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Every Issue Complimentary Every Time

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A day in the life of Hidden Wings

Nonprofit serving those with autism, special needs going strong despite pandemic

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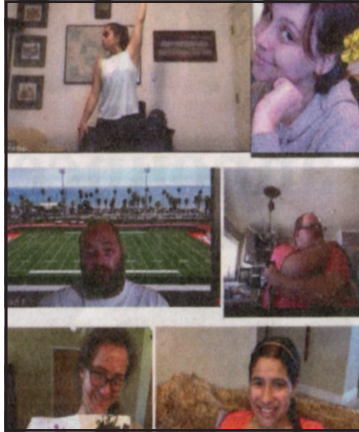
It's 9:30 a.m. on a typical weekday, and the teachers and staff of the Solvang nonprofit Hidden Wings are meeting via teleconference. At the same time on another Zoom call, students are watching two videos solo — one about the dangers of making friends online and a second from a collection of more than 50 homemade videos from Hidden Wings' own YouTube channel, Hidden Wings Live.

Hard to believe that although COVID-19 has shuttered businesses across the globe, Hidden Wings decided to keep nearly all its staff. When the nonprofit that serves young adults with autism and those with special needs told parents it might have to suspend operations in light of the pandemic, the outpouring of messages was clear — Hidden Wings must remain open.

With that, Hidden Wings Live! was born. All but one of our regular students participate, and we've actually increased enrollment by two.

Back on the Zoom call, teachers went over the day's lesson plans, designed to help students find a job and a friend.

After the educational videos, Hidden Wings' acting program director (who is also the defensive line coach for Santa Barbara City College football) would lead students in a grueling half-hour of squats, planks, pushups, sit-



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ups and windmills. Then, students would do a series of dance drills made popular on TikTok.

Next, an instructor teaches everyone the rules for gaining a safe-serve license — a meal ticket, so to speak, for working in the food service industry. The course has taken us almost two months to perfect, but now we have seven people licensed.

On every Thursday, instructors taught students how to make essential food. (What's 'more essential than pizza?) They make a plan for buying the right organic ingredients: flour, tomato sauce, mozzarella cheese, broccoli, mushrooms and salami.

The noon hour is for one-on-one chats with instructors. Some say that adults with autism are the "champions of social distancing," but that's simply not true. Each student talks daily with a teacher they know well, and every day they enthusiastically wonder when they'll get to come back to class in person.

After that, a Tai Chi instructor does a live Zoom session with students, helping them achieve balance, lowering anxiety and promoting peace. In that same vein, the next 30-minute activity is meditation. Over



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the last decade, we have learned that this cluster of meditation, Tai Chi, and "exercise 'til exhaustion" reduces anxiety much more than pharmacology.

At 2 p.m., a student gives a live demonstration on how to make a high-protein, low-carb smoothie. He's Zooming from the kitchen, grabbing kale and other green things. One student says it's "just as good as a McFlurry."

Next, a tech-savvy student gives a presentation on how to clean computer keyboards, mice and screens. This same student volunteers to restore and resell electronics donated to Hidden Wings, helping to raise more than \$3,000 so far. By 2:30 p.m., students just want to talk. "Why can't we see each other more often?" one said.

"I can't wait until COVID is over, and we can be back together as a family," another student said.

We were alone. We were together.

COVID-19, the monstrous event that it is, has given Hidden Wings an opportunity to continue to work outside the box and to help a population in need. Our work is more important than ever, as about 1 in 54 children are diagnosed with autism

spectrum disorder, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). California's Santa Ynez Valley doesn't have many places for adults with special needs, where they can be who they are and also be educated and prepared for all that they can become.

Our nonprofit can soldier on because of our network of supporters who champion our work — and have for more than a decade — and with the support of the Tri-Counties Regional Center. Co-founder Julia Billington, M.D., a local physician, also provides essential health-care guidance.

"Jim and Julia Billington have created a unique program where inclusiveness and compassion for all individuals is at the heart of the program," said Cindy Green, a parent. "It is the only program I am aware of that really looks past each individual's disability and toward their unique strengths to provide an environment focused on continual growth. Every day is a new adventure and challenge based on respect and understanding of each of our unique value to the world. It is a blessing for my daughter!"

Her daughter, Tina, said: "I think Hidden Wings is a wonderful program because there are so many things that people can do and learn."

In this uncertain time, we are happy to be a light in this sometimes very dark world.

If you'd like to learn more about Hidden Wings, contact Jim Billington at jim@hiddenwings.org.