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Autism society awards 17 grants to educators

By Justin Vick

jvick@independenttribune.com

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The Cabarrus County Chapter of the Autism Society of North Carolina recently awarded 17 educational grants to professionals who work with autistic children.

Most of the \$100 grants went to teachers, allowing them to get instructional materials without having to delve into their pockets. "And that's not always a feasible thing to do," said Christina Whipple, a teacher's assistant in Carolina International School's Exceptional Children program.

Whipple got several items that will help her students improve their learning and social development.

Autism is a developmental disability that affects brain functioning, which could lead to language delays or unusual social skills.

Tracy Breinich, a teacher at Mount Pleasant High School, said it's sometimes difficult meeting the needs of all eight students in her class without boring anyone.

"Academics are almost secondary for my students, because they are getting ready to go out into the world," Breinich said. "They need independent living skills."

Some of her 15- and 16-year-olds don't know how to turn on a washing machine or wash a dish, she said.

Kim Roe's son was diagnosed with autism five years ago, hampering his ability to communicate. It hurt Roe when people would stare at her son or assume his behavior was due to bad parenting.

The Autism Society has helped her cope.

"I have met the most inspiring and phenomenal people," said Roe, who serves as chapter president. "When we go out and people stare at our kids, we can just smile at each other. You learn how to handle it with grace."

The group started more than two years ago with just a handful of people and has grown to roughly 167 members.

"I wish I could say that it was because of the positive things we've done in the community, but if you look at the statistics, autism is spreading," Roe said.

One in 166 children born in the United States will develop autism, according to the society. An estimated 30,000 North Carolinians have autism.

The chapter began awarding the grants last year through donations made in memory of the late James Garrison, whose daughter, Collette Pendergrass, is an officer in the society.

Its next big project will be an Autism Awareness Fair that will showcase available resources in the community. The fair is scheduled for 6:30-8:30 p.m. April 12 at NorthEast Medical Center.

The chapter's leadership is hardworking and persistent, said Ann Palmer, director of



Harris Road Middle School teacher Mary Moss works with Zachary Smoot during class Friday. She works with autistic children and is one of several county teachers that received grants through the Autism Society of North Carolina's Cabarrus County chapter.
Bridgett Baker

chapter relations for the Autism Society of North Carolina.

"This is one of our most active chapters that gives so much back to the community," said Palmer, who oversees 40 chapters.

The Cabarrus County chapter was named Chapter of the Year in 2006, the same year North Carolina won best state chapter of the Autism Society of America.

Palmer said there is hope for parents with autistic children.

Her 24-year-old son, diagnosed with autism when he was 3, graduated from N.C. State University last May.

"We don't know what our kids are going to be doing in the near future," Palmer said.

"We don't want to give up our dreams and hopes for our kids, because anything is possible."

For more information on the Cabarrus County Chapter of the Autism Society of North Carolina, visit www.asnc-ccc.org

• Contact Justin Vick at jvick@independenttribune.com or at 704-789-9138.

\$100 grant winners

Recipients of the James P. Garrison Autism Educational Grants for 2006:

- Amelia Olson, Bethel Elementary School
- Carla Gentile, Bethel Elementary School
- Christina Whipple, Carolina International School
- Breana Turner, Early Intervention Provider
- Mary Moss, Harris Road Middle School
- Carol Diaz, Harrisburg Elementary School
- Miriam Van Pelt, Long Preschool
- Elizabeth Witte, Long Preschool
- Tracey MacLaughlin, Long Preschool
- Tracy Breinich, Mount Pleasant High School
- Shannon Lineberger, Mount Pleasant Middle School
- Jennifer Edwards, Pediatric Theraplay Speech Services
- Wendy Teal, Pediatric Theraplay Speech Services
- Barbara "Lynn" Stipe, TLC Academy of Learning
- Emily Austin, Weddington Hills Elementary School
- Christine Cronin, Wings of Eagles Ranch
- Susan Lankford, Kannapolis Church of Christ