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POISE, a Perfect Partnership

By Lou Fancher

P.O.I.S.E.

Parents of Orinda Individuals in Special Education

Perfect partnerships form when two parties share a common goal, but retain individualized responsibilities. In the past year, the Orinda Unified School District (OUSD) and POISE, Parents of Orinda Individuals in Special Education, have paired their remarkable forces to create a dual support structure for parents of children with special needs.

POISE, not just an easy-to-remember acronym, is appropriately descriptive of Anna Tague and Joni Binder, the dynamic spokespersons and founders of the Orinda group. Speaking eloquently about their upcoming first anniversary event and POISE's purpose, they symbolize a new frontier in special needs advocacy. "The main motivation for creating the group was to make connections, provide information and to support all parents of kids with special needs," says Tague. Determined, but not dogmatic, POISE supports, informs and thereby seeks to change the closed-door face of special needs education.

For the past ten years Robin Reves, Director of Special Services, has been building a sturdy informational haven within the OUSD. She is a master at following district procedures and privacy requirements, while still managing

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to connect and inform parents of students with special needs. Whether inviting parents to join Community Advisory Committee meetings, attending private and public special needs events, or, recently, by mailing POISE flyers with announcements to district families, Reves is tireless in her quest to maximize her message. "Parents of students with special needs have a need for support when their child takes them on a different path than they were expecting," she says. "POISE gives association-that affinity of support-to what the district is doing. It has really brought forward my vision of what is needed."

Most people know that public school systems are legally bound to provide an appropriate education for all students. What they may not know, is that the districts must also keep student information-including special needs designations-private. The protection is appreciated, but the unintentional isolation can leave parents feeling lost in the system. "We were bubbles, afloat in a soapy sink," says Binder, "but none of us were connecting." These feelings were the seeds out of which POISE grew: in its first year, the group expanded to include over 200 Orinda families.

At POISE's monthly meetings, held in private homes, the conversation flows freely. The personal, here-in-the-flesh interaction is essential: "As soon as you realize you're not the only person in the room experiencing some of these things, it's such a relief," says Binder. Tague points out two reasons POISE is irreplaceable: not all people will reach out in public ways, even online, and within a common diagnosis, parenting a special needs child is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Parents frequently ask, "What about the future? What about sixth grade? Where's it all going?"

One way POISE answers the flood of questions is with liaisons. Organized by age group and developmental stage, POISE liaisons add specificity to the overwhelming amount of information that parents encounter. It's here that POISE and the OUSD demonstrate the power of their partnership. Reves meets with liaisons quarterly, in business-like meetings whose smaller numbers are an efficient and effective means of communication. Liaisons then dispense the pertinent information back to parents in POISE's customized, intimate settings. Tague highlights the value, pointing out that talking to someone at a distance, or in a formal setting, "is not the same as having a shoulder to lean on."

The balance between POISE and the OUSD reflects attitude, as much as ability. "Information is the most valuable currency a parent can have," says Binder, giving credit to Reves' side of the equation. "A positive, collaborative relationship is what I have a vision of and what (POISE) has made an actuality," says Reves. Their intention is clear, the results unquestionable. When school districts and families work together, each maintaining their unique profiles, their combined strength is sure to have a wonderful outcome for students.



Join POISE for

"Autism: The Musical"

POISE's mission extends beyond its membership. On April 15th, the organization will mark its one year anniversary with its third free, public event. POISE has received special permission to screen the Emmy-winning documentary, "Autism: The Musical," and Assembly member Tom Torlakson has agreed to be the guest Introducer for the event. "It [the film] is the most honest portrayal that I've seen of what life can be like for families with children in the spectrum," says Joni Binder. Anna Tague urges people to make reservations (their last event had over 70 people packed into Orinda Bookstore), and to note the recommended age for attendance. Reservations can be made by calling Anna Tague at 925-254-5084.

"Autism" The Musical," presented by POISE, at Orinda Intermediate School, 80 Ivy Drive, Orinda, on Thursday, April 15, 2010, from 7-9 p.m. Recommended for ages 11 and up; parental discretion is advised.

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