needs of 8 students from 8:30am-3:00pm. Our kids feel safe and happy; they are willing to face the obstacles that have made a traditional setting a non-viable option at this time in their lives. The Day Program is embedded in our clinical Extended Day Treatment Program and it continues to grow and evolve as we add new students. This program admits kids that are having a very difficult time being maintained in their current school system because of their intense social and emotional needs. Each new student brings their own creativity and makes the classroom shine even more!

In addition to their regular work the students take a Tuesday trip to the Canton Library to choose new books to read for the week. We have also begun a Home Economics program that involves basic cooking classes. The students have baked amazing treats, including M&M cookies, homemade pretzels and cake. They choose the recipes, follow the directions and add the ingredients independently, with some staff guidance. They have been proud to share their treats with their friends at FOCUS and with their families. Being able to prepare food is an essential life skill. Students are also learning to be responsible for cleaning up afterwards as well.

An essential piece of our Day Program is the social interaction our students receive. We have activities planned throughout the day that help in creating friendships and teaching social skills. Each day there is a morning meeting where daily goals are set, several sensory breaks, lunch bunch, and a structured social activity. Clinical and Direct Care Staff are an essential component for facilitation of interactions and activities.



The Spectrum Unplugged Panel ROCKS!

Our “panel of experts” is more in demand than ever, especially by school systems. With 1 in 100 children being diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, awareness of this epidemic is increasing. School systems are now looking for the panel to help educate staff and to increase the understanding of staff and students alike of this rising problem. As Stephen Shore says, “When you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism”.... and that is what is at the heart of understanding these complex individuals and where the panel can really make a difference.



School can often be a difficult experience for those with Autism Spectrum Disorders and the more we are able to teach the easier the school day can be for all involved. It has been our experience that knowledge and awareness are key to breaking down barriers and promoting acceptance and understanding.

State Senator John Kissell and State Representative Matt Conway recently attended a panel presentation at Suffield High School. It was suggested that our panel present to the State Legislature to increase awareness of the myriad of issues associated with having an Autism Spectrum Disorder. FOCUS believes that education and increased awareness are essential to the development of increased services in CT and that there is no better way to do this than to attend a panel and listen to our “panel of experts!”

For the first time, the panel was asked to speak to 25 Residential Assistants at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts and they were amazed at the panel’s honesty and forthrightness, especially around school experiences and bullying. One young man stated, “I wish I had learned about this when I was younger as it would have made me a kinder peer.” Another student defined it as a “life changing experience!” The panel members are committed to help change the face of autism and make a difference, one day at a time.

FOCUS Improves!



Because of your ongoing support and generosity, we have been able to make some essential improvements to our building in Canton to better accommodate our expanding Day Program.

We have all worked very hard these past few months to make great things happen inside and out!

We have a brand new roof and some new windows thanks to [Mike Weik](#), "Home Improvement Guru and Big

[Fan of FOCUS.](#)" Over the years Mike has tirelessly poured his heart and soul (along with his many talents) to make FOCUS a safe and beautiful place where our kids can grow and thrive. We also have a new swing set that our kids of all ages enjoy regardless of the weather!

Inside, we have reorganized each room to better fit our students' needs in both the Day Program and the After School Program. We are enjoying new wood floors and a wonderful "design on a dime" makeover that includes some new furniture as well as repurposing some of the old for a comfortable and inviting place to learn about life and make friends.



The most recent and most appreciated addition by the students is the new Wii, which helps to keep them fit and entertained. Prior to our December break many of the kids were asking if we might "please get a Wii."

Well.... wishes do come true and that is evident by the fun they have doing all the games and activities!

The classroom has undergone improvements to better facilitate the various learning styles. We have added new furniture and rearranged the room for our increasing number of students. The classroom has a morning meeting board and bulletin boards displaying student work. Walking into the classroom has a whole new feeling. The hard work and dedication displayed by our Head Teacher, Cheryl Fritz, and our Milieu Coordinator, Jamie Cohen have made the classroom successful. Academics, or "epidemics," as one of our kids calls it, can be very frustrating and challenging for individuals on the Autism Spectrum and our main focus is to try and teach them how to manage their frustrations and embrace their learning differences. The needs are great and we are looking to expand the program over the next few years. As we grow, we are careful to maintain our FOCUS philosophy, utilizing Milieu Therapy to address the social, emotional, and academic needs of those who are as we say, "creatively wired and socially challenged."

See Us on YouTube

The Nutmeg TV shows that were produced by and starred FOCUS kids and staff are now being aired on YouTube. To access these finely crafted shows go to YouTube and search for [FOCUSonAutismTV](#). Each show is on a different subject and addresses some aspects of life lived with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

This was a tremendous undertaking but we loved doing the shows and making a difference. We have received a tremendous amount of positive feedback and will be starting a new taping session in March.

Greg Pillon, the cameraman for the show as well as employee at FOCUS, said "I had a blast working with our FOCUS Panel and the Nutmeg crew! It was awesome to see how great the panel members did in raising awareness about the Autism Spectrum. Every panel member had something unique and special to add to every episode. I am very excited for season two!! Stay tuned!!"

Below is feedback we received from YouTube users:

Holidaytracker: "I really enjoy watching these videos; I can relate to the feelings of all of these people and the topics discussed. I feel good hearing the perspective of these people on what they go through because I can relate. Keep making more episodes."

superautism: "I love these videos, please keep making them talking about these issues will hopefully bring them more attention, and eventually increase understanding, and help make the world a better place for people on the spectrum :)"



Cast and crew of FOCUS On Autism

PLANS IN THE MAKING



We are hosting three free Open Houses. The first was **FOCUS ON TRANSITION** on Wednesday, January 27th, from 6:30pm-8:30pm at the Community Center in Canton. Carol Barans and Donna Swanson addressed "Transition Services for Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum".

The second Open House is planned for educators and schools in March, and the third Open House is for state agencies and is planned for June.

We also will announce the dates for a 10th Anniversary Celebration Day for all of our kids in April and a family and staff team-building day in May. WOW.... we are a work in progress!!

Please save the Date of June 5th for this year's **FOCUS Festival for Autism!!** We will have the festival at Mill's Pond in Canton same as last year and this year's Festival will be bigger and better than ever! The event is free for the children and families and over 300 people happily attended last year's day of fun.

Festivities include the petting zone, face painting, raffles, bounce house, rock wall and pony rides. In addition, the Lion's Club will be selling hotdogs, hamburgers and veggie burgers.

We will see you there! Help us make the FOCUS Festival for Autism 2010 as great as it has been the past seven years! If you would like to volunteer or make a donation for the raffle, please contact Jamie Cohen at (860) 693-8809 (ext. 18).



FOCUS Needs

We are looking to borrow an electric keyboard with a sustaining pedal for one night only during our 10th anniversary celebration on April 30th. If you have one to donate, please contact Caroline Jestin at 860-674-0099 or 860-810-0159.

We are also in need of a durable and portable Basketball Hoop at our Extended Day Treatment Program. **Durable** is the key word here! If you have one to donate please contact Eric in our business office at 860-693-8809.



PLEASE HELP US REACH OUR DREAMS

Our dream is the further expansion of our programs and teaching others about our successful Milieu Therapy based Model of Care©. We have seen tremendous progress in the clients of all of our programs and see them thriving emotionally and socially, very possibly for the first time in their lives. We all want to belong and to be understood. **Please continue to support our dreams! Because of YOU, we have achieved so much, but as always, there is so much more to do.**