



Alumni Joe and Jackie Ceonzo and their sons, Andrew (left) and Joey at one of SNACK's NYC location, and a favorite spot for the children—the basketball court.

If You Build It, They Will Come

Alums create program to help children with autism

BY BETTY RUSSELL



One of SNACK's key strategies is the excellent child to staff ratio. The high number of trained staff members are able to give attendees one-on-one attention that makes all the difference and promotes involvement and better outcomes.



SNACK has scholarships to help children and families in need.

Jackie Galatola Ceonzo '86 A&S and her husband, Joe Ceonzo '85 VSB, met at Villanova and had the quintessential college experience.

"Our time at Villanova was filled with fun, friends and hope," Jackie says. "We had it all. Then we had this wonderful little boy and everything changed."

The Ceonzo's son, Joey, was diagnosed with a lower functioning type of autism at the age of two. Autism spectrum disorders are an array of complex developmental disabilities that may impair children's social and communication skills and can cause repetitive, often disruptive behaviors. There's no cure for autism, but many kids' symptoms improve with appropriate therapies.

Coping with a devastating diagnosis

At the time of his diagnosis, Joey didn't speak, and he had a profound seizure disorder that lasted until he was seven.

"Joey had 25-50 seizures a day," Joe says. "We were so worried about his seizures that we didn't realize the big challenge we faced with his autism."

The Ceonzos enrolled Joey in early intervention services but quickly became frustrated with the level of care available. They found that most programs weren't equipped to handle the difficult behaviors associated with autism.

"Joey spent so much time in school and undergoing after-school therapies that

he didn't have any fun," Jackie says. "I knew he would stay in his own world if we let him."

Turning adversity into opportunity

Several years ago, Joe, a finance specialist on Wall Street, had a difficult choice to make. His company wanted to transfer him to another office out of New York. Jackie and Joe didn't want to disrupt Joey's routine. At the same time, they wanted Joey to have a happier, more fulfilling life.

So they took matters into their own hands. Joe accepted a severance package instead of a transfer, and he and Jackie used those funds to create an organization tailored for kids with autism and other special needs. Joe soon found new employment and Jackie found a new vocation.

The Special Needs Activity Center for Kids (SNACK) opened in Manhattan, NY, in 2003. The Ceonzos worked with professionals to design a place where kids ages 3-18 could socialize while they learned practical skills in a warm and supportive environment. Jackie serves as SNACK's executive director.

Acceptance and support help kids thrive

"Joey and many other SNACK kids suffered from isolation," Joe says. "They weren't invited to

other kids' homes and were turned away from many programs in the community."

For many special needs kids, SNACK is the first place that they have felt truly welcome and where they are encouraged to do things that other kids take for granted. They can participate in group and individual activities, including: swimming lessons, sports clinics, art, music, yoga, movement and drama. Staff members also take the kids on field trips.



SNACK was originally designed for children up to a certain age, but when the Ceonzos realized children "aged-out" of programs all-too-soon, they opened the program and their hearts to older children with autism, and to children without autism but with other disabilities who could not find programs to accept them. Pictured here, the swim program has been very beneficial to children of all ages.

“Kids with autism and other special needs usually can’t go to the movies because their behaviors disturb other customers,” Jackie says. “We rented an entire theater for one field trip. The kids had a great time. They could watch a movie and feel free to be themselves.”

The Center has a high 2:1 student to staff ratio and limits the size of classes to make sure all kids get the attention they need. SNACK recruits highly qualified personnel who have undergone advanced training in a variety of special education fields, including speech-language therapy,

applied behavior analysis (ABA), and music and art therapy. Staff throughout the Center use ABA principles to help manage behavior and provide the positive reinforcement kids need to make progress.

Although the Center is a non-profit organization, parents pay fees to enroll children in SNACK programs. However, scholarships are available.

Phenomenal growth

SNACK initially offered one 2-hour program one day a week. Today, the Center offers 22 hours of programming in three

locations and serves 150 kids each week. Services are available after school, on weekends, during school vacations and over the summer.

While SNACK focuses on special needs children, it has evolved into a caring community for kids and their families. The Center offers a family swim time, and siblings can participate in any sports activities that interest them. More importantly, all family members receive support and develop friendships with people who understand exactly what they’re going through.

Keeping the Faith

Dad and Son Find that Different can be Wonderful

In 1987, Michael Fitzmaurice’s ‘68 VSB life changed dramatically when several prominent physicians diagnosed his 2-year-old son, Chris, with autism. The little boy rocked constantly, didn’t speak or make eye contact, and had other classic autistic symptoms.

“Chris started intensive behavioral, speech and physical therapy services immediately and continued receiving care for many years,” Fitzmaurice says.

Surviving Early Struggles

Chris’ early academic experiences were discouraging. School officials wanted to remove him from the classroom in kindergarten because of his distracting behavior. Then he had to repeat second grade. By eighth grade, years of therapy began to pay off, as did Chris’ interaction with his siblings, some of whom also had learning disabilities. Chris was doing better academically but still struggled socially.

“He was two years older than the other kids and was very tall,” Michael says. “Other kids made fun of him. It was very tough.”

