

## **Something Personal**

### **A dream come true**



Pat Schissel, LMSW  
President, AHA  
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By May-Lynn Andresen, RN

*The following remarks were given by May-Lynn Andresen, RN, a founder of Westbrook Preparatory School, project director and an advisory board member of AHA, at Westbrook's ribbon cutting ceremony in February 2011. She was introduced by Rosemary Stein, Chief Program Officer of SCO Family Services, the agency administering Westbrook. May-Lynn's remarks follow:*

As Rosemary described, although a professional in the field of autism, most importantly, I am a mother of three, and for me, today is all about how reality can create dreams and dreams (*with hard work and a little "besbert" [good luck] sprinkled in*) can make new realities happen!

By the time my middle child, who is on the spectrum, was 13 ½ years old, he had been in six different failed school placements, in addition to being homeschooled during two separate periods of time.

Despite his average IQ and speaking skills, his strong abilities in, and love of reading, and aspiration to eventually marry, have children and a successful career, his struggles and deficits were such that he needed a residential placement and there were no appropriate schools for students like him in the entire state of New York.

This led me to make the most difficult and painful decision of my life: to send him out of state to be educated . . . 10 hours round trip on Friday and Sunday afternoons . . . to the only program around that could give him the chance to meet his potential to live the adulthood that he was dreaming of.

This exemplifies the harsh reality of choices for families like mine:

- Keep our children in programs that can't properly educate them;
- Keep them home and isolated; or
- Send these most vulnerable children, for whom we have advocated their entire lives, away to another state to give them the opportunity they deserve . . . but at some serious cost: separating them from their only safe haven, their homes, their parents, siblings, families, peers, communities, region and even state!

So, today truly is about dreams and reality, and for me, when that horrible reality of my son being torn from us hit, one great thing happened . . . a dream formed.

A dream that one day the pain that we were experiencing would, for other families, be lessened, and a school would exist here in New York!

- That children would no longer have to be completely separated from their homes;

- That they could be educated, appropriately, in a place where they could continue to have regular family time;
- That kids could continue to have a connection to their community and Long Island;
- And that school could really prepare them for what they need to live here as adults, productively and happily.

Within the year, the Westbrook founding champions convened: state education (Ed Placke), SCO (Bob McMahon), and an amazing team of “moms/autism professionals” . . . our founding members.

We strove, over the next four years, to convert this shared dream into a new reality which, together, we all are sharing in today . . . the opening ceremonies of Westbrook Preparatory School, with our students sitting right here celebrating with us!

Westbrook is all about our students’ dreams and we strive to translate their dreams for themselves into their new reality.

We are proud to be the first and only dedicated secondary school in the state of New York to serve our student population. We strive for excellence in practice. We are bringing our youth back from out-of-state placements, and proud to be keeping others from having to leave!

Not only are we the first in the state to do this, but we are doing it differently.

We are a transition-focused program. Our goal is to teach our students the skills they need to have happy and successful lives for the 60+ years after graduation. Few programs are accomplishing this.

Functioning in a community is often very difficult for our population. Westbury has truly welcomed Westbrook. Located in the perfect place to learn community skills, nearly 100% of our students are either in or about to begin job internships in addition to their academic work in this community.

We are an education-based program and believe that it is all about teaching/preparing our students, whether it is:

- o The regents track academic curriculum,
- o Social and communication skills,
- o Learning to regulate their emotions and responses appropriately,
- o Learning to be a good friend and be successful in a job and in the community,
- o Learning to plan and prepare meals; to eat exercise and live healthily . . . our students are learning throughout their days and evenings.

We have a strong family training and support model, with parent training twice monthly, family therapy, monthly family support groups and monthly parent committee meetings. Families are encouraged to join us for activities, like our parent-run seder several weeks ago.

Strong technology-base including interactive white boards in all of the classrooms, a mobile science lab, and a building fitted for innovative student training methodologies such as video modeling and bug in the ear technology.

The broader autism community is invigorated by Westbrook:

- o For developing a world class professional advisory board.
- o As a training facility: receiving requests from many of the local universities (Adelphi University, etc.) to establish educational affiliations.
  - Train new professionals in “best practices.”

- o For its plan to be a model program, contribute to the evidence-base of autism spectrum disorder treatment and intervention research, develop and publish guidelines and change practice and outcome, with the hope of replicating our program across the state and country.

Our mission: Westbrook Preparatory School offers an enriched therapeutic, academic, residential experience for adolescents and young adults with Asperger Syndrome and related learning needs. Our promising students participate in a broad education, individually attuned to their unique strengths and challenges.

Our vision: the 3 B's!

Westbrook Preparatory School:

**Builds** independence

Creates a sense of **Belonging** and

**Believes** in happiness through possibilities

For every student and family.

Thank you for believing in our dream, helping it to become this new reality, Westbrook Preparatory School, and for supporting our students in helping them to make their dreams of today their future realities!

**Patricia R. Schissel, LMSW,  
President, AHA**

Asperger Syndrome and HFA Assoc.

PO Box 916

Bethpage, NY 11714

888.918.9198

[www.ahany.org](http://www.ahany.org) email: [pats@ahany.org](mailto:pats@ahany.org)