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School offers support, basic life lessons to autistic students

By Jeannie Kever

Updated 12:04 a.m., Monday, May 7, 2012

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Donna Wilson, left, had worked at the Monarch School for seven years when she offered to fill in as house parent for a few weeks. That was two years ago. "I learn every day," Wilson says of her interaction with such students as 18-year-old Riley Simpson. Photo: Melissa Phillip / © 2012 Houston Chronicle



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More Information

The Monarch School is one of a number of private schools in the Houston area serving children and adolescents with autism and other neurological disorders, but few offer residential programs.

Riley Simpson could have become a statistic, one of the growing number of people with autism who leave school only to find that the next step toward independence - a job and a home of their own - remains just beyond their grasp.

Instead, Simpson has found something entirely different: Dinner parties. Job interview tips. Advice on the difference between Madonna and Lady Gaga.

"When everyone laughs, it's because we understand each other," he said as he gathered with friends over a spaghetti dinner. "We have the same experiences in life."

That didn't happen by accident.

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Avondale House Executive Director Barbara Boyette says the search for housing is one of the biggest challenges families face as their children become adults.

"When children are in school, the school is their support system," Boyette said. "Their families are shocked when their children turn 22."

Avondale House has operated three group homes for teens and adults with autism since the 1970s. It also has a day school for children from preschool through age 22, and runs a day program for adults.

The Center offers housing for adults with Asperger's syndrome in a high-rise just west of downtown.

Several of these clients attend a program at Houston Community College.

The Center traditionally has served people with intellectual disabilities, and it still does. But Executive Director Eva Aguirre said it expanded its mission as the demand became clear.

"We see the needs everywhere," she said.

One of the region's best-known residential programs for adults with autism spectrum disorders, as well as for those with developmental and other disabilities, is the Brookwood Community in Brookshire, west of Houston.

— Jeannie Kever

Simpson, 18, will graduate this spring from the [Monarch School](#), a therapeutic day school in west Houston.

A generation or more of mainstreaming students with disabilities has increased public acceptance, but employers have been slower to adapt. Options for community housing are still limited, as well.

Monarch is trying to change that, one student at a time.

The school's mission has broadened over the years.

It now serves students from prekindergarten through high school and offers a post-graduate program with internships, help finding jobs and, for some students, the transition to college. It has a small housing program, a cluster of homes near the campus where students ranging from their teens to early 30s live with a house parent.

An apartment program for more independent living could start next year.

Monarch serves students with attention deficit disorder, Tourette Syndrome, traumatic brain injury, and mood, anxiety and seizure disorders. The number with autism spectrum disorders has risen dramatically over the past 15 years and now accounts for almost two-thirds of the school's enrollment, executive director [Marty Webb](#) said.

Nationally, the number of children identified as having an autism spectrum disorder has doubled over the past decade, and 1 in 88 children now has been diagnosed with the condition, according to the [Centers for Disease](#)

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Autism is a developmental disorder, marked by varying degrees of difficulty in social interaction and communication; about 40 percent also have a cognitive impairment.

Boys are four times more likely to be affected than girls.

Research has found genetic mutations that can raise the risk; other evidence points to risk factors including maternal obesity and paternal age.

Early diagnosis and intervention have eased the hallmark behaviors of some children, said [Linda Holloway](#), who chairs the department of rehabilitation, social work and addictions at the [University of North Texas](#).

"The schools are doing a much better job," she said.

Public schools provide services until students turn 22; private schools charge tuition - at Monarch, it varies with the student's level but can top \$30,000 a year, although financial aid is available.

Too often, Holloway said, progress ends when students leave school.

"We talk about this black hole after graduation," she said. "Too many young adults don't know about the resources out there."

Unemployment and underemployment among adults with autism is as high as 90 percent, according to [Lisa Goring](#), vice president for family services at the advocacy group Autism Speaks.

That helps to explain why lifetime costs to care for a person with autism are \$1.4 million, according to research from [the University of Pennsylvania](#) and the [London School of Economics](#). The cost rises to \$2.3 million for those who also have a cognitive disability.

Helping one another

Riley Simpson had his first job interview last month. And while he didn't get the job, he felt good about the experience.

"They liked me," he reported. "They wanted to go full-time. I did really good, though."

Simpson has a form of autism called Asperger's syndrome, characterized by normal to high intelligence but difficulties with socialization and communication.

"I normally don't like to brag, but many people have told me I'm lucky," he said. "I have a pretty good grasp of what's going on socially."

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