

New school provides environment for neuro-diverse learners to 'bloom'

BY NIKKI ACKERMAN
STAFF WRITER

The Alexander Den Heijer quote "When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower" captures the spirit of the newly-opened Bloom360 Learning Community—which will introduce itself to area families at the free-and-open-to-the-public Germantown Community Special Needs Resource Fair to be held Thursday, Nov. 30 from 6 to 8 p.m. in the Kennedy Middle School cafeteria.

Laura Rauman founded the independent, private school that serves southeastern Wisconsin children (called "learners" at Bloom360) with neuro-diverse needs, such as ADD/ADHD, autism and dyslexia ("They may have an official diagnosis, or they may not," explained Rauman). Fostering learning in a "nurturing environment with a focus on whole-child development while leveraging strengths and interests," the school focuses on reaching each student exactly where they are and guiding them forward. The Learning Guides (teachers) utilize a project-based approach which provides an academic framework with a variety of hands-on activities.

"Physically this school could accommodate a lot of learners, but our goal is to be intentionally small," explained Rauman. "We want things to be individualized, to focus on relationships and give the learners the ability to move at their own pace in their educational journey."

The 10,000-square-foot of interactive and creative learning—built from the historic one-room schoolhouse located at N8921 Stone School Road in East Troy—welcomes children with various special learning needs. The school uses a tree to describe its educational model: the leaves represent the five areas of human development—emotional, body, social, spirit and mind; the trunk is the unique support system of whole child development; and the three roots are each named for an aspect of the school's whole child approach—strength-based, relationship-based and developmentally-based.

"We appreciate everyone's strengths and honor who the individual is," said communications director Dawn Frasa. "It's more about who you are than what you do."

The building is one room after another of specialized learning space. Areas include the multipurpose room which "is set up to be sensory-friendly and support movement," explained Rauman of the space that includes aerial yoga swings; a kitchen where the learners are encouraged to bring their own ingredients to make their lunch for the day; a sensory gym that features a rock wall where occupational therapists work with the learners; a "create-it" studio for art and woodworking projects; and classroom space.

Lighting, furniture and paint colors were intentionally chosen to enhance each space, said Rauman. "Everyone gets what they need and that is different for everyone," she noted.

The school officially opened Sept. 5 and now serves seven learners. It is open to learners ages 5-21 in a school day that runs from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Thursday and until 1 p.m. on Fridays 11 months of the year with several weeks of time off sprinkled within that time frame. Learners receive a high school diploma or certificate of completion upon leaving the school and they will receive guidance transitioning into areas including a four-year college, technical college, volunteer/internship programs, the military and employment.

Bottom line: there is a place for all of the learners who spend their days at Bloom360, as children are not designated by grade level, but rather by their level of development. The children move through their day in an environment that celebrates strengths and works on challenge areas in a way that brings out the best version of each learner, and various forms of therapy—occupational, speech, music—are built into the schedule. "Our model is based on time and space for flexibility," said Rauman, who noted that mindfulness exercises are included each

the day so that the learners can reflect on what they did well that day or where they could try a different approach next time.

Rauman's idea for Bloom360 is rooted in proverbial soil close to home, born organically out of her personal experience with her daughter Morgan, 13, who is on the autism spectrum. After concluding that neither public nor private schools were the best fit for Morgan, her family decided to try home-schooling. This led to her forming relationships with other like-minded individuals and eventually to the conclusion that an entirely new approach to special needs learning was in order.

"One day we said, 'We should start our own school,'" Rauman said. "This has been in the works for six years."

An entrepreneur and owner of Vista360 LLC—a compliance and management consulting firm previously located in Milwaukee—Rauman co-located her firm with Bloom360. Rauman's team from Vista360 provided the financial and organizational framework to launch the school and the Vista team now acts as mentors and advisors to the children.

"This (Vista360) group has so much to offer—they are upbeat, optimistic, fun, smart," said Frasa, who was one of the moms who believed in Rauman's dream early on.

Frasa eagerly came aboard in the planning stages with her now-15-year-old son Darren who was able to use his unique gifts during the renovation of the very school he now attends.

"He was actually involved in the renovation and building planning process," said Frasa. "How many kids can say that about their school?"

Community partnership is a huge part of the Bloom360 vision as "we continue to develop more community bridges," said Rauman. From connections with Willow Creek Ranch to area individuals who make organic spaghetti to the local police department, reaching out and utilizing local resources is key for the school. "We are always looking for opportunities to connect," she said.

Also, the four acres that surround the school have endless potential, said Rauman. "It's peaceful out here and there is a lot of room to play and for outdoor learning experiences. This is a great spot for nature walks, we have plans for a community garden and we are building a playground."

This will all be a part of the big picture of the Bloom360 learners experiencing the world around them and putting in impressive amounts of effort each day—but on their own terms and in ways that celebrate what makes them unique.

Perhaps Frasa's son put it most aptly after his first day of school at Bloom360: "This was the best first day of school ever!"

"He smiles every day when we talk about school," said Frasa. "He has found his place to bloom."

For more information about the school, one can call (414) 935-6360, email info@bloom360.org or visit www.bloom360.org.



SARAH MANKE *Good Neighbors*

Laura Rauman, Founder/President of Bloom 360 Learning Community, her daughter Morgan (and inspiration behind starting the school), and husband Jeff cut the ribbon at a ceremony and community celebration for the non-profit school located at the former Stone School site in East Troy.

Bloom360 celebrated at ribbon cutting

In 1858, Stone School first opened to serve children in East Troy. Nearly 160 years later, Bloom360 Learning Community opened for the 2017-18 school year as a unique, project and strength-based private school for children with neuro-diverse needs from all over southeastern Wisconsin.

Bloom360 is the only historic school site in the area still operating as a school.

Bloom360 welcomed more than 150 guests to its Ribbon Cutting & Community Celebration Sept. 14 at its renovated 10,000-square-foot facility.

"Our daughter, Morgan, is the inspiration behind starting this school. Over the past six years as we developed our program, I've met many families just like mine who were searching for options," said Laura Rauman, Founder & President of Bloom360 Learning Community.

After the ceremony, guests enjoyed refreshments and guided tours of the school's unique learning spaces including: The

Create-it Studio, Sensory Gym, Learning Pods, The Lounge, Project Lab, Multi-Purpose Room and the Vista360 offices.

"Being here last week as our learners bravely started their new school year was a testament that this is just the beginning in many ways. New relationships are developing, strengths are shining through and interests are being identified," Rauman said.

"Bloom360 is so needed in Wisconsin. We know families need options for their children to have an opportunity to bloom," she added.

The presentation included remarks from: Rauman, Mary Stone, CEO of Stepping Stones Educational Services and the Ribbon Cutting with Vanessa Lenz, Executive Director of the East Troy Chamber of Commerce.

Live entertainment was provided by The Bill Stone Duo. For more information about the school, visit bloom360.org.



The inaugural class and Bloom 360 team held a ribbon cutting and community celebration Sept. 14 to unveil the modern renovations that have transformed the historic school into a sensory-friendly, project-based learning hub designed for learners ages 5-21 with special needs.

VANESSA LENZ *Good Neighbors*

Bloom 360 Learning Community

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Bloom360 Learning Community, located in the former Stone School site in East Troy, is a private, non-profit school for learners ages 5 through 21 with special needs such as ADD/ADHD, autism and dyslexia.

The one-of-a-kind educational model

focuses on each student's strengths and interests with a developmental and project-based curriculum.

Learners can earn a high school diploma or certificate of completion.

Community partnerships are needed. For more information, visit bloom360.org.





Submitted photo

More than 150 community members attended the ribbon-cutting and Community Celebration event on Thursday to welcome Bloom360 Learning Community to the renovated Stone School historic property in East Troy. The school serves learners ages 5-21 with learning differences such as autism and ADHD from across southeastern Wisconsin. It features a project and strength-based approach.

School for people with autism opens in East Troy

Bloom360 to work with those ages 5-21

By **Brian Huber**
Freeman Staff

WAUKESHA — Enrollment is now open for a new private school in East Troy that works with people on the autism spectrum who are between 5 and 21 years old.

But anyone interested ought to act fast, as enrollment will be capped at 20 at Bloom360 Learning Center, so as to “truly customize the learning environment for each child,” said Mandy Clapper, a Waukesha native who is a learning guide educator in the organization, which used to be active in Milwaukee.

Bloom360 took over the site of a former one-room schoolhouse on Stone School Road, which was built over time to its present 10,000 square feet. The space is optimal to provide project-based learning. Prospective students already have had some opportunities, such as working with members of a carpenters union in Pewaukee or engaging in equine therapy at Willow Creek

in Mukwonago, Clapper said.

The school will include a large “sensory room,” with things like mats, a rock wall and trampolines, as well as a workshop or multipurpose room.

“We’re looking at these kiddos as a whole child — where their strengths lie... and bridging the gap to help them in the future,” Clapper said.

As such, education won’t be in a traditional grades structure, but rather three growth rings based on individual needs. It will be a year-round program, with breaks in summer and throughout the year — Christmas, Thanksgiving, and in the spring, Clapper said.

“We feel sometimes summer can get too long and you’re always restarting,” she said.

This would not be the first autism-centric school in the area. The Genesee Lake School in Oconomowoc is part of an organization that runs five schools around the state in West Allis, Brookfield, Beloit and Madison, and three in Indiana, said Kim

Ray, executive director of the Genesee Lake School in Oconomowoc. She said students in her organization who are dealing with the more intense effects of the autism spectrum typically need intense communication sensory services, and smaller classrooms help provide more individualized attention, speech and occupational therapy.

Clapper is a Waukesha South High School and UW-Milwaukee graduate who has been working with people on the autism spectrum since high school.

“They taught me so much about myself, I want to continue working with them and help them reach their full potential and bright future. They’ve made a bright future for me,” she said.

On Thursday evening, a ribbon-cutting ceremony was held to officially welcome Bloom360 into its new space. Over 150 community members attended the event.

For more information, visit www.bloom360.org.

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