

**TEMPERATURES**

For Oct. 17:

**L 54 H 68**  
Some sun.

Sunrise: 7:06 a.m. Sunset: 6:09 p.m.

**HIGH TIDES**At Bridgeport Harbor  
for October 17-19:Today 3:55pm  
Tomorrow 4:51pm  
Friday 5:52pm

# 2nd front

Police Reports	4	Editorial	12
Obituaries	8	Sports	18
Legal Notices	9	Classified	21

Number of pages 24

FAIRFIELD CITIZEN-NEWS, Wednesday, October 17, 2007

3



FAIRFIELD CITIZEN-NEWS photo / Autumn Pinette

The founders and organizers of the newly launched The Pilot House hope to give kids with special needs a place to grow and have fun. From left are John Jones, co-founder and vice president, with his son Alex, 9, bottom, and his son Wade, 11, top; Doreen Caruso, center, co-founder and president, with her son Christopher, 8; Debbi Barer, director of communications, with her son Eli, 11, on her lap and Eli's twin sister, Milo, kneeling behind them next to her brother Logan, 13; and standing far right, Jennifer Shockey, public relations coordinator, holding her son Will, 4.

## Navigation for Children With Special Needs

BY RITA PAPIAZIAN

A group of parents is charting a new course in helping youngsters with special needs. They have founded The Pilot House to assist children with developmental disabilities and their families.

Borrowing a nautical term for the place within a ship that holds the navigational system, The Pilot House offers children, siblings and families a place to come to interact in an after-school environment. Offered in small group settings at Fairfield Woods Middle School, The Pilot House — starting tomorrow — provides programs, therapy referral services and support services, provided by a paid staff and volunteers. The programs and services are offered on a fee-based system after school, Saturday mornings and during vacation breaks. Other financial sources include fundraisers and grants.

Founders Doreen Caruso, the president, and John Jones, the vice president, both parents of an autistic child, wanted an after-school program that offered a variety of services in one location, not only for the child with special needs, but also for family members as well.

"It's hard to be a sibling with a special needs child," said Jones, the father of two sons, Alexander, 9, who is autistic, and Wade, 11.

Caruso is the mother of three children; Michael, 16, and twins Allison and Christopher, 8. Her younger son is autistic,

as is one of the triplet sons of Jennifer Shockey, who handles the publicity for the organization. Shockey met Caruso at the Early Childhood Center and upon learning about the plan for The Pilot House was immediately drawn to the concept.

"I thought, 'These kids will have something to do after school and on holiday breaks,'" Shockey said.

"We are giving our children a place to go and be a child," said Caruso, noting that The Pilot House will offer a variety of programs, including art, music and yoga and skills building, similar to other programs that are offered to children in regular settings. However, those programs often have too many children, are too stimulating or do not have the skills level for a child with special needs.

The founders' vision is to offer smaller class settings with professional staffing trained to deal with the special-needs children. This will alleviate parents' concerns and give them the feeling that their children are in a safe and happy environment.

Jones acknowledged that the town does offer similar programs but they are "typically higher functioning," he said. "We like to create another option for parents. We're specializing."

Jones, who heads his own media consulting business, changed his life when his son was diagnosed. He quit his job for a global media company so that he could devote attention to his son. He and his

wife, Elizabeth, went to the Yale Child Center to learn what they could about autism, which was diagnosed when his son was two-and-a-half years old.

"He's my son," said Jones, explaining his decision to leave his corporate job and start his own business. "We adjusted our lives to do what we needed to do." Learning that his son was autistic was an entirely new experience for him.

Caruso applauded Jones' activism. She said, "A lot of dads are in denial."

Jones said, "Alexander has brought a lot of challenges to my life and an incredible amount of joy. He has challenged me to look at myself — who I am and how I deal with other people."

"They make us better people," said Caruso, describing children with special needs. "You learn to appreciate the small things."

Jones said, "As a father, I've learned to find those special moments when I can guide him through those special moments."

Jones said he feels lucky to have come together with Caruso and other parents, including board of directors members Wendi Taylor, the treasurer, and Debbi Barrer, the secretary, to navigate the waters of a new nonprofit helping other young families.

"This has been a wonderful therapeutic thing for us and to know we are going to have something to help other people who don't necessarily have to go through what

we went through," Jones said.

It's his desire to ease the sense of loneliness — that "waiting room stare" — that parents get when they go from waiting room to waiting room seeking answers and help for their children and asking, "What's next?"

Jones acknowledged that once parents learn that their child has autism, Down syndrome, sensory issues, or other developmental disabilities, they go into a period of "mourning" with the realization that their life as they knew it "had just ended. People get depressed because no one is showing them the way.

"We want to offer a place not only for the kids," Jones said, "but also for the families so they don't isolate at home. Our ultimate goal is to have a facility of our own, a center where families can come and participate in the program

On Nov. 4, Mary Gentile, Christopher Caruso's aunt will be running the New York City Marathon to raise funds for The Pilot House.

In her fundraising letter, Gentile wrote, "I have a great deal of admiration for my sister-in-law Doreen, who has used her experience to help so many other families. Way to go, Doreen!"

Anyone wishing to make a donation to The Pilot House can send check payable to P.O. Box 1553, Fairfield 06825.

For more information, visit [www.thepilothouse.org](http://www.thepilothouse.org) or contact Doreen Caruso at 319-7452.