In high school, Chris started lifting weights, making friends and getting



Chris Fitzmaurice and his proud father, alumnus Michael Fitzmaurice. Chris is now a college graduate who helps others create a more positive lifestyle through exercise.

better grades. Remarkably, he was accepted at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in exercise science in May 2009. His professors were so impressed with Chris that they accepted him into the school’s master program.

“My goal is to help normal and disabled people live a better lifestyle,” Chris says.

Thriving Despite Autism

Villanova alumni may remember Michael for his athletic achievements in swim-

ming and his induction into the Villanova Hall of Fame. While at Villanova, he was a 10-time All American swimmer and won a Gold Medal for the United States in the 1967 Pan American Games. Michael also swam on the same relay with Olympic gold medal winner Mark Spitz.

The hard work and tenacity that made him an outstanding swimmer gave him some of the skills he needed to tackle the problems Chris faced. But Michael says Villanova gave him something even more important.

“I took my faith for granted when I was younger,” Michael says. “Villanova gave me my faith back, and my strong beliefs and prayer got me through this. I really believe Chris was touched by the hand of God.”

Chris adds, “My autistic symptoms are still within me, but unlike the past, I am able to control them more effectively,” Chris says. “To be honest, I feel that if I had not been diagnosed with autism and was actually considered ‘normal,’ that I would not be half the determined and caring person that I am. I want to share my story to inspire hope in other people.”

Serving others

“If we hadn’t done something, Joey would have spent all his spare time at home practicing being autistic,” Jackie says. Instead, Joey, who is now 14, has made extraordinary progress thanks to the services and programs he participates in at SNACK. He has friends, listens to music, and enjoys swimming and playing soccer. And he has closer relationships with his parents and his 10-year-old brother, Andrew.

Joey may have been the inspiration for SNACK, but many other children have benefited from the Ceonzo’s generosity and vision. Some SNACK families looked for years for a program that would help their children learn, play and flourish. They’re grateful that SNACK is there to fill that need.

“The changes I’ve seen in our kids have been amazing,” Jackie says.

“SNACK grew much larger than we ever imagined,” Joe says. “It’s now a training center for special education, occupational therapy and psychology students. We get emails from all over the world from people who want to open similar programs for their kids. Our goal is to expand SNACK to other areas across the country and help even more children. We’re working on a manual to help other people set up this type of program in their communities.”

Villanova experience left lasting impression

The Ceonzos admit that living with autism isn’t easy. However, they say their time at Villanova shaped the kind of parents they became and gave them the inner strength to help their son and other kids that society over overlooks.

“Villanova’s emphasis on giving back stayed with us,” Jackie says. “And we were there in 1985 when Villanova beat Georgetown to win the NCAA basketball championship. It was the biggest Cinderella story in the country. No one thought we had a chance. But the team and the school never gave up. We took that lesson to heart and never considered giving up on Joey or his autism. His diagnosis was devastating, but his illnesses added a whole new and positive dimension to our lives.”

Villanova Nursing Student Already Making a Difference for Autistic Kids

When most of her high school classmates were applying to colleges, Catherine Capozzola was already taking undergraduate level courses and participating in autism research. She collaborated with Susan DeLuke, Ph.D., an associate professor of Special Education at the College of St. Rose in Albany, NY, to study the effectiveness of social skills groups for adolescents with autism.



Catherine enrolled in the Villanova College of Nursing in 2008 and is pursuing her nursing degree and continuing her work on autism.

“The school has been incredibly supportive,” she says. “I’d only been here a

short time last fall when the CON sponsored my presentation at the International Autism Conference in Toronto. This year, they supported my trip to speak at the Ohio Regional Autism and Low Incidence Conference.”

Now a sophomore, Catherine is about to embark on an independent study research project that will look at nursing care from the perspective of patients and families dealing with autism.

“Villanova is a caring, community-oriented environment where we can bring and our own ideas, and people here will help us develop them,” Catherine says. “I hope the research I’m doing will help the medical community provide better services to kids with autism.”

Alumna Heads Prestigious Autism Organization

Jean Ruttenberg ’76 GS has had a tremendous impact on the lives of people with autism spectrum disorders in Philadelphia where she heads the Center for Autism – the oldest specialized autism treatment center in the United States. The Center offers community-based programs and serves about 400 patients a year.

“No two children with autism are alike,” she says. “So we don’t use just one methodology. Staff members assess children and their families individually and develop the programs they need rather than put them in existing programs. For example, we offer services to address sensory issues that help calm children’s systems down so they can get ready to learn. We also teach them how to interact, communicate and relate to others. Social skills are vital to their future success.”

The Center’s specialists integrate new research into programs and services.

They also measure patients’ progress to determine whether the therapies they receive are effective.

Ruttenberg has a bachelor’s degree and two masters’ degrees, including the master’s in education/elementary counseling she earned at Villanova.

“I didn’t want to go just anywhere for a master’s degree,” Ruttenberg says. “I chose Villanova because it promotes strong ethics and community service. My education there really helped me develop a greater framework for looking at children within the context of their families and embracing families are part of the treatment process.”

In 2008, Ruttenberg was honored with the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Alumni Medallion—an award that recognizes graduates who have excelled professionally and have demonstrated services to their communities and to Villanova.