



## Parents Helping Parents

BROOKSVILLE

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BROOKSVILLE - Spring Hill resident Stacy Walsh knows what its like to feel lost in the system.

In the years since her 9-year-old son, Gavin, has been diagnosed with Asberger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism, she has struggled to get certain educational services added to his state-mandated Individualized Service Plan, or IEP, through the Hernando County School District. Not that it's anyone's fault. The process can just be complicated, and if parents don't know how, it can be difficult to know what to ask for, she said.

That's why she and fellow parent Nikki Pierce, of Brooksville, have joined forces to create the Special Students of Hernando, a support group that functions more like a resource for local parents of students with disabilities.

"When you begin your journey with a special needs child, you have to learn a whole new language," Walsh said. "I didn't know how to ask for what I thought I needed. You have to know who to ask, what to say, and a lot of times, certain things have to be done before other things can be done."

With the motto of "parents helping parents," the two created a Web site with contact information, event notices and other information.

The group aims to work as a community partner with the district's Exceptional Student Education department, and its members — local parents — meet once a month to share solutions that relate to their children with disabilities.

"I now (know how) to work with the school district, and that's why I'm helping other parents," Walsh said. "You'll never get anywhere if you're butting heads with administration."

And now, with a project that has been in the planning stages since April, they are partnering with the ESE department to bring a world-renowned expert to Hernando County for a two-day boot camp designed to help parents and educators get appropriate, legal help for their children.

His name is Peter Wright, and he is a well-known author and attorney who has argued successfully for landmark special education cases. His books include, "From Emotions to Advocacy" and "Special Education Law."

"He's a great resource and we've really had to jump through hoops to get him here," Walsh said. "This is the type of thing that would normally only occur in somewhere (bigger), such as Pinellas or Hillsborough counties. People travel from all over the country to see him speak." Topics will include reviewing the specifics of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, how to organize a child's file and how to use information from evaluations to better understand a child's disability and needs.

Teachers and attorneys will both receive continuing education hours, and parents will learn how to properly vouch for their students and get the services they need.

"We all have to fight for our kids, but also collaborate and work hand-in-hand with the law,"

Walsh said.

She said she has seen the difference herself firsthand, particularly after learning the appropriate protocol and procedure for obtaining services for her son, a fourth-grader at Challenger K-8 School of Science and Mathematics in Spring Hill.

"You write your letters, document (everything) and then things just fall into place," Walsh said. "Learning the law is what really allowed me to work things out with my child's school, and play by their rules."

The boot camp will take place Jan. 16 and 17 at Glen Lakes Country Club. Cost will be \$100 for both days for parents, teachers and attorneys, and all attendees will receive copies of two of Wright's books and breakfast and lunch both days.

Both the support group and event are also meant to encompass children with all kinds of special needs, instead of focusing on just one disability, Walsh added.

Since starting the Web site, the group has gotten positive feedback and "hits" from other parents across the nation.

"It's really just taking off," Walsh said. "We have parents in Texas, New York and Georgia that have reached out to us."

For more information, go to [www.specialstudentsofhernando.com](http://www.specialstudentsofhernando.com).

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