

New school will address 'grey area' in Autism education



By Brock Weir

Serena Thompson's young son, Daniel, lives on the autism spectrum.

He has been in public school and private school, he has even been home schooled, but he has yet to find the perfect fit for him.

Ms. Thompson, however, thought she had struck gold in an autism-specific private school in Toronto, but when told by the director parents were not allowed in the facility, there was no turning back for this mom.

Joining forces with Laurie McRae, whose son is also on the Autism spectrum, the duo have set about turning a large Aurora house into Lighthouse Learning and Development Centre, slated to open this September on Old Yonge Street, next to Oakland Hall restaurant.

Unique for York Region, the school is focused on individual education plans, direct instruction, and sensory experiences, all lead by Ontario-certified teachers with specialization in teaching children with autism at a maximum rate of four students per teacher.

Throughout Daniel's journey, Ms. Thompson said he had 'amazing teachers' in the school system, but these teachers were not given the adequate support they needed.

'In all the centres we went to, people wanted to tell me about my son, but I am with him 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so I am pretty sure I can tell you way more about my son than you can tell me,' says Serena. 'There seems to be a gap. [We chose the name] Lighthouse because a lighthouse is the only thing you can see in the dark from miles and miles away. Being a parent, I have felt a lot of times very isolated because you have to trust people to help your child, but that is really hard. There has to be something out there to help you and that is where this all came from.'

'We're trying to service this grey area of children who are too high functioning for a typical community class, but they are not high functioning enough to not be supported in a regular classroom environment. Academically, Daniel is very strong, but he learns in a certain way. You have to talk to him in a certain way. You have to deliver the information in a certain way, and that is something that, unfortunately, the school boards have not caught up with.'

Opening up a school to address this gap has been a dream of Ms. Thompson's since 2012. At the time, she says she knew how smart

her son was but there weren't a lot of people who believed it. She was trying to fight for his education and convince people 'he was worth teaching', she explains. He has the potential to be great, but if you don't believe in him first, he is not going to reach that potential.

That is a struggle common for parents with kids on the Autism spectrum, something 850 likes and counting on Facebook can testify to, she says.

Parents will have their first opportunity to take in Lighthouse with an Open House on Saturday, May 9. When completed, the school will have room for 25 students, ample volunteers, and even a 'grandparents' room' where grandparents of students can come and spend time with their grandchildren with the support of trained staff.

Tuition is \$2,400 per month per student for the school year and, in partnership with Under the Umbrella, Lighthouse aims to raise a minimum of \$150,000 per year to provide student bursaries.

Students will follow a typical day familiar to everyday students in the public school stream, and this is by design.

'We're hoping this is sort of a middle point for kids where we can transition them into the regular school system seamlessly and we can't do that unless they are familiar with how that routine works,' says Ms. Thompson. 'Although we would love to keep them, we would love to see them move on. [We'll measure our success] by seeing some of our children integrate beautifully into the public school system, something they probably wouldn't have been able to do without coming to us first.'

'Another way is by our parents telling other people how great this is, how welcoming it is, and by seeing the smiles on these little kids' faces ' little kids who have anxiety about going to school, seeing them come here, want to be here, and be happy.'

For more information on Lighthouse, visit www.lhldc.com.