



July 1, 2008

Special children line up for pre-K diplomas

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The Journal News

WHITE PLAINS - Some children wore their white graduation caps while others struggled to keep their heads upright.

They sang, cheered, screamed, clapped, stomped their feet and wiggled in their wheelchairs with excitement.

Forty-four mostly disabled children of the John A. Coleman School at the Children's Rehabilitation Center not only graduated from preschool yesterday, but left the place where they've met major milestones in their physical and emotional development.

The children, most about 5 years old, have a range of disabilities including cerebral palsy, spina bifida and Down syndrome. They receive medical treatment, speech and physical therapy at the school.

Many took their first steps and spoke their first words there.

"This school is amazing," said Angela Gillen of Putnam Valley. Gillen's 5-year-old twin daughters, Brianna and Sascha, attended the school for three years. "Everyone works really hard to make sure your child achieves her full potential. No one looks at them for their disability, they look at them as people."

The Gillen twins, born with mild cerebral palsy, were unable to walk on their own until they had surgery to correct their legs last year at the Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx.

Yesterday, the girls wore splints and stood in the middle of about 15 proud family members at a reception held after the graduation ceremony. In September, the twins will attend the Putnam Valley school district.

Relatives of Ohana Caraballo, 4, of Yonkers said they saw a "lot of progress over the last three years."

"Before she started coming here she couldn't speak, now she won't shut up," joked Louis Caraballo, 28, Ohana's brother.

That's what makes schools for special-needs children so essential, said commencement speaker Adrienne Arkontaky, a lawyer and advocate for disabled people.

"The miracle that happens here is that children learn how to walk and talk and do things others never thought they'd do," Arkontaky said in her speech to the more than 150 people who attended the ceremony.

About 145 students attend the John A. Coleman School, which is part of the Children's Rehabilitation Center. The center, on the former campus of St. Agnes Hospital, has been