

Autism school seeks new chapters

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A Solvang-based school for teens and young adults on the autism spectrum is seeking to expand its educational and social model to other communities.

Hidden Wings, founded by the Rev. Jim and Dr. Julia Billington, began in 2008 as an experiment that erupted from their frustration that little higher education or vocational training was available for two of their sons who are on the autism spectrum.

The nonprofit Hidden Wings has become a comprehensive scholastic and social outlet that includes digital imagery courses, extensive outdoor education with kayaking and hiking, language and math courses, drum therapy, yoga and life skills.

Now the couple is in the final stages of securing a “group inclusion” plan, so other parents and groups can form a Hidden Wings chapter, or affiliate. The Billingtons have created a how-to manual and materials for potential chapters, Rev. Billington explained.

Hidden Wings, located at 517 Atterdag Rd., is also modifying its curriculum to bring preexisting, underserved community members and groups – such as those with disabilities and special needs attending adult day centers – into its programming, he added.

At the same time, Rev. Billington announced a capital campaign for a new “home base” in the Santa Ynez Valley, where the attendees can ride horses, do organic gardening, participate in ceramics and woodwork, and also have access to Solvang for jobs.

It is hoped, he added, that if the home base, or integrated community is built, it



COURTESY PHOTOS

Rev. James and Dr. Julia Billington hope to expand their Solvang-based Hidden Wings school.

will be a meeting place for other chapters. Hidden Wings accepts no government funding and relies solely on contributions and modest tuition, Rev. Billington said.

The new affiliates would operate under the Hidden Wings nonprofit status, but be responsible for its own budget, programs, board of directors and fundraising, according to the Billingtons.

In 2015, Hidden Wings was spotlighted during the Grateful Dead “Fare Thee Well” summer tour and again last July. Several of those involved in the nonprofit

attended the concerts as special guests of drummer Mickey Hart, a longtime supporter and catalyst in Hidden Wings’ therapeutic drumming program.

The Billingtons said they’ve had requests for chapter affiliates from Valencia to San Diego so far.

“These new students will benefit from Hidden Wings’ effective transitioning of youth with autism into productive and fulfilling adulthood based on gifts, not deficits,” Rev. Billington said. “Fall classes will include social and vocational skills training, including woodworking, gardening, art and therapeutic drumming.”

One of Hidden Wings’ alumni, Kevin Hosseini, is exhibiting his art around the nation, and other students have secured jobs and gone to college. One student had a job as an online animator for Disney Studios in Burbank and one young man published a book.

“Hidden Wings is a great adventure in learning about the wonderful gifts of those with autism, and how these gifts can translate into fulfilling lives in society,” Rev. Billington added. “The challenge of replicating Hidden Wings is daunting and exciting.”

According to most recent CDC data, 1 in 68 children are born with autism and 80 percent of those diagnosed aren’t yet adults.

For more information, visit hiddenwings.org

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An artist’s rendition shows aerial view of a proposed Hidden wings complex.