

Lighthouse hopes to be a beacon for autistic kids and their families



By Brock Weir

When Christine Morassutti's son, Devon, was just two-and-a-half, the King Township boy was diagnosed with autism.

The family did their utmost to ensure he got the care, treatment and education he needed, first focusing on speech and language development. But as he grew older, different symptoms and behaviours began to appear on the horizon, presenting new challenges not just for Devon, but his family as well.

‘We went through numerous settings, not being able to find appropriate care,’ says Ms. Morassutti. ‘Initially, he was in preschool in Oakville with a Montessori focus. Most recently, he was in the Catholic School Board, but we had to remove him to go into treatment.’

Ms. Morassutti bubbles over with enthusiasm explaining her feelings when she first heard of Lighthouse, a new school in Aurora working specifically with students on the autism spectrum.

Mayor Geoff Dawe was on hand at the Old Yonge Street school last week to help cut the ceremonial ribbon on the new educational venture in Town and had the opportunity to speak with Christine and Devon as the lad embarked on his second week as one of Lighthouse's inaugural students.

‘What were the chances this was closer to home and also had basically every focus we were needing for this point in his life?’ says Christine. ‘The system had failed him, but we found this setting. We were so excited when it was opening and it has been flawless. His behaviours have rapidly decreased. He is being able to apply the treatment.’

‘In this single setting, it brings together [all aspects] of his education. When they were trying to focus on his education in other schools, he wasn't able to achieve anything because of the behaviours; they weren't able to handle the anxiety and other things that were occurring. They are focusing on how to avoid behaviours, so the education just diminishes him. In this setting, they are actually applying the treatment so he is able to be educated and find practical use for all the awesome coping skills and all the different things he received in treatment. You couldn't ask for more.’

Ms. Morassutti is certainly not alone travelling this journey with a child. Indeed, Lighthouse is the brainchild of parents Serena Thompson and Laurie MacRae, who experienced similar challenges with their respective children. In her experience, Ms. Thompson says the teachers working with her son, Daniel, in the public school system were ‘amazing’ but they were not given the support and resources they needed.

They found there was a ‘grey area’ for kids too high functioning for a typical community class, but not high functioning enough for

a mainstream classroom environment.

Thus, they pooled their resources, their contacts, and their experiences, to create Lighthouse, a unique concept for York Region focusing on individual education plans, direct instruction, and sensory experiences, all with a full staff complement of Ontario-certified teachers specializing in educating students on the autism spectrum with a maximum rate of four students per teacher.

“When I first spoke to Serena, she was taking her son down to the Keele and 401 area, so this takes away the wear and tear on the people doing that,” says Mayor Dawe. “Having a facility like those closer to home, or in your hometown, makes it that much easier. This really is spectacular.”

Ms. Morassutti shares this enthusiasm.

“It is such a relief because [Devon had] massive amounts of anxiety in the other settings,” she says, of Devon's first week at Lighthouse. “It was horrendous, and he would stim because he is retreating into himself. There was none of that here. There is no resistance and that is huge because [anxiety] can be so debilitating.”

Adds Ms. Thompson: “To hear parents report to us that the anxiety levels are decreasing, and to see the smiles is just surreal. We're still not quite wrapping our heads around it just yet, but maybe in a couple of weeks.”

As Ms. Morassutti casts her eye across the room to her son working on a new iPad app with a teacher, she sums it up; “He needs to be reminded it is a joyous thing to be educated. It shouldn't be traumatic.”