

The magic of music

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And piano has certainly been a part of that.

"Steven is a wonderful student," Ms. LaMon said. "Steven is high-functioning, and he actually caught on quite quickly to playing the piano."

High-functioning Autism means that a person can use meaningful language, read, write, do math, show affection, complete daily tasks but can't hold eye contact, maintain a conversation, engage in play or pick up on social cues.

Watching Steven play the piano is a dream come true for Mrs. Heinz.

"Every parent wants to set their child up for success, and Steven is greatly succeeding at this," she said. "We definitely tried other avenues, like gymnastics, but it didn't work. They didn't know how to handle Steven and interact with him at many of the places I took him. Piano is a perfect fit and I really believe that it was kismet that we met Miss Maria. Her personality is a great match for Steven."

The Heinzes plan to keep piano playing in the family. Steven's twin sister Marisa, 11, will be attending the Kane Studio this fall. "She won't be in the same class as Steven; she will be taking regular piano lessons. It should be a lot of fun," Mrs. Heinz said.

At first, Mrs. Heinz was unsure about Steven taking piano lessons because Steven suffers from sensory problems as a result of his Autism.

"Steven has sensory issues—he can't take a lot of loud noises—so at first I was hesitant about the music," Mrs. Heinz said, noting that when the family went to Disneyland a few years ago, Steven loved watching the Disney characters go by in the parade but hated all the noise—so much so that Mr. and Mrs. Heinz had to put both sets of their hands over Steven's ears. "But from the minute we stepped into the studio, there was no further doubt. It was the best decision my husband and I ever made putting Steven into this piano program."

At a recital this past May, Ms. LaMon recalls the immense joy expressed on the parents' faces watching the children play *Fur Elise* by Beethoven. "It was fantastic. We taught all the kids how to take a bow, and everyone was dressed up. Parents were crying," she said. "To see this type of progress means so much to everyone involved in this program."

That's because this program is giving families a little piece of their normal lives back.

"I get phone calls all the time. So many parents are looking for a program like this," Ms. LaMon

said. "This allows families to get a sense of normalcy back into their household."

Since there are many types of Autism, Ms. LaMon must always be ready to tackle any type of behavior on any given day. They include *Asperger's Syndrome*, whose patients can communicate and possess an excellent memory but have an extremely obsessive behavior. *Fragile X* involves hyperactivity, hand-flapping and speech delays. *Rett Syndrome* is a degenerative disorder that primarily affects girls, including loss of speech, hand-wringing, rocking, and social withdrawal. *Landau-Kleffner Syndrome* is when children can appear normal until up to the age of seven. While they may be able to speak well in early childhood, this ability is gradually lost.

"Every behavior is different," Ms. LaMon said. "The job is challenging but extremely rewarding."

The Music Academy for Special Learners will be moving to a new, more spacious location in Ronkonkoma this October. "We are not moving that far away because we don't want to disturb or disrupt the children's and parents' lives," she said. "We are only moving about a mile and a half away. It will be bigger and better."

In recent years, there has been a tremendous growth in the number of Long Island children diagnosed with autism and other neurological disorders. Across Long Island, the number of students classified as Autistic has jumped nearly 50 percent during the past three years to more than 3,000. Autism occurs in about 1 in 125 births.

The question of what causes Autism is highly controversial. There are theories that link autism to vaccines, genetics, bad parenting, atypical brain development, immune deficiency problem and poor nutrition. Mrs. Heinz can't say if it's one thing or another.

"I can't really say if I agree with vaccines causing Autism, to tell you the truth, I don't know," she said. "I have been to hundreds of lectures on the topic. I still have yet to see a 100-percent-sure definitive answer on what causes Autism."

One thing Mrs. Heinz knows for certain: the lives of her son and her family have changed for the better thanks in no small part to the Music Academy for Special Learners.

"During Steven's preschool and early Elementary School years, I did a lot of crying. I don't do that anymore," Mrs. Heinz said. "We are now at a point in our family where we are enjoying our lives. We are blessed."

For more information on the Music Academy for Special Learners, call (631) 656-0180.