

MERLIN'S MAGIC WAND Opens First Space in New York Area

ACDS in Scarsdale receives LEGOLAND Discovery Center room

By Jean Sheff

Merlin's Magic Wand Foundation, a public charity that works to bring magic into the lives of seriously ill, disabled, and disadvantaged children worked in partnership with LEGOLAND Discovery Center Westchester and ACDS in Scarsdale, a preschool serving children with developmental disabilities, to design and create a magic room inside ACDS that is devoted to occupational therapy for children with special needs.

"The children have been anticipating the opening of the room and are so excited," says Michelle Meyerhoffer an occupational therapist at ACDS. She was right. As soon as they entered the space, 20 students spotted the 5,000 DUPLO bricks and started building with some serious abandon.

"The room meets the needs of our preschoolers ages 3 to 5 in developing fine motor tasks," says Meyerhoffer. "We are delighted that it will enable us to facilitate much-needed therapy services in an engaging environment."

Meyerhoffer pointed out the tools and features available to the teachers and students. A large magnetic puzzle board mounted on one wall enhances children's vertical grasping skills, and the large LEGO pieces help children develop fine and gross motor skills. Moving partitions allow teachers to work individually or in small groups with more privacy. The cloud-shaped lighting fixtures offer soft lighting and the bright graphic walls are inspiring.

Meyerhoffer was delighted that LEGOLAND Discovery Center Westchester asked for input from the teachers when they were designing the space. "It was a wonderful experience," she says. Through their collaboration the seating was modified. "Seating is especially important for our children as they generally have low muscle



Students at ACDS, a preschool for children with disabilities, enjoy creating with LEGO's through the support of Merlin's Magic Wand and LEGOLAND Discovery Center Westchester.

tone," she added.

General Manager of LEGOLAND Discovery Center Westchester, Chris Mines, was pleased to bring some of the magic of LEGOLAND's DUPLO village to the school. "The space was designed to give the children a taste of what they could experience at LEGOLAND Westchester in a sensory-friendly environment," he says. "It's been a great project to work on. We are committed to working with and being an integral part of the local community."

Michael M. Smith, executive director of ACDS, says the preschool opened in September 2016 at 963 Scarsdale Road in a school formerly run by the Archdiocese. "We had two classes and 12 children enrolled," says Smith. "Now the school services 145 children in 15 classes." Children arrive at ACDS through school district preschool education programs. Currently ACDS serves school districts in Southern Westchester including Yonkers, New Rochelle, Port Chester, and Mt. Vernon. ACDS employs

some 75 people in Scarsdale and the school day runs from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., Monday through Friday, year-round. While ACDS adheres to the same holiday and vacation schedule as the local school districts, they are open during the summer months to prevent learning backslide for the children.

The school's main campus in Plainview, Long Island opened in 1966. ACDS (Adults and Children with Down Syndrome) historically served the population affected by Down syndrome, but they have since broadened their scope and now serve those with a wide variety of disabilities.

It was Megan Lombardo, a grant writer for ACDS, who approached Tracie Hogencamp, Merlin's Magic Wand Operations Manager USA, with the concept of a Merlin's Magic Space in ACDS. "We are delighted to be involved

in creating this therapeutic play space," says Hogencamp. "This is the 46th Merlin's Magic Space globally, the eighth in the United States and the first in the Northeast."

In addition to creating Merlin's Magic Spaces, the charity works alongside Merlin Entertainments throughout the United States to host Magical Days Out and community outreach. r

The LEGOLAND Discovery Center room at ACDS is a real partnership," says Smith. And it was clear the involvement on everyone's part was heartfelt. Tiana Jones, whose 2-year-old son Cooper attends the ACDS Plainview school, was on hand to celebrate the new space. "This space is beyond my wildest dreams," says Jones. "It's wonderful to see people focusing on children's abilities rather than their disabilities." It appears parents, teachers, and the children agree. It's a joyful, inspiring, and magical space.

Jean Sheff is editor of Westchester Family.

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