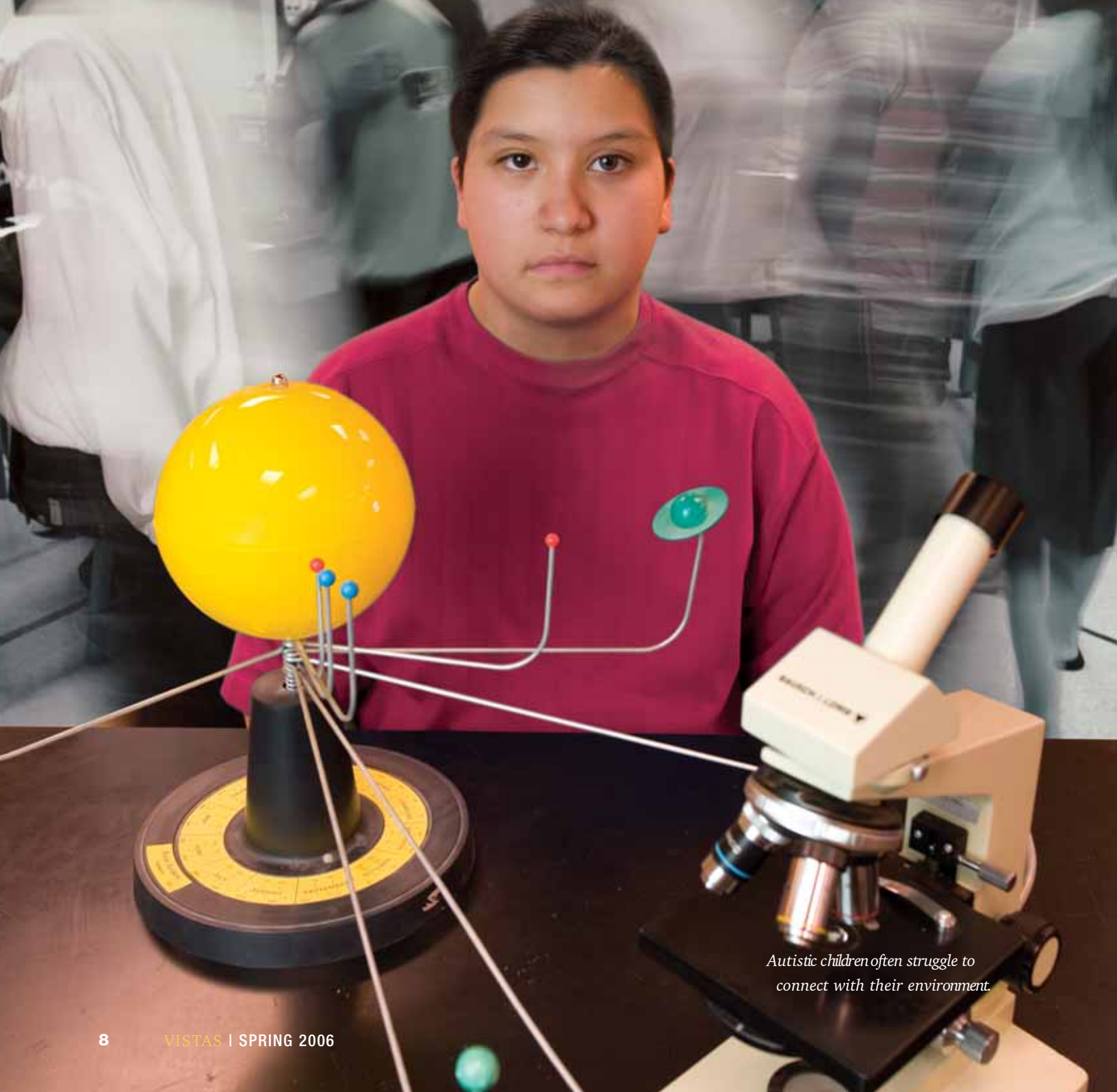


CENTER for HOPE

THIS CENTER HELPS AUTISTIC CHILDREN AND ADULTS FROM THROUGHOUT THE SOUTH PLAINS.



Autistic children often struggle to connect with their environment.

The mother and grandparents of 12-year-old Francisco huddle together and cut through a river of bustling students as they walk up the steps of Texas Tech’s College of Education building. Although they live only 40 miles away from campus, their world on the rural South Plains stands in stark contrast to where they are now.

Francisco (not his real name) has been displaying unique characteristics at home and school, and his family has reached a dead end with almost all local resources.

