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## New program for autism already making a difference



Volunteer Wendi Smith and her daughter Kendall Gilbert, 6, and Frankie Suppa, 9, paint and decorate wood blocks during a visual art program at the Seven Hill Center Aug. 6. The program is crafted to bring about therapeutic change for children in the autism spectrum.

By **SANDY PHANEUF**, Valley Breeze Staff Writer

WOONSOCKET - The use of visual art is a widely accepted means to help bring about therapeutic change for children in the autism spectrum.

But Nancy Wilson wasn't aware of that when she first embarked on a mission to help change her community.

Wilson also didn't realize that a project she'd nearly abandoned would quickly become a rewarding focal point for her own life's journey - combining years of varying in-school learning and life experience. Armed with the knowledge she'd garnered from the Parent Leadership Training Institute - a new city program teaching parents how to become more active in their communities - Wilson only knew that she wanted to help children.

She decided to try the class, not really realizing what I would create for the community



of Woonsocket, nor the amazing networking opportunities available," she said.

Now, Wilson has started the Kids Count Project, a new program at Seven Hills that combines art activities with relaxation in hopes of helping youth with the disorder to enhance both their self-awareness and self-control. Only three weeks into the class, Wilson has already seen results.

"It's been really rewarding and exciting so far," she said.

Wilson started the program with the help of Seven Hills Human Resource Generalist Mike Shugrue. The pair let parents know about the drop-in class, and drew in many participants in the first week. Their first project, creating a new sign for the Seven Hills Community Garden, is now well underway.

"I'm learning as I go but I already feel like there's no limitation on the artwork I can do with these kids," Wilson said. "It's almost like I need to just step out of the way and give them canvasses."

After each class, the kids take part in a relaxation exercise, an element that has also shown quick results. The idea, Wilson said, is that the children will be able to learn the mind-body relaxation techniques and use them in their daily lives.

In the first week, Wilson met Cody, a 7-year-old boy who has to use a computer to talk. During the relaxation session, the young man seemed restless, squirming throughout the lesson.

"I was worried if he really got it," Wilson said.

After the class was over, however, Cody yawned, and to Wilson's surprise began doing yoga poses before falling asleep.

"His mom said he was a lot calmer afterwards and she was absolutely thrilled," Wilson said.

In her second week, the entire class, including two 7-year-olds, a 5-year-old and a 12-year-old, were still for an extended period after the exercise.

Ironically, Wilson had no personal experience with autism disorder before running the class.

"I was surprised myself that the group of children I chose were the autistic spectrum," she said.

Wilson originally hatched the idea as a means to help children with Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder.

"I have heard moms express a lot of frustration in trying to have their children's needs met who were diagnosed with ADHD and thought my idea would serve as an addition to the current options of out of school programs available locally," she explained.



When she began to research her idea, she learned that ADHD was classified under the umbrella of disorders in the Autistic spectrum. At first, Wilson became overwhelmed.

"I put it on a back burner in my mind," she said.

While attending an unrelated resource fair at Thundermist Heath Center weeks later, however, she learned that Seven Hills was looking for help. She contacted Shugrue, who she'd met previously through PLTI.

"Mike has been instrumental in making this happen," Wilson said.

To her own surprise, Wilson has been able to put much of her background to work in the program. Art was her first passion and the mother of two worked briefly as a teacher before starting a career in jewelry design that lasted nearly a decade. She's since received education in healing massage arts and polarity, a therapy used to encourage self healing.

"This project seems to combine everything I've ever learned," she said. "This has been like the magical journey."

For their next project, Wilson hopes to have the kids create flag banners to be donated to the 125th Anniversary Block Party celebration Aug. 29. The children, she hopes, will draw out ideas of what they would like to see happen in downtown Woonsocket and answers could vary from answers like "love" to "a supermarket." The banners, she hopes, will be sewn into a cord rope and hung on Main Street

"We'd like to bring some focused energy into the revitalization effort," Wilson said.

The program runs every Tuesday evening from 4:30 to 6 p.m. at the Homestead building on Fabian Street and is open to the public. For more information, interested parties are asked to contact Wilson at Nancy [nanwil22@gmail.com](mailto:nanwil22@gmail.com).

The class is just one of her planned contributions to the city. Wilson is also working on The Community, a resource guide for Woonsocket children and families. A website full of information on events and opportunities for kids and their parents is expected to go live later this month, prior to the start of school.

And she's just one of eight inspired parents that graduated from the PLTI program last June.

"PLTI has given me an understanding of myself, family, community and government and the integral relationship these components share in creating my environment," she said.