

HOMETOWN HEROES:

Autism Profile Class, Old Mill Middle South

JENNIFER NOVINGER, KIM COOK, DEBBIE VACEK AND PAT GAGLIANO

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For the past three years, our son, Timothy, has attended the autism profile class at OMMS. We’ve watched Timothy grow a lot as a young man during that time, and his success is due in large part to his teacher, Jennifer Novinger, and her three assistants, Kim Cook, Debbie Vacek and Pat Gagliano. These four magnificent ladies have enriched our son’s life, as well as our own lives. They are heroes to us, and it is a privilege to nominate them as Hometown Heroes.

Although the autism profile class is small, it is a huge undertaking. These four women must not only educate the children, but manage all of the myriad peculiarities and quirks that go along with such a class. Through it all, Jen, Kim, Debbie and Pat have taken the time to show that they really care, whether they realize it or not. It’s not just a job to them. They have been understanding, patient and kind through all of Tim’s highs and lows.

These remarkable women have also shown Tim’s parents a little understanding, patience and kindness. Whether it’s my husband’s proofreading and editing of IEPs, my boasting about how wonderful Tim is, or Tim’s latest scripting episode, they manage to redirect and get us back on task.

Timothy has provided his teachers with moments of both humor and stress, and it’s comforting to know that he is in an environment where he can be reassured that everything will be all right. Personally, I prefer the humorous moments, and we’ve had many a laugh over Tim’s antics.

Many of you may not know it, but my husband and I have five daughters as well. We also homeschool. Our oldest is almost 16 and in 10th grade; our youngest is in kindergarten. Our plan was to homeschool Tim, too. After Tim was diagnosed with autism, I pretty much tossed that idea. I felt I did not have the specialized training and education for that overwhelming job, along with providing the additional therapies he would need.

These four ladies provide the autism community with extraordinary dedication and service. It comes from the heart. It comes from four educators who want to improve the lives of these kids as much as possible in the short period of time that they are in their care. It means that they are there, day in and day out, working to make the school year as normal an experience as possible.

It certainly helps that Jen, Kim, Debbie and Pat are willing to go the extra mile for autistic children. From promoting autism awareness school-wide during April, to taking up lunchtime collections to donate to our ASA chapter, these ladies set a real standard of excellence. It’s the “little things,” too, like that note home saying what an awesome day Tim had, or that kind-hearted phone call or e-mail when things *haven’t* gone so well. All of this makes our role as parents much easier. At the end of the day, it’s reassuring to know that Tim has been in a caring and nurturing environment, which makes our day less stressful.

As you may know all too well, it was not easy facing Tim’s autism challenges, but for me in particular, it was hard giving up home education. Yet not once, in the past three years, have I regretted having Tim in the autism profile class. We have been blessed to have four women who pretty much think of these kids as their own and have made an indelible mark on us all. Jen, Kim, Debbie and Pat are more than deserving of the accolade “Hometown Heroes.”

NOMINATED BY: Cindy Gallagher, Parent