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Making Life Better for Young Adults with Asperger's Syndrome

By *Sophie Braccini*



Photo provided by Aspen Network

Many teens and young adults with Asperger's syndrome or non-verbal learning disorder find it difficult to transition from their parents' home to a productive, independent life. Too bright to find a stimulating environment in state-provided housing, these individuals can struggle with deficient executive functions that can affect how they can interact with others and understand language in context - a few things that can make living on their own difficult.

Orinda residents Meg and Michael Fields' son, Darin, was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. They created two unique programs to help young people on the spectrum or who are affected by non-verbal learning disorder learn the skills they need to lead meaningful and independent lives. Team Living is a pod pilot where a group of eight individuals on the spectrum live together and learn

organizational and social skills. Aspen Network is a residential summer wilderness camp where teens with the same challenges, safely and successfully participate in a camp away from home.

"It all started with the idea that there is no reason why children with Asperger's should be deprived of the fun of going to overnight wilderness camps," says Michael Fields. Of course, it helped that the family owns a large property in the Lake Tahoe area. That's where they took the first group of adolescents five years ago.

"The value for the teens is enormous," says Meg Fields. "When you have to pitch your tent, you have to have help and engage in a collaborative process."

"We found that when these kids came to our camp and left their family for two weeks, there was some kind of magic that happened," says Michael Fields. "It was not necessarily just our program, the river rafting or the backpacking; it was being away from (their usual) dynamic, being able to experience their own feelings. After two weeks, some parents did not recognize their own kids. It was startling."

Meg Fields thinks offering a safe space where the kids are accepted exactly how they are makes the difference. She adds that a shift happened for her as well. She realized that things were never going to be how she originally thought, and she accepted it. The Fields work with other professionals such as education specialist Kathy Allen and Nancy Sperry, Ph.D. The camp staff ratio is 2 to 1.

Meg and Michael Fields are both nurses. Michael Fields is an E.R. nurse and knows everything about emergency situations. Meg Fields added a doctorate in psychology to her initial training. Her dissertation was on Asperger's syndrome.

"The teens who come to the camp have different diagnoses that make them more fragile," says Meg Fields, who wanted to welcome a mix of kids. "It creates a family because everyone is accepting of everyone else."

A few years after the camp started, parents began to ask for more regular interaction between the teens. They formed weekly activity groups that meet in Orinda to learn the art of communication, listening, and being able to relate well with others.

Recently the Fields recognized other needs for the group. "When Asperger's teens go to college they are often confronted with difficult situations that (can)lead to failure," says Fields. Their son went to Sonoma State University but did not stay. "He was in a unit with six other roommates, but he was not talking to anyone," she remembers. "Eventually, he failed." All too often these young adults end up still living with their parents and employed far below their ability levels, Meg Fields says.

"Being alone with no peer group of their own is not fair," says Michael Fields.

The Fields came up with the idea of a pod, what they call Team Living. "The program is for young people who cannot live outside of their parents' home without assistance," explains Meg Fields. "We bring them together in a home and teach them over a couple of years the tools they need to become independent. Then they will move to offshoot satellite houses with much less supervision."

Practitioners regularly conduct cooking lessons, weekly community meetings, offer tutoring, coordinate outings on Saturdays, and work with each resident's ability to handle daily routines, such as laundry or other chores.

"We have eight young adults living in the first pilot pod in Orinda," says Meg Fields. "Some of them go to college, and/or have a job. The pod works really well for them." Another pod should open this summer in Lafayette. The plan is to create a community of homes.

"Society needs to change," adds Meg Fields. She hopes society will create "social-cognitive-ramps" for this population. "We have adapted the workspace for people with disabilities. Now we need to be able to accommodate those who have social difficulties. Education has to change; jobs have to change to accommodate them."

For more information about the Aspen Network, visit aspennetwork.net.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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