They arrive at The Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research and are seated in a cozy room containing a colorful balance between the technology of education and invitingly bright toys. Seated across from the family are the center’s founders, Robin Lock and Carol Layton, who oversaw the facility’s opening last year. In many ways, the center has become their life’s work.

“Take as much time as you need and tell us all about Francisco and why you’re here,” Layton says to the family.

Francisco’s mom, an articulate and educated woman in her early 30s, almost comes to tears and for 45 minutes describes her feelings of hopeless exhaustion in caring for Francisco, who has begun to show characteristics that may be consistent with autism. Though she describes years of attempts to tap local resources and organizations for guidance, sitting at the table with her you get a sense that no one in the bureaucracy of education and social services has ever asked her to describe her situation.

Lock and Layton describe at length an impressive collection of customized solutions that will likely offset the family’s stress and concern. Calls will be made, meetings scheduled and in the course of an hour and a half, Francisco’s mother is plugged into a unique and dynamic network of support.

“My goal, my biggest dream right now, is for Francisco to someday be an independent and functioning adult,” she says. “I’ll always do whatever it takes to make Francisco have a full and normal life.”

By the end of the meeting, Francisco’s mom

and grandparents have several referrals to people classified as movers and shakers at the local level, backline phone numbers, a clearer sense of what Francisco’s symptoms might indicate, and a new sense of hope. They are no longer individuals lost in a sea of despair, no longer a number or just another case.

Until the late 1980s and early 1990s, little was understood about autism. Its symptoms often went undiagnosed and parents found themselves at a loss to explain their children’s symptoms.

The condition today still goes undiagnosed in both children and adults. Lock and Layton were well aware of this when they and their college formed The Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research, which offers training and consultations for individuals affected by autism and those closest to them.

“We want to improve quality of life issues for people who appear on the autism spectrum, their families and their educators,” says Lock, co-director of the center. “Parents and teachers often have so many questions and are confused about how to manage or learn more about autism, and that’s what this center is here to assist them with.”

The center’s open door and free-of-charge approach is almost alarming to new visitors. After all, most of them have met with dozens of people and filled out hundreds of pages of forms by the time they fall into the Burkhart Center’s care. Here they won’t find piles of forms and won’t be inundated with jargon and flippant, overburdened personalities that often dominate the world of social services.

The center bears the name of Jim and Jere Lynn Burkhart, who in the past several years have made significant contributions to the college’s mission toward autism. Their first gift to the college established the Jim and Jere Lynn Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research in 2003; the second established the Burkhart professorship in autism education last year.

The center specializes in improving the transition from school to the adult world for persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders, which



Robin Lock (L) and Carol Layton

“ I’LL ALWAYS DO
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TO MAKE FRANCISCO
HAVE A FULL AND
NORMAL LIFE. ”

— MOTHER OF AN AUTISTIC CHILD



Stacy Poteet and her son Jackson

“ PARENTS OFTEN FEEL THEY’RE ALONE AND THEY WANT TO MEET WITH OTHER PARENTS. THEY WANT TO KNOW HOW TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN, AND THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT WE’RE HELPING THEM WITH.”

— STACY POTEET, PARENT BOARD MEMBER

can be characterized by severe impairments in several areas of development, including social interaction and communication skills.

It’s not uncommon for autistic children to experience extreme difficulty in relating to others and understanding the world around them. They typically exhibit markedly abnormal social interaction, communication difficulties and varying patterns of interests and behavior. For some children, symptoms can be subtle and behaviors are often misdiagnosed or undetected by both parents and teachers. For others, symptoms are easy to recognize.

Clients have a lending library available and are invited to attend regular lectures given by professionals throughout the community.

“Those with loved ones on the autism spectrum often need as much support and as many resources as they can get,” says Layton. “That’s what we are here to do.”

Stacy Poteet, the parent of a child with autism and a member of the center’s Parent Board, says the facility provides a unique resource.

“My goal is to help those families who think nothing is available to them in this area,” she says. “Parents often feel they’re alone and they want to

meet with other parents. They want to know how to help their children, and that’s exactly what we’re helping them with.”

Research conducted at the center includes three major aspects: developing strategies for the preparation of teachers to meet the needs of students; examining ways to develop parent support networks; and preparing individuals with autism as they transition from school to adult services.

The center also holds its monthly “Sibshop” meeting, designed as a resource for siblings of autistic children.

“Siblings often have a hard time in their situation and they feel left out,” Poteet says. “The center provides an outlet for them where they can express their feelings and learn how to talk about their situation with others.”

— MICHAEL CASTELLON

Interested in consultations and support services? Contact Burkhart Center at (806) 742-1998, ext. 458. Or visit: <http://www.educ.ttu.edu/EDSP/burkhartproject/>