

## Learning center for autistic adults becomes reality

### TRAIL Center will teach life and work skills in a working farm environment

BY NICOLE ANTONUCCI

Staff Writer



Visitors pause on the front porch of the Coe Estate during the grand opening of the Impact OASIS TRAIL Center in Middletown on April 28. ERIC SUCAR staff

MIDDLETOWN — A place for young adults with autism to grow and learn — a dream in the minds and hearts of a few individuals — became reality last week with the opening of the Impact OASIS Transitional Residential/Adult Independent Learning (TRAIL) Center.

Families and young adults with autism toured the grounds of the 25-acre Coe Estate property on Sleepy Hollow Road on April 28 to inspect the living accommodations and the farm environment that will provide life and work skills.

"This is better than expected," said Doretta Helfgott, of Woodbridge, looking around in amazement at the freshly painted rooms and varnished wood floors of the historic home that will now serve as a residence for young adults with autism and as the headquarters for the Impact OASIS program.

Helfgott explained that her goal last Saturday was to look at all facets of the program and facilities to ensure that her son would have a productive day including work, recreation and living accommodations.

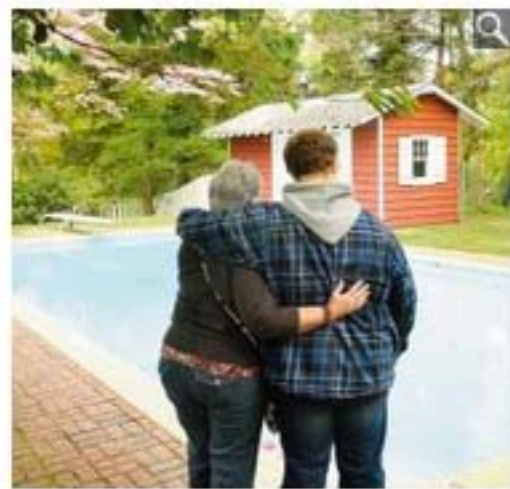
"I want a suitable environment. As a single mother, I may need more help," Helfgott said.

"This is more than just a day program, and I think he would enjoy it more than being home."

Marcy McGarry, of Middletown, was considering TRAIL as a viable option for her daughter who has autism and Down syndrome

"They did a terrific job fixing it up," she said. "The ability to bring a group like this together is amazing."

Others in attendance were there to show support for Impact OASIS.



Below: Family members explore the grounds of the Coe Estate, which was acquired with the help of Middletown Township, the Monmouth Conservation Foundation and the NY/NJ Baykeeper. More photos at gmnews.com. PHOTOS BY ERIC SUCAR staff



Below: Family members explore the grounds of the Coe Estate, which was acquired with the help of Middletown Township, the Monmouth Conservation Foundation and the NY/NJ Baykeeper. More photos at gmnews.com. PHOTOS BY ERIC SUCAR staff

HAND DRAWN  
MARKETING

and  
**blippar**

bring  
**Advanced Augmented  
Reality  
Advertisements**  
to New Jersey Businesses

"Today is a happy day. Hats off to Mai Cleary [president of Impact OASIS] and her team for what she has done," Sen. Joseph Kyrillos (R-13th District) said, adding that he had worked with Cleary since the beginning of the project. "It was a tremendous effort, and she has gotten things in shape for the intended purpose. This is a great opportunity for people in the area to be productive and tend to a historic home."

The center, which is expected to open in September, will eventually provide eight autistic adults a place to learn daily living and social skills in a farm-like environment close to their communities.

A tour of the house included the main room off the entry, a large dining room, kitchen, an office space and a bedroom on the ground floor.

On the upper level are seven semi-private bedrooms, which will house up to eight individuals with autism ranging in age from 18 to 26 years old.

According to Liz Smith, vice president of Impact OASIS, only four students will be accepted for the first year, with no day students.

"We want to make sure we do everything correctly," she said. "We want to take it slowly."

Next year the center will take eight residential students and eight students during the day, she said.

Skill-building may include, but not be limited to, independent living skills such as grooming and meal preparation; healthful eating and living choices; housekeeping skills and recreation.

The curriculum also focuses on social skills, which include conflict resolution, employment skills and conversation skills.

The center provides strong emphasis on language comprehension and usage so students can build functional communication and reading comprehension.

A major focus of the center is to serve as a vocational site to help the students learn about agriculture, nature and the environment.

At the rear of the property, a vegetable garden has already been planted and solar panels are in use.

"Students will learn about solar energy and how it helps in conservation," Barbara D'Augusta, an Impact OASIS volunteer, said. "We will connect students to the environment by discussing current environmental issues and the roles we play in protecting the environment and our connection to plants.

"Students will learn to recycle, use general conservation techniques, utilize organic farming practices to limit chemical exposure, compost to build healthy soil, etc. In general, we will promote a sustainable way of living."

Beth Keefe, a coordinator for autistic students in the Fair Haven School District, helped to create a curriculum modeled on schools in states throughout the Northeast.

ImpactOASIS acquired the 25-acre property in August 2011 through a partnership with Middletown Township, the Monmouth Conservation Foundation and the NY/NJ Baykeeper.

The circa-1871 estate was purchased for \$2.9 million, with Impact OASIS contributing \$1 million raised through donations and Middletown contributing \$900,000.

The remainder of the funding came through \$1 million in state Green Acres funds, of which \$650,000 was allocated to the township, \$100,000 to the Monmouth Conservation Foundation and \$250,000 to the NY/NJ Baykeeper.

According to the partnership agreement, the township will retain ownership of the estate's 18 acres of open space, which will become a park and will be used for passive recreation with walking paths and sitting areas.

To learn more about TRAIL and Impact OASIS, visit [www.impactoasis.org](http://www.impactoasis.org).