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Hidden Wings youth launching business, producing plays

'We focus on their gifts, not on their deficits,' founder Jim Billington says of his students on the autism spectrum

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Hidden Wings continues to expand its activities to help socialize young autistic adults with the addition of production, marketing, and sales of a new line of handmade products for the body and the home.

The school also has produced new student-inspired theatrical productions.

Hidden Wings, based in Solvang, serves young adults with autism and related conditions in an effort to promote teamwork and physical fitness, to teach independent living skills, and encourage its students to become active members of the community.

It was co-founded in 2009 by the husband-wife team of Rev. Jim Billington, and Julia Billington, MD.

"The word 'autistic' literally means 'onto oneself' - think 'automation'" said Jim Billington, president of Hidden Wings. "They often function onto themselves. They are lone-some people, often without friends and social connections. At Hidden Wings, young adults have the opportunity to break free from their 'aloneness' and to be a part of something big-

ger than themselves. We focus on their gifts, not on their deficits.

"Everything we do here at Hidden Wings is to build friendships and vocational skills," continued Billington. "We do this through extensive team building and work opportunities in the commercial sector.

"We want every person on the spectrum that has graduated or aged out of the high school system to have two things, a job and a friend," he said.

Twenty-five students attend classes, which run six days a week, although every one doesn't attend every day, Billington noted. The sixth day is an "outward bound Saturday," where the group builds teamwork through rigorous outdoor activities such as ocean kayaking, hiking, and outdoor exploration. Since the start of the fulltime program, nearly half of the students have come from Lompoc and Santa Maria.

Now in its eleventh year, Hidden Wings has added a commercial aspect to its classes, wherein students create an array of products made from herbs that are locally sourced and then sold.

Hidden Wings students created an herb garden, which was designed by Steve Shultz, on the grounds of Mission Santa Ines. The garden includes 17 different varieties of herbs - English thyme, French lavender, sage, Russian tarragon, giant myrtle, rosemary, and Spanish oregano - to name a few, all of which are being turned into a variety of natural products by the students.

"We've turned our cottage into a cottage industry," Billington mused. "Our students have created a line of natural, organic products, soaps, body balms, lip balms, bath salts and room sprays - our best seller being our lavender room spray. The oils we obtain can be made into marketable, everyday products. They are made by the students at the Hidden Wings house on Atterdag or at the Santa Ynez Valley Presbyterian Church, which generously allows us the use of their facilities. All items can be made with your choice of scent."

"We are getting a lot of sales by word of mouth and with stands outside local grocery



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"Our students have created a line of natural, organic products, soaps, body balms, lip balms, bath salts, and room sprays - our best seller being our lavender room spray," said Hidden Wings Executive Director and Founder, Jim Billington.



Erendira Herrera enjoys lunch with instructor Theresa Kings.

stores and merchants. Sales have been very successful and have led to more substantial orders.

We are now filling an order for an East Coast software executive for \$500 worth of product for Christmas gifts," said Amy Tagles, program director.

Another of the methods Hidden Wings uses to inspire teamwork with its students is through drama, dance and music.

"Recently we took their unique gifts and brought them all together to create Halloween play. Aimee Carrol was our director and it was performed at the Santa Ynez Valley Presbyterian Church. It was student led; they choreographed the dances, chose their own characters and pulled together their own costumes," said Tagles.

"It was such a great success for us and such a win for our students, we have already started working on a new play titled 'Snowmen at Christmas Time,' which is tentatively scheduled at 12:45 pm, Friday, December 13, at the Santa Ynez Valley Presbyterian Church."

"It's an example of an art form transforming these kids who have so many disabilities, helping them grow and be expressive," said the Rev. Chuck Stacy, board member of Hidden Wings, and former rector of St. Mark's Church in Los Olivos. "Hidden Wings has really matured in the last 10 years, and this was all expressed in this wonderful play. The board of Hidden Wings and many people in the commu-

nity are very thankful to the Santa Ynez Valley Presbyterian Church for the use of their wonderful facility. I can't wait to see the next one."

"This play will be terrific, and we would love everyone to come and enjoy our Christmas offering," said Billington. "Admission is free and donations are gratefully accepted."

"Our products support meaningful work as well as being a profitable endeavor," Tagles added. "Our drama class encourages teamwork and offers our students the opportunity to step outside of their shells. We highlight their individual gifts. In our last play we had a solo dancer, and I'm sure his talents will be included in our next play."

"I go to a lot of programs similar to Hidden Wings in design and I can't think of one that treats individuals within the program with more respect and dignity. The staff here treat these individuals like the adults they are," said John Harnett, an independent contractor working with Hidden Wings.

Hidden Wings classes run from 9 am to 3 pm Monday through Friday, with all-day outings most Saturdays. They are open to high school graduates with developmental disabilities who are enrolled at the Tri-Counties Regional Center. People who are not enrolled can pay privately.

For more information, call 805-705-3918,
email jim@hiddenwings.org or visit
<http://hiddenwings.org>



Hidden Wings introduces its new line of organic products, all hand-made by the students.



The sixth day of instruction is an "outward bound Saturday", where the group builds teamwork through rigorous outdoor activities such as ocean kayaking, hiking and outdoor exploration.