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Hidden Wings Gives Students Lift They Need to Finish College

College Crew helps students with autism and other learning disabilities in their pursuit of degrees

SOURCE: GINA POTTHOFF KACIK FOR HIDDEN WINGS

Growing up, Ryan struggled in school. He didn't understand or grasp subjects as well as other students, so his parents advocated for him to get extra help in the classroom.

Ryan didn't realize he had autism until after high school. That's when he discovered Hidden Wings, a Solvang nonprofit that has provided support to hundreds of young adults on the autism spectrum throughout Santa Barbara County.

Now Ryan is pursuing his passion for photography and an associate's degree at Allan Hancock College.

More and more students are pursuing college degrees and certificates through College Crew, a program at Hidden Wings for students with autism and other learning disabilities.
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Since 2008, the nonprofit has worked to help students find a job and a friend through its own classes that promote bonding, physical fitness and identifying meaningful careers.

Rachael Mendoza, an education specialist at Hidden Wings, started College Crew because she knows the transition from high school to college can be difficult. She saw the challenges firsthand when she enrolled at Allan Hancock College in Lompoc and struggled to adjust because of her ADHD.

"I wanted to help students with autism and other learning disabilities navigate college successfully," she said. "Our students consistently share that they could not have achieved their academic goals without the support of College Crew."

Mendoza helps students enroll in college by taking care of the details: scheduling campus tours; assisting families who apply for FAFSA and CCPG financial aid; navigating Learning Assistance Program accommodations; securing school materials and peer aid support for students with visual impairments; and coordinating weekly homework help and academic support.

When Mendoza first enrolled she didn't know about all the resources for students who need special learning accommodations.

She took a break from classes but came back with help from a mentor, Linda Kelly, a counselor in the Disability Support Programs and Services (DSPS/Learning Assistance Program) department at Hancock College.

Mendoza's vision and dedication are transforming the way community colleges support neurodivergent learners, according to Kelly, who said Mendoza's work is bridging a vital gap between community resources and campus support.

"Tasks like managing transportation, scheduling, organizing materials, and handling unexpected stressors can become barriers to attendance and persistence," Kelly said. "When these life-management supports are missing, students may fall behind, withdraw, or lose confidence in their ability to thrive in higher education."

"Our collaboration with Hidden Wings has created a continuum of care that extends beyond campus boundaries. The coordination between our teams allows us to address both the educational and personal dimensions of student success, something no single program could achieve alone."

The now-growing College Crew program opened with just one



College Crew hopes to start a club at Hancock College that will promote student friendships and address common challenges. (Courtesy photo)

student who wanted to study film to become a director. That student is graduating in 2026 and will transfer to a university next year.

Another student who had previously been forced to drop out of college due to lack of support is now actively pursuing a certificate in welding. A student who is legally blind now has an aide who supports with note-taking and assignments.

"I knew that with adequate support and resources, these students could thrive," Mendoza said.

She said College Crew also hopes to start a club at the college to foster student friendships and discuss common challenges.

Taking college classes is an important step on the path to meaningful employment, said Jim Billington, who cofounded Hidden Wings with his wife, Dr. Julia Billington.

The nonprofit regularly partners with businesses in the community to find jobs and some students also manage Hidden Wings enterprises such as a beehive yard, herb and lavender garden.

"It is a daunting labyrinth of details to take a course at any community college, especially for people with special needs," Billington said. "What Hidden Wings provides is a channel through the bureaucracy, support every step of the way."

"Most of these students have never attended college, and yet they are all receiving passing grades or better. This program is a model for day programs around the country."

Ryan has taken English, history, art, sociology, and (soon) history and public speaking. He hopes to become a professional photographer, and his work is already on display throughout the Santa Ynez Valley.

He's still smoothing out kinks in his confidence, but he is confident in the future.

"Moving forward my future looks brighter than I had imagined," he said. "Hidden Wings truly cares about every student in the program. We all have potential, but it depends on how much we are willing to show our true colors and let the light shine to others."

For more, visit hiddenwings.org or contact Jim Billington at Hidden Wings, jim@hiddenwings.org.