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OASIS TLC'S Executive Director Mai Cleary is hands-on at the organization's home in Middletown as she greets one of the farm's newest residents. SCOTT LONGFIEL

An Expanding Oasis in Middletown

Organization looking to grow program for young adults with autism

By John Burton

MIDDLETOWN – Impact OASIS's work is moving forward, so much so, its executive director is looking toward the program and facility's growth in the near future.

"We hope to expand next year," said Mai Cleary, the executive director and president of the organization's board of directors. She wants to be able to accommodate additional residential and day students at the facility, which serves as a transitional and vocational school for teenagers and young adults with autism.

Cleary hopes to acquire another house, located in the immediate vicinity of the sprawling Sleepy Hollow Road property that the organization has been using since 2012.

"We want to continue to be local so we can continue to have that connection with the kids' parents, which is so important for them," she said. Parents of the students are required to contribute some time to assisting operations.

SCOTT LONGFIELD

OASIS TLC'S home on the former Coe Estate in Middletown dates back to the 1700s. The Lafayette Room is used for special occasions and a yoga class that is offered to the public. The house mascot, Sawyer, takes a rest in the center of the room.

Initially known as Impact OASIS (Ongoing Autistic Success in Society), the organization is changing its official name to OASIS TLC – the TLC stands for Therapeutic Life Centers – because officials would like to eventually expand from its single location to additional ones.

In 2006, the group originally partnered with Middletown Township, the Monmouth Conservation Foundation and the environmental advocacy organization NY/NJ Baykeepers to purchase the 26-acre former Coe Estate at 89 Sleepy Hollow Road for about $3 million. The deal included use of 6 acres by Impact OASIS while the township took possession of the remaining 20 for open space and eventual recreational uses.

The organization uses the property as a sort of farmstead model to conduct its programs with instructors

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teaching students a wide array of skills. The students work the property's extensive garden and the 7 acres the group uses at the township's Stevenson Park in Lincroft. They also care for the site's animals – which include about 50 chickens, 17 goats, a pony and dog – and care for the inground, outdoor pool, among other activities.

The home on the property is a rambling, two-story structure, with portions dating back to the late 1700s, according to Cleary, who noted the Monmouth County Historical Association has deemed the building one of the most historically significant in the county. Four OASIS students and four volunteers live in the home on a college-like schedule of September-to-May while seven days a week students also use the site.

The building serves as more than just a residence with students learning a variety of life and work skills they can take away as they make a place for themselves in the outside world. Among other tasks, the students, who are post-high school age, work with teacher April Lippet-Faczak. She instructs them in fabric weaving on looms as the students make different items to be sold.

In the building's Lafayette Room – so named because it was built in honor of Marquis de Lafayette, the French general who assisted Americans during the Revolutionary War and visited the site in the early 19th century – volunteers have been conducting yoga classes available to the public. They also have been holding biweekly tea parties, open to the public, with vegetable sandwiches made from items grown on the property or donated by the local Whole Foods.

This summer, students will hold breakfasts for the public and the proceeds will allow students to go out to a restaurant on occasion.

Program participants also have been doing some work at Red Bank's Jon Bon Jovi Foundation Soul Kitchen, a restaurant dedicated to helping the food insecure. "They learns some restaurant skills and get a nice meal," Cleary said.

Cleary said organization officials hope to purchase another structure from one of the homes for sale in the area to be able to accept more students. There also are plans to construct a nature trail around the property for the enjoyment of program participants and the public. They would like to start some business opportunities, such as renting out the goats to tend properties' poison ivy growth, and having students care for homeowners' gardens. The money raised would be used to help defray student families' costs and subsidize the program's approximately $220,000-a-year budget, Cleary said.

SCOTT LONGFIELD

OASIS weaving instructor April Lippet-Faczak at the loom.

Impact Oasis is an outgrowth of I.M.P.A.C.T. (Improving Middletown's Program for Autistic Children Together), like Impact Oasis, a not-for-profit, founded in 2000. The idea was to offer those with autism a chance for additional vocational educational opportunities beyond high school in a beautiful and healthy farm-like setting, according to Cleary.

"So much of what we want to do is teach these guys a healthy lifestyle," she said.

Cleary, who was trained as a nurse, has a 25-year-old, high-functioning son, John Cleary Jr., who has autism and attended a four-year program at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ). He participated in OASIS's pilot program and now attends Brookdale Community College in Lincroft. "I always felt fortunate we could afford that," she said of the TCNJ program and wants to provide opportunities to other families.

Tony Sloan, one of the live-in volunteers, sees the program as his way of finding a community. Sloan, who is in his mid-60s and has been diagnosed on the autism spectrum, said, "I spent the first 42 years of my life living as an outsider." He came to live and work at the site almost a year ago after his Highlands home was destroyed by Super Storm Sandy. "Now I can communicate with people like me," he said.