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Autism nonprofit forms partnership with local adult day programs

by Gina Pothoff
Contributing Writer

Careful hands used paper towels to glide mineral oil over the sanded edges of wooden lounge chairs outside Hidden Wings in downtown Solvang.

A handful of eager students happily placed mineral oil finish on the chairs, which served as part of a woodworking project for the autism nonprofit organization that was founded in 2009.

As they worked, they chatted about movies they've watched, a bird house one of them built, and community college courses they're tackling online.

The talk came easily, a by-product of a new partnership between Hidden Wings and PathPoint of Santa Barbara County, another nonprofit group.

For the first time this fall, Hidden Wings, which has traditionally served lower-to middle-functioning autistic youth, has opened its doors to a new population of students – adults with autism and other developmental disabilities who spend their time in community day programs.

The new workshops focus on strengthening social and vocational skills through fun activities such as woodworking, gardening, cooking, yoga, art, music and other special projects.

"Socialization is a big thing," said Joe Sanguinet, a Los Olivos resident and board member of PathPoint, which helps dis-



Photo by Gina Pothoff

Hidden Wings provides area adults with workshops focusing on strengthening social and vocational skills.

abled and disadvantaged adults achieve self-sufficiency by providing independent living skills, employment resources and more.

"The best thing you can teach them is how to talk to each other," Sanguinet said. "Jim's (Billington) doing a great job here."

PathPoint's mission mirrors that of Hidden Wings, which the Rev. Jim and Julia Billington, a local physician, established in 2009 to find young adults on the autism spectrum the right job and a good friend. They receive no government funds and operate on donations and modest tuition.

Hidden Wings has done almost too good a job, since all its founding students secured employment, said Jim Billington, who has two sons on the spectrum.

Bringing in existing, underserved groups from surrounding communities maximizes the use of the headquarters at 517 Atterdag Road and provides additional training for the transition to adulthood based on gifts, not deficits.

Billington said the goal is to partner with other vocational programs in the future.

"We have been inviting adult day centers from several cities to come to Hidden Wings for part of the day or an entire day to learn about what we do," Billington said. "Hidden Wings hopes to stimulate and improve the quality of these local centers while also drawing on inspiration from participants."

Public support for autistic kids drops off once they reach 21 years old, he said. According

Watch the short video on this program on our YouTube channel provided by Hidden Wings.

to the CDC, 1 in 68 children are born with autism and nearly 80 percent of those diagnosed haven't yet reached adulthood.

PathPoint facilities have transportation, a critical hurdle for autistic adults. The nonprofit serves 2,500 clients in four counties, with local facilities in Santa Maria, Lompoc and Santa Barbara.

Tanya Dennett, a PathPoint services coordinator, said groups visiting Hidden Wings are from the nonprofit's integrated work program with a focus on volunteering, consumer skills and healthy lifestyles.

"It's exciting for us getting to take part in some of the things going on at Hidden Wings," she said. "The drumming and music, I think, has been fantastic for them. It's a life-enhancing, relaxing thing."

The workshops, which Hidden Wings began offering on Wednesdays and Thursdays in September, block out time for each activity. Therapeutic drumming occurs from 10:15 to 11:30 a.m. Exercise and some form of work take place after lunch from 12:15 to 1:15 p.m. A photography class will also be offered occasionally on Tuesdays from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m.

For more information on Hidden Wings' fall classes, which run through Dec. 16, visit www.hiddenwings.org