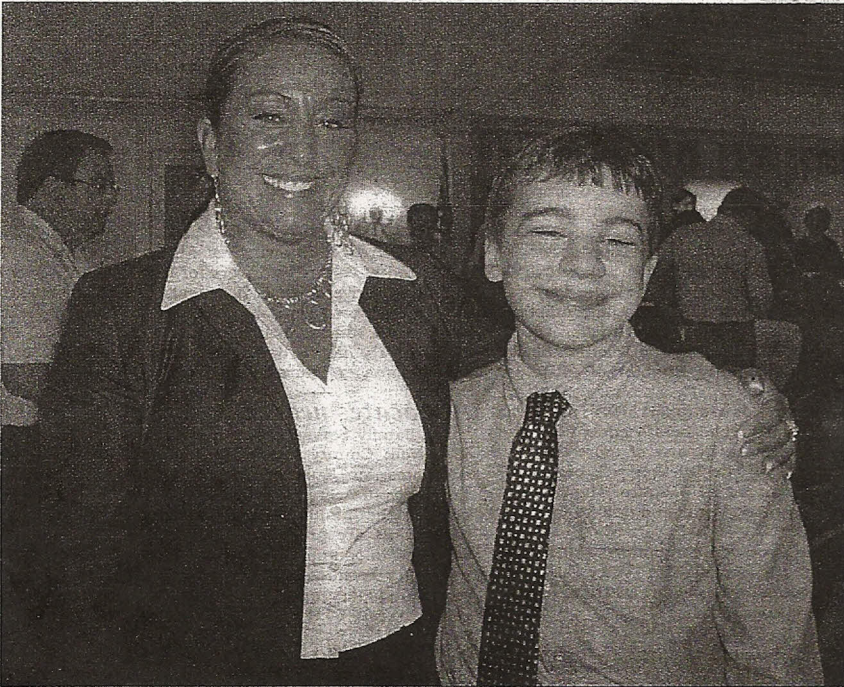


# Dimensions of Living

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## In tune with special needs



**KEYED IN:** Steven Heinz, 11, of Nesconset (right, and above) is one of many special needs children benefitting from the instruction of Maria LaMon of the Music Academy for Special Learners.

The moment Steven first heard the sound of the piano, he gravitated towards it.

"He instantly had a connection and immediately fell in love with playing the piano," Mrs. Heinz said of Steven, who has a pervasive developmental disorder, a mild form of Autism that affects a child's ability to communicate, understand language, play, and relate to others.

"Steven has been practicing here at home and right now he is working on *Surfboard Boogie*, which is a great jazz tune, and the *Star Wars* theme. My son loves *Star Wars*," Mrs. Heinz said. "Whenever he plays on the piano, the whole family gathers around and claps and says 'Bravo' when he is done."

Steven, who attends piano lessons once a week, recently graduated from Tackan Elementary School in Nesconset and will be attending Great Hollow Middle School in Nesconset this September. "I am so happy with the progress that my son is making," Mrs. Heinz said.

Steven, whose hobbies include collecting Pokémon game cards and playing Wii, still suffers with his mood swings.

"You never know. Some days he is the sweetest kid, other days, Steven can be quite defiant," she said. "I definitely learned a lot about Autism through my son, the highs and the lows. But I do know that he has gotten a whole lot better."

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### How piano bettered the lives of autistic boy and his family one of many success stories from unique Music Academy

By URSULA MOORE

**T**here's nothing like a dangling carrot when it comes to encouraging youngsters to accomplish something.

Or, in this case, a dangling donut.

Lured by sugary treats bought by his instructor prior to every lesson at the locally based Music Academy for Special Learners, 11-year-old Steven Heinz, of Nesconset, is fast becoming a piano protégé.

"Steven loves chocolate donuts, and I mentioned this to his teacher, Miss Maria," said MaryLu Heinz, Steven's mother, of instructor Maria LaMon. "So now she gets his donut from Dunkin' Donuts, and Steven knows to look for it at the end of his lesson. With Autism, it can be hard to keep a child focused so every little incentive helps."

Ms. LaMon is Steven's music teacher at the Music Academy for Special Learners held at the Kane Piano Studio

in Nesconset. The program uses visual methods to teach musical notes to Autistic children ranging from non-speaking to high-functioning.

Steven showed signs of autism that his mom started to notice before he was diagnosed at age 2.

"When Steven was eight months old, my husband and I knew something wasn't right," she recalled. "Steven had difficulty transitioning. He would often wake up from his naps screaming

and crying. Even going to the car or a birthday party would end up in a meltdown. He could not transition from one thing to the next without great difficulty. Also, Steven wasn't talking and he gave very little eye contact. Steven's twin sister was progressing just fine but Steven wasn't doing any of the things she was able to do."

Motivated by her son's great interest for playing the piano, Mrs. Heinz recently purchased a Yamaha Digital Piano.