A mother's concern led to special preschool
Ex-Albany official gave up city job to focus on helping youngsters like her son

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Caption: PHOTOS BY LORI VAN BUREN/TIMES UNION
SHERI TOWNSEND holds her son Alex at the Spotted Zebra Learning Center in Colonie. Townsend, a former Albany youth commissioner, left her city job to open a preschool and day care center that offers special learning help to special needs children. MARIE HICKS, an early childhood teacher, works with Alex Townsend, center, and Zachary Isenberg at the Spotted Zebra Learning Center, which offers small classes and the services of therapists and teachers.

COLONIE - For Zachary Isenberg, it was a victory. The 3-year-old attended his first children's birthday party at a bowling alley, where the loud music and strobe lights would have set him crying and screaming only a few months ago.

   His mother, Jean, recounts how her son also recently got through a haircut without becoming similarly agitated by the harsh buzz of the clippers.

Zach, an affectionate redhead, suffered cardiac arrest when he was three weeks old, which deprived his brain of oxygen and left him with some developmental problems, like sensitivity to loud noises and bright lights as well as delayed language and motor skills.

Since November, Zach has been coming to the Spotted Zebra Learning Center, a preschool and day care center run by Sheri Townsend, the former commissioner of Youth and Workforce Services for the city of Albany.

On Monday, Zach sat in a classroom with other children listening to a story. His language skills, which had been limited to a word or two, have expanded into full sentences. "When I was making lunch, he told me, 'I don't want a bagel. I want bread,'" said his mother. "The progress he has made has been remarkable. It's allowing him to become a typical 3-year-old boy."

Townsend, a 42-year-old mother of four, resigned from her $70,000-a-year city job last year to start the center, located on Kross Keys Road in Colonie. "Some of my friends questioned why I would leave a good job with the city," she said. But she took a "substantial pay cut," and with her husband, Scott, an architect, used the couple's life savings to start the center for children with mild autism and other disabilities. It opened in November with five children and now has 32.

For Townsend, who ran programs aimed at helping children in Albany, the decision to change careers started as a personal one. One of her 3-year-old twin boys, Alex, was diagnosed with mild autism about 18 months ago.

   He showed some of the classic signs of the neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, affecting development of social interaction and communication skills.

"Alex was difficult to engage. He didn't make eye contact," said Townsend. And his play was oddly "non-productive." He would only play with certain colored blocks, and never did more than stack a few on top of each other.

Like many autistic children, he hated certain sensations. When his family took him to the beach, he shrieked whenever his feet touched the sand.

   Townsend and her husband got in-home services to help Alex through the Albany County Department of Children and Family Services. But she decided that she wanted a place where Alex could be with other children and become prepared for school, and after looking at her choices, decided to start a licensed center herself.

"We dreamt up our perfect vision of what a preschool would look like," she said. Her husband designed it, down to the kid-sized doors and bathroom fixtures. And where many similar programs end at 1 p.m., Townsend wanted to make hers compatible with the schedule of working parents by ending hers at 5:30 p.m.

With 15 staffers, including teachers, occupational, speech and physical therapists, class sizes are kept small. Children at the Spotted Zebra range from the mild end of the autism spectrum through those with no developmental disabilities.

Townsend said her own son has continued to make progress. "I think it's very realistic that he might enter regular kindergarten," she said. And Alex doesn't mind sand anymore. "He likes the beach now," said Townsend.

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