

# SUN-TRIBUNE PEOPLE

## Stouffville autism centre gives families hope



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Tracey Grensted at Let's Communicate in Stouffville, a community-based autism centre.

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Staff Writer

Shortly after the Scrofano family of Stouffville celebrated their eldest son's second birthday, he started to change.

"I noticed it was very difficult to get his attention; he was always very hyper (and had) limited speech," said Matteo's mother, Anna Maria Scrofano.

Matteo spent the next year bouncing from one day care to another. It was not until one day-care provider approached the Scrofano family that they finally get assistance.

"All I needed was one person to say to me 'I think we need to talk,'" Mrs. Scrofano said.

The family immediately got on the pediatric development assessment centre's waiting list at Markham Stouffville Hospital. It took one year to receive a clinical diagnosis of what was happening to Matteo. That was in 2005.

While waiting to see the pediatric neurologist, the Scrofanos continued to seek out the assistance of other specialists in order to get an answer to Matteo's troubling behaviour.

However, Mrs. Scrofano knew deep down what the problem was.

"I knew he had autism," she said.

Autism spectrum disorder is the most common neurological disease to affect children, as well as one of the most common developmental disabilities to affect Canadians in general, according to the Autism Society of Canada.

Autism changes the way the brain processes information and can affect all aspects of a person's development. Symptoms include a disinterest in toys, content being alone, flapping hands, becoming excited in unusual situations, lack of affection, unusual sleeping patterns and the failure to respond to his or her own name.

Despite exhibiting many of these characteristics, it was hard to find anyone able to correctly diagnose Matteo.

Matteo was initially diagnosed, by his pediatrician, as being epileptic.

### NOW SEIZURE-FREE

"When we got the diagnosis, I knew that wasn't it," Mrs. Scrofano said, noting that at one time she did believe Matteo suffered from epileptic seizures, but it was not the root cause of his behaviour. As of today, Matteo is seizure-free.

In late 2006, Matteo finally saw the pediatric neurologist at Markham Stouffville Hospital, who confirmed what Mrs. Scrofano knew all along. Matteo was autistic.

For the next two years, Matteo went to therapy in Richmond Hill. But last year, he changed therapists and starting going to Stouffville's Let's Communicate, which is a community-based program centre for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder or who are developmentally or communicatively delayed.

The centre opened in April 2006 at the rear of a plaza that houses M&M Meat Shops and

Card's Appliances and Televisions.

"There (were) absolutely no services (here) so families were traveling to Newmarket or Aurora or Ajax and the Pickering area," said Let's Communicate owner/operator Tracey Grensted.

Let's Communicate utilizes applied behavioural analysis, as well as intensive behavioural intervention, to best understand and treat the needs of autistic children.

Intensive behavioural intervention is an individualized program that targets communication through imitation and play, school preparedness as well as social and life skills.

Prior to going to Let's Communicate, Mrs. Scrofano said therapy helped Matteo read and function in social situations, but it was apparent these were learned behaviours and not something that came naturally to him.

However, once at Let's Communicate, Mrs. Scrofano noted that he now speaks with feeling and can sit down and play games with his family, something he never did before.

Matteo's autism has also been downgraded from moderate-to-severe to high functioning.

According to Mrs. Scrofano, when Matteo was diagnosed with autism by the pediatric neurologist, she told the family: "by the age of 10, he wouldn't be on the spectrum; therapy would help him that much."

Matteo goes for a re-assessment later this year, shortly after his seventh birthday.

### Fashion show helps children access Stouffville centre

Let's Communicate is in the process of opening a subsidiary company to focus on fundraising for families within Stouffville to utilize professional assistance, through grants.

"We want to be accessible to everyone," said Tracey Grensted, the owner/operator of Let's Communicate.

The provincial government currently provides \$40,000 a year, per autistic child, for therapy.

"But a lot of families are still (paying) out of pocket," Ms Grensted said, noting \$40,000 does not provide enough money for the number of hours many children need to be in therapy.

Let's Communicate is conducting a penny drive campaign in which people are asked to fill small plastic water bottles with pennies and bring them to the centre.

In an effort to step up their fundraising efforts, on Feb. 23, the organization will be holding a fashion show at Boston Pizza in Stouffville.

The event gets under way at 6 p.m. Tickets are \$40 each and include dinner, door prizes and the fashion show.

Tickets are available at M&M Meat Shops, Boston Pizza and Card's Appliances and Televisions.

### Whitchurch-Stouffville News Digest

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#### Canvassers, pizza sales boost heart research

There are 114 people making the rounds of your neighbourhood for all the right reasons this month.

They're trying to raise \$16,000 for Whitchurch-Stouffville's Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario February drive.

Last year's campaign raised \$15,633. The goal across northern York Region is \$152,000.

Money raised supports the work of 900 researchers across Canada.

"We are hoping to retain these canvassers for next year and also to expand the campaign into areas we have not canvassed before," said Maureen O'Leary, York Region North Area Manager.

Boston Pizza in Stouffville is selling paper hearts for \$1. Heart-shaped pizzas are on the menu this weekend, with a portion of the proceeds going to the Boston Pizza Foundation and the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

#### Get active this weekend

It's a long weekend for many, thanks to Monday's Family Day designation.

The Whitchurch-Stouffville Winter Carnival is on today from 1 to 4 p.m. at Cedar Beach on Musselman's Lake, 10 minutes north of Stouffville.

Latham Gallery hosts a free family art day today in the Lebovic Leisure Centre lobby from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Make hand-printed Valentine's Day cards with artist Sandra Cole Burke.

Monday activities include:

- Oak Ridges-Markham MPP Helena Jaczek hosts a free public skate from 2 to 4 p.m. at the Stouffville Arena.

- The Lebovic Leisure Centre is holding a variety of swimming and fitness sessions. Call 905-642-PLAY.

- Camp Willowgrove is hosting a free day, including wagon rides, sledding and snowshoeing. Call 905-640-2127.

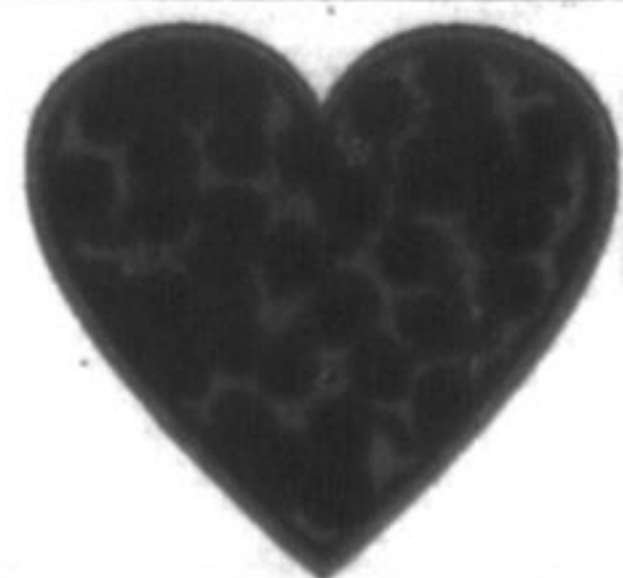
- The Whitchurch-Stouffville Museum is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Create heritage crafts and visit the historic buildings.



## Boston Pizza® UPCOMING EVENTS



**TONIGHT**  
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**FAMILY DAY**  
Monday, February 16<sup>th</sup>  
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