

# A place to discover their independence

**The Coffeehouse Center of Bucks County at Oxford Valley Mall is more than just a place for young adults with mild autism disorders.**

By JO CIAVAGLIA  
STAFF WRITER

At the Coffeehouse Center of Bucks County, members can't get a drink, but they can learn how to balance a checkbook.

If they don't feel like playing a board game or surfing the Internet, that's fine. They can hit the food court next door at the mall, or sit in on a workshop on conflict resolution, building friendships or dating advice, the things young adults need to learn to live on their own.

What was once a casual, drop-in center where young adults with mild autism disorders could practice social skills, the coffeehouse has undergone a major expansion into a formal and comprehensive program designed to promote self-sufficiency.

Bucks County ranks third in Pennsylvania — behind Montgomery County and Philadelphia — in the number of school-age children receiving special education services for autism disorders, a developmental disability that interferes with cognitive function, communication and social behavior.

There were 104 Bucks County students between the ages of 17 to 21 with autism disorders receiving special education services as of the 2008-09 school year, which represents roughly 10 percent of the more than 1,100 school-age children with an autism diagnosis. It represents a 2 percent increase over the previous school year.

People with Asperger's syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder experience milder symptoms than those with classic autism and often have above average intelligence. So it's more difficult for them to fit in because outsiders might not realize they have a disorder.

Someone with Asperger's, for instance, might fixate on a particular subject; they'll interrupt or dominate conversations. They avoid eye contact. A lack of coping skills, social graces and judgment ability makes it harder for them to fit into the community and develop relationships. They can lose their temper easily, overreact to minor problems and lack personal boundaries so they can be easily manipulated.

Most autism support services typically target early childhood interventions, but young adults also face major challenges adapting to daily routines once they are no longer in a structured daily school environment.

In Pennsylvania, autism disorders are considered a developmental disorder and publicly funded childhood support serv-



DAVID GARRETT / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Teresa Colosi of Falls is enrolled in the Coffeehouse Center program, which provides transition services and socializing opportunities to young adults with high-functioning autism disorders.

ices generally end once a person turns 21 and leaves high school. Without regular practice and reinforcement, the skills they've spent years developing can quickly regress.

Filling this gap was the mission of the original Coffeehouse of Bucks County, which opened in a Warminster farmhouse in 2008, the first behavior health program of its kind in Pennsylvania to promote independent living skills for young adults with Asperger's and PDD.

Expanding the program to provide additional supports was always part of the big picture, said Joyce Harding, executive director of the original coffeehouse program.

"This is a natural progression of the coffeehouse," Harding said. "It's very much needed."

The new coffeehouse, which officially opened Monday at the Oxford Valley Mall, is the socialization piece of the larger vision of Family Service Association of Bucks County, which took over the coffeehouse program in January.

The Asperger's Awareness, Community Education and Support program — called AACES, for short — targets Bucks County adults through age 26 with high functioning autism disorders who need help transitioning into adult lives. The program includes social, employment and education support services, said Marlene Piasecki, Family Service's director of program planning and development.

Later this year, the agency hopes to launch Tracks to Employment, another program component that will include career testing and promoting the skills necessary to find and keep a job. There are plans to develop

## The Coffeehouse Center

Asperger's Awareness, Community Education and Support program at Family Service Association provides community-based programs for young adults with Asperger's syndrome or Pervasive Developmental Disorder/Not Otherwise Specified.

Program components include:

### The Coffeehouse Center of Bucks County

A drop-in center, open twice a week at the Oxford Valley Mall in Middletown where members can meet and socialize with other young adults with mild autism disorders, as well as participate in activities geared toward developing independent living skills.

### Tracks to Employment

Program combining education, practical support and mentoring to help clients acquire and keep jobs.

into adulthood," Piasecki said.

The AACES program provides a critical connection for what he believes is an important, but underserved, population, said Ron Bernstein, executive director of Foundations Community Partnership, which is among the groups funding

### Tracks to Education

Program combining workshops and mentoring to help clients decide on post-secondary education or training, picking a school and developing a curriculum and study plan.

### AACES program admission criteria includes:

Ages 18 to 26

High school graduate or completed a GED

A diagnosis of Asperger's or Pervasive Developmental Disorder/not otherwise specified

IQ score of 70 or above

Bucks County resident

Demonstrates motivation to participate in the program and agrees to adhere to the program expectations (explained at admission).

For more information, contact Family Service Association at 215-757-6916, ext. 232z or visit [www.fsabc.org](http://www.fsabc.org).

### AACES.

"They need something to help them make that next step in life," he added.

At least 30 people have enrolled, so far, though that number could increase to 50 within the next year.

Debra Jakubowski, 24, of Bensalem is an original member

of the coffeehouse, where she learned how to make friends. Now she hopes the expanded program can help her find a job. The Bucks County Community College graduate is looking for work in art therapy.

Her mom, Cathy, likes the center's new location since it means Debra, who doesn't drive, can take a bus by herself, which helps build her self-esteem.

"It's a great opportunity for young people to get to know each other," Cathy Jakubowski added. "It's about time they realized these young people still need some help. They can't just jump into the real world."

The center's location at Oxford Valley Mall because offers members plenty of opportunities to interact with the public, practice social skills and learn how to deal with the unpredictable, added Middletown resident Ambry Ward, whose son David Grygo, 22, is part of the program.

"This is part of the community and they need to be part of the community," Ward said.

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## BUCKS BRIEFS SOAR restaurant opens today

### BUCKS COUNTY TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL

High school students with special needs will open a restaurant to the public for lunch today to practice the service skills they have been learning, the program coordinator said.

The restaurant at Bucks County Technical High School will open again for business July 21 if enough customers turn out today, said program coordinator April Tadley.

The students attend the Summer Opportunities Are Real program at school in Bristol Township.

They will open the SOAR restaurant at 11 a.m. in the faculty dining room and serve Grandma Ro's Famous Baked Ziti, as well as a side salad, garlic bread, Italian water ice and refreshments, said Tadley.

Meals will cost \$4 per person. The restaurant will be open for business until 12:15 p.m. The school is located at 610 Wistar Road. Information: 215-949-1700.

## 100 years ago in Bucks

### Heard on the Street.

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Item from Bristol in the Bucks County Gazette of July 1910

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