

Hidden Wings Celebrates 10 Years of Unfurling Gifts of Autism

Community is invited to appreciation event on Dec. 1



Hidden Wings uses therapeutic drumming as part of its program. (Hidden Wings)

By Gina Potthoff for Hidden Wings | November 17, 2018 | 11:58 a.m.

When Jim and Julia Billington started Hidden Wings 10 years ago, there was no such thing as an adult with autism.

That seemed to be the most common response to the couple's news: they had just launched a nonprofit in the Santa Ynez Valley to serve young adults on the autism spectrum. More specifically, to help this population find a job and a friend.

At that point, there wasn't much Jim Billington was sure of. He had just left his post as a reverend of

a large Episcopal church in Northern California, and his wife had just uprooted her medical practice. Along for the ride were their four sons, two of whom were on the spectrum.

But Billington did know one thing: Someday soon, all children diagnosed with autism would grow up, and they'd need help finding their place in the world.

Ten years of operating Hidden Wings has proven the Billingtons right. The Solvang nonprofit, which has served more than 1,000 students since 2008, is about to celebrate 10 years of unfurling the gifts of those with autism with an open house on Dec. 1.

"We started out with one teacher, one student, and one activity — a hike on a Thursday afternoon," Billington said, noting that like most famous ventures, Hidden Wings started in their garage.

"Fast forward 10 years and we've worked with hundreds of students, focusing on their gifts, not their deficits," he said. "We work every day against society's dour predictions and inevitabilities: the menial jobs, the mental flat-lining, the total dependence, the lack of talents."

Hidden Wings operates out of its headquarters at 517 Atterdag Road in Solvang, but those aren't the bounds of its classroom. Students come from throughout Santa Barbara County and beyond to take part in classes that promote bonding, physical fitness and identifying meaningful careers.

Therapeutic drumming, horseback riding, hiking and kayaking play roles in creating friendships. Digital arts and life-skills courses help prepare students for jobs. Some students have even launched a new gardening business or sold crafts at the farmer's market.

"We provide students with the rhythm, the routine and a sense of purpose," Billington said. "We are constantly trying new things, realizing there isn't a one-size-fits-all to autism."

One of those new approaches has been opening Hidden Wings' doors to young adults with other developmental disabilities, many of whom benefit from the same social and life skills training.

For parents, who were instrumental in getting Hidden Wings off the ground, the nonprofit is a lifeline.

"Hidden Wings has been a life saver for our son, and for us, in so many ways," said one mother, Molly Ballantine. "He's made friends and enthusiastically looks forward to being a part of every activity offered.

"How critical the need is for more programs in communities everywhere, as our young children with autism are quickly becoming adults with autism."

The need is indeed critical. According to CDC data, 1 in 68 children are born with autism, and nearly 80 percent of those diagnosed with autism haven't yet reached adulthood.

Hidden Wings is inviting the community it serves to an anniversary celebration — a thank you for being good neighbors and staunch supporters. Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart, Jean Kennedy Smith, Bill Draper, and the late Oliver Sacks have also been counted among Hidden Wings fans.

"Without them, we would not — and could not — continue to operate," Billington said.

When Billington thinks about what got him through the earlier, tougher years, he's reminded of a young adult on the spectrum he wasn't able to help.

More than 10 years ago, that young man, a family friend, was stopped by police for driving too slowly on a bridge. Frightened by the sirens and lights, he jumped and took his own life.

"That experience gave us a resolve that allowed us to go through those first few months, and indeed those first few years, with a kind of steely determination," Billington said.

He thinks that resolve, combined with help from supporters and the knowledge that Hidden Wings has helped so many other young adults is what will get the nonprofit through the next 10 years.

Members of the public are invited to help Hidden Wings celebrate, 12:30-2:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 1, at 517 Atterdag. For more information, contact the Billingtons at 805-705-3918.

— *Gina Potthoff for Hidden Wings.*

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