

# New venue for children with special needs opens

The Pilot House offers programs for children and their families

BY JORDAN FENSTER

## COMMUNITY PROFILE

According to Pilot House President and Co-founder Doreen Caruso, one in every 150 children in the United States is diagnosed with Autism. But with a wide spectrum of ability within that disorder, the challenges one family faces may be entirely different from those faced by another family.

A newly opened center for children and families of children with special needs, The Pilot House began programming Wednesday in Fairfield. Before the center opened — it is using, for the present, facilities at Fairfield Woods Middle School — Caruso spoke about the need for such a center as she was putting together last minute details and making final preparations for the opening.

“We are going to be offering recreational programs for children with special needs,” Caruso said. Far from limiting their intake to families dealing with Autism, The Pilot House is open to children, siblings and parents dealing with a range of developmental disorders.

“We don’t want to exclude anyone, because we know how that feels,” Caruso said.

John Jones, The Pilot House’s vice president and co-founder,

said Fairfield did and does possess resources for families of special needs children, it is often hard to find an all-encompassing place to fit every bill.

“There were resources available, but there was no one place we could turn,” Jones said. Jones’ son, Alexander, now nine years old, was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder at the age of two. Jones said there was no one to tell him, with no previous personal experience, what to expect.

“We kind of had to develop a play book on our own,” he said.

The Pilot House is starting small, with facilities in a school and 10 families signed up for opening day. But the goal, of course, is to grow.

“Long-term, we would like to find a space in the community,” Caruso said.

Being the parent of a child with special needs is demanding, Jones said. “Very demanding of resources, both financial and physical. Demanding of time.”

“It’s very isolating,” Caruso, whose son, Christopher, was also diagnosed with Autism, said. “You go through some deep bouts of depression.”

For that reason, The Pilot House is offering resources designed specifically for parents of

special needs children. A place, Caruso said, parents can talk to someone in a similar situation, “swap horror stories or just hang out and

have a cup of coffee,” in addition to more traditional, support network resource options.

Siblings of children with special needs as well can be in need of some assistance, Caruso said. With so much energy and focus heading in one direction, a sibling can learn to feel disregarded.

“Siblings really are left behind,” she said. “The focus is toward the special needs child, for whatever reason.”

Program leaders at The Pilot House are primarily special education teachers with behavior

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DOREEN CARUSO



Photo by Jordan Fenster

**Doreen Caruson and John Jones are co-founders of The Pilot House. Both are parents of children with special needs.**

backgrounds, and there is also a licensed musical therapist and an occupational therapist on board. Classes are designed to be small — four to eight children per group.

Everyone involved with The Pilot House, whether on the nonprofit’s board of directors or running a program on the ground, has personal experience

with children of special needs, Caruso said.

“It’s very hard for somebody who doesn’t walk the walk to understand what you’re talking about,” she said.

Programs at The Pilot House are offered at a sliding scale. For more information, or to contribute to an ongoing fundraiser, log on to [www.thepilothouse.org](http://www.thepilothouse.org).