

Allowing kids to be who they really are: Parents open school for students on autism spectrum



By Eric Hodies Correspondent

When Josh and Maegan Cahoon set a goal, all their energy goes into the project. Recently, they started their own school, from the ground up. Total time from initial idea to opening day — just seven months.

Maverick Learning Center, which opened in September in the Hilltop area, serves children on the autism spectrum. Currently the school is accepting

students for grades kindergarten to fifth grade, with plans to expand to middle school and high school grades.

The Cahoons have three children: Gavin, Jax and Maverick. Finding the right school was a problem for Maverick.

“Maverick is on the spectrum, and we couldn’t find the right fit,” Maegan Cahoon said. “We tried self-contained classes, but he didn’t need that much help. When we tried inclusion classes, he was overstimulated. It was like putting a square peg into a round hole. He needed something in-between, and we knew there were other children just like him.”

During a phone call with Josh in February, Maegan brought up the idea of starting their own school. Josh was on-board, and the couple immediately began work on the massive undertaking.

“I thought we can just sit around for the next 10 years and wait for someone else to do it, or we can just build it ourselves,” Maegan said. “I’ve lost a lot of sleep and cried plenty of tears to make this happen.”

The couple found a 4,200-square-foot former medical office on First Colonial Road, but it needed a complete renovation to become a safe and effective learning environment. Fortunately, Josh is a contractor and was able to renovate the spaces during evenings and weekends. The paint was barely dry when the first students filed in.

For help designing the spaces and creating the curriculum, the Cahoons talked to special education teachers, therapists, school administrators and parents. The result is a sensory friendly space, including a calm room. Also available are areas for therapy and outdoor instruction.

“Our school allows kids to be who they really are,” Maegan said. “They can feel safe, without a need to try to fit in. My husband and I were born and raised here, and we love Virginia Beach. But we couldn’t find anything like this in our community.” Andrea Birch teaches kindergarten through second grade at the school, and has a daughter who has presented with special needs associated with communication.

“As a parent, you want to know there is more than one option,” Birch said. “This school provides support for the in-between kids. And it provides

community, and community is so important when you have to live it every day.”

Maverick Learning Center features open enrollment, so students can start at any point during the school year, which follows the Virginia Beach City Public Schools calendar. The school partners with the Eliza Hope Foundation to provide tuition assistance.

Inspired by their son, the name of the new school was never in doubt.

“Maverick means “one of a kind.” Maegan said. “Our son is a one-of-a-kind person, and this is a one-of-a-kind school.”

For more information, visit www.MaverickLearningVA.com

Eric Hodies, ehodies@hteam.net