

Paving the Way to Bright Futures for Individuals with Autism

When you become a parent, your mind is filled with all of the possibilities that lay ahead for your child. You dream about their future, the things you will do together, the things they will achieve. Then, you receive a diagnosis of autism, and in that instant, your child, and the future you had imagined for them, is taken from you. It is gone, and you are left to struggle, to pick up the pieces and try to form some semblance of a life with them.

Florence Block, daughter of Theodore and Esther Block, both Holocaust survivors, was born in a German refugee center. Despite unimaginable hardships, Theodore and Esther built a life together, as owners of a furniture outlet in Newark, NJ. In 1992, Florence gave birth to her third child, Steven, and of course, began to dream of his future.

Twenty-two months later, her dreams were halted when Steven, who was not speaking, making eye contact, nor playing with other children, was diagnosed with autism.

Florence diligently researched. She learned about autism treatments – which were effective and which weren't. She scrutinized schools and programs until she found one that offered the best quality intervention – the Princeton Child Development Institute (PCDI). Sadly, due to the limited number of similar programs, there was a long waiting list. Florence knew that this was the right course of treatment for Steven and that there was no time to waste in getting him the best help, so rather than settle or resign herself to a waiting list, she took action. She set a course to partner with PCDI to establish a new school. Florence learned everything necessary to ensure that her son, as well as other children with autism, had an opportunity for the best education possible.

Although autism may have changed her course, it didn't stop her from dreaming of Steven's future.

In early 1999, Somerset Hills Learning Institute, with Florence as one of its founders, opened its doors to 5 students with autism and 5 highly trained teachers. Under the direction of the Institute's founding Executive Director, Dr. Kevin Brothers, in

partnership with PCDI, the school began a program using Applied Behavior Analysis to teach students with autism. Over the years, the school has grown to serve exponentially more people with autism and their families, train new interventionist, and publish research for the benefit of the entire autism treatment community around the globe.

There is an undeniable need within the autism community for quality adult services that offer more than mere supervision. This is why Somerset Hills Learning Institute is now launching the Center for Career Advancement, providing job training and career opportunities to adults with autism, helping them lead meaningful, fulfilling lives and furthering the possibilities for their futures. The Center will give parents the chance to breathe easy with the knowledge that their children have the skills and guidance they need to lead independent lives; it lets them dream about the future their children are building.

Florence was the catalyst for creation of an Institute that can be replicated to offer educational opportunities to individuals with autism, across the lifespan. Dr. Brothers said, “ We at Somerset Hills Learning Institute are so grateful to Florence for paving the way for us to meaningfully impact so many lives. We have chosen to honor her by naming the entrance drive to Somerset Hills Learning Institute’s headquarters ‘Florence Block Way’ in commemoration of her enduring efforts to improve the lives of people with autism and her devotion to the Institute.”

Florence’s perseverance and refusal to stop dreaming of her son’s future, paved the way for Somerset Hills Learning Institute to change the face of autism and create bright futures for its students. Time and time again, the Institute has given parents back their children and the dreams they have for them – the things they will do together and the things they will achieve. A diagnosis of autism can lead to so many “will nots” as parents look ahead, but because of Florence Block and her refusal to give up, Somerset Hills Learning Institute is able to restore so many “wills.”