

INSIDE THE SANTA YNEZ VALLEY MAGAZINE

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JIM AND JULIA
BILLINGTON

COVER STORY

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The Little Bookstore That Could

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AT HOME IN THE VALLEY FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS CELEBRATIONS SHOPPING

The Nurturers-in-Chief of “Hidden Wings”



JULIA AND JIM BILLINGTON

BY MITCHELL KRIEGMAN

AMY MAY PHOTOS BOTH PAGES

They have the calm, vigilant look of people who have overcome enormous odds and remain eternally hopeful. They are parents, practitioners, and providers. They are people who believe in the hidden wings that many people don't see or notice, especially in a child who has been labeled, diagnosed, and misunderstood. They believe that even when a child has lost hope, those hidden wings can grow and learn to fly.

Rev. James Billington and his wife, Julia Billington, M.D., live in Santa Ynez and are both graduates of Harvard University. They are the creators, developers, teachers, and nurturers-in-chief of "Hidden Wings."

Both are tall, imposing people whose open, approachable demeanor seems at odds with their physical stature. Jim is gangly, spontaneous, and forthcoming. Julia is elegant and thoughtful. They have an infinite ability to handle the stressful and unexpected with aplomb and forgiveness.

Hidden Wings is a school, a junior college, for the most challenging kids on the autism spectrum – those children who have aged-out of all the early-years treatment programs.

"There exists an intense intervention for these children when they are very young and first diagnosed," explains Dr. Billington, who has a thriving practice as an internist at Sansum Clinic.

"But when they're not-so-cute teenagers and they're struggling, having emotional problems, entering puberty, they either make it into the mainstream or they don't. Kids who don't, fall off the map. There are so few programs that are in place for these kids with huge deficits. But they have wonderful talents as well."

"Our goal is to find a job that fits their gifts and a



Julia Billington and her son Adam drumming outside the Hidden Wings school in downtown Solvang. Drum circles help student develop communication skills. The specialized drums are manufactured and donated by the premier drumhead company, Remo.

friend that fits their compatibility," explains Rev. Billington, previously director of the Appalachia Habitat for Humanity. "We try to find their gift and try to make a career out of it." It's a vocation that involves endless problem solving and dedicated optimism.

"Ultimately, we want them to have some life where they can function independently," Dr. Billington adds, "so they're not just in a home with a caregiver or in the basement of their parents' house."

The Billingtons have four boys – two who are on the autism spectrum and two who are not. This mixed configuration is one of the most challenging for parents, yet more and more common. The needs of the autistic sons are considerable, but the parents have to insure that the neurotypical children are not neglected.

"We're helping to make a future for our boys, and our students, a future that involves growth and learning and contribution," explained Rev. Billington.

One in 68 children is born with autism. Eighty percent haven't yet reached adulthood. One in four

people know or are related to someone with autism. When ADHD and the wide range of other neurological issues are included, the percentage is much higher. The challenge for children with autism spectrum and other conditions to become a functioning part of

society as they grow older is considerable. The cost to parents and institutions is enormous.

Like it or not, today we live in a world of neurodiversity. The preponderance of developmentally diverse children with different learning abilities is a reality. Institutions like Hidden Wings believe that, regardless of their circumstances, children are children and share a basic need to be nurtured. More and more, compelling stories of families tackling autism and developing solutions have gained admiration and captured public attention.

Life, Animated, the memoir by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Ron Suskind about his autistic son, Owen, and how his obsession with sidekicks from Disney movies helped him come out of his shell was a best seller. The documentary film was nominated for an Academy Award. The success of Temple Grandin, also autistic, has inspired many. With so many children involved, inclusion has proven to be the most successful strategy. But it requires an adaptive approach – not just for the autistic child but from the world at large.

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Venturing into the outdoors is an important part of the program.

Andrew Lenner aces a day-long kayak adventure.

The group kayaks on placid Cachuma Lake. A spectacular view rewards students hiking the rugged Santa Ynez Mountain Range.

“Our lives are wrapped around autism,” Dr. Billington admits. “As parents you go through different stages of denial – is it a pattern of behavior? Is it a different way of thinking? You can look on the positive side and think maybe it’s a sensitive brain that is more susceptible. A lot of scientists and doctors are on the spectrum and their children are as well.”

The Billingtons started the program seven years ago. The students range from 14 to 30. Located in the heart of Solvang on Atterdag Road (Danish for “another day”), Hidden Wings School combines life-skills instruction with art and computer classes, academic tutoring, music, and drumming. Outdoor adventuring is the key to boot-straping these young people into a more self-sufficient adulthood.

The outdoors, with all the beauty that Santa Ynez Valley offers, provides an ideal environment for these kids.

“Outdoors gets your blood sugar up. And a lot of these kids are computer geeks. They are not in great shape, but it’s a process. It seems like it’s just having fun, but in the end, as they become tired, barriers come down, they build friendships and togetherness, collaboration, and teamwork,” says Jim Billington.

Meltdowns happen more indoors and everything about the outside fosters calm and independence.

“Besides I’m falling all the

Amy May, a certified instructor at the Santa Ynez Valley Therapeutic Riding Program, and a Hidden Wings student enjoy a horsey moment.

time,” Jim says chuckling. “They have to pick me up because I have a bad ankle.”

Julia adds, “Robb Kennedy, a local water polo coach, and the life guard at Refugio Beach, and a local legend, is our exercise guy, an incredible athlete. He takes them on hikes and kayaking, a bit of the Outward Bound idea. They bond and push themselves.”

Horses are a positive, calming influence, and Hidden Wings works with the Santa Ynez Valley Therapeutic Horseback Riding Program. The kids learn horse

care, horse “manners,” and how to ride. They also garden, take classes at Bloom Yoga, and have employers, including El Rancho and Nielsen’s Market, all over Solvang.

“You know when the Danish settlers came here, they created Atterdag College, a college of life-long learning, and they ventured out from there. Hidden Wings is that way too, a hub with a lot of spokes,” Rev. Billington said. The deep welcoming collaboration of the town of Solvang and the wider Santa Ynez Valley is key to their success.



A Therapeutic Riding Program horse takes the unusual in stride, even drums and drummers.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

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Creativity flows at Hidden Wings. Students regularly exhibit their paintings, sculpture, and photographs. Music is central to the program.



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Carl Johnson, Emmy-winning composer for film and stage, socializes with students after a drumming session. Johnson helps compose music for songs written by Hidden Wings students.

Support for Hidden Wings spreads beyond the local area. Renown Disney orchestrator and composer Carl Johnson, a Valley resident, has shared his musical gifts with the school. The Grateful Dead chose Hidden Wings as the sole beneficiary of an auction of art created by band members before their “Fare Thee Well” tour.

The collaboration with the Grateful Dead’s drummer, Mickey Hart, has been crucial to the drum program at Hidden Wings. Hart had been interested in how drums help people with dementia vocalize and come out of their solitude. He became intent on applying what he learned to autism. He started by teaching Jim Billington to drum.

“He knew I was involved with autism and he came up to me at a camping retreat in Bohemian Grove. He brought out a drum and told me to hold it. He has these big meaty hands and he struck the drum – thump, thump, thump. He said that’s a C sharp. That’s the sound of your heartbeat. He was hitting one side of the drum and I was hitting on the other and I felt the connection.”

Over time Hart developed a circular drum specifically for kids in the autistic group. The special drums, with a NSL label which stands for “Not So Loud,” are designed and manufactured by Remo Drums, the world’s largest drum-head company for the auditory sensitive.

Jim and Julia Billington make a powerful team. Jim sets yearly goals, raises most of the money, and establishes connections and collaborations in town and beyond. He recruits volunteers and teaches pottery, outdoorsmanship, drumming, and writing. Chief cook and bottle washer, he even performs janitorial services for the school.



Meanwhile Julia, the doctor and scientist in the family, dives into many of the deeper issues regarding the considerable increase in autism. She is working on a research project to find the Holy Grail of neurodysfunction – from Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s to autism: a central trigger.

“As a scientist, I am motivated to look for the underpinnings,” Dr. Billington offered. She has narrowed in on one environmental toxin, a pesticide called glyphosate. “Sadly, it’s in almost everything we eat. It’s shocking to me how likely it is the cause of so many diseases.” Bees exposed to glyphosate have lost their bee dance.

Dr. Billington’s theory is that the tiny glyphosate molecule is so small it slips through the blood-brain barrier and enters the cerebrospinal fluid. As of yet there have been no comprehensive tests or studies, but Dr. Billington continues to pursue those tests. In a world where it’s easier to have a pesticide approved

than a new drug, her theory is a political hot potato. But that hasn’t stopped her.

The late Oliver Sacks, renowned physician, author, and neurologist, has endorsed the school. “Hidden Wings is a place where young people with autism can spread their own wings learning life skills and how to participate with others in a warm and



Jim Billington with Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart at a summer retreat in 2013. Hart, long interested in the use of drumming in therapy, taught Billington how to drum.

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A Hidden Wings drumming circle gathered at Knapp’s Castle on East Camino Cielo to celebrate the Grateful Dead’s 50th anniversary tour. The event was filmed and shown to audiences at the five Grateful Dead “Fare Thee Well” concerts in the summer of 2015. More than 250,000 people saw the short film, and Hidden Wings received over 200 inquires as a result of the national coverage.

See the film on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syVeaYxnDws#action=share>

supportive environment. The Billingtons are building a future for every child in their program, which is a model well worth emulating. The world needs many more such havens.”

Meanwhile the Billingtons hope to continue to expand and refine their model school.

They’ve targeted a ranch in the Valley that would not only be a nature-based nurturing environment for their students but could create useful employment as well. It would include an organic garden and a pasture for horses. There would be a fitness barn, a house for life skills and computer work, an art barn, and a vocational barn.

Rev. Billington envisions the biggest black truffle garden in the Valley. Making the connective leap between black truffles and autism is the kind of unique



Jim Billington with a big Remo drum and a little drummer at Refugio Beach.

thinking this couple has brought to the education of these autistic children.

It’s all about emphasizing strengths over pathology, gifts rather than deficits.

“Our end goal is for them to have jobs that reflect their passions,” Jim Billington adds. “This is not therapy or maintenance, neither is it a school to learn auto mechanics. We want to make a model for the world.”

Jim and Julia Billington have a deep partnership that is world changing.

They live with their hearts on their sleeves. Boisterous and elegant, an unlikely combination of personalities, they have dedicated their lives to making Hidden Wings a shimmering example for others to follow, wrapping these children in nature and teamwork, drumming the rhythms of their heart in a love that never ends.



The Billingtons’ four sons, and Sonic, their Golden Retriever, in the family’s ever-optimistic holiday card.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HIDDEN WINGS

located in downtown Solvang,
see their comprehensive website: hiddenwings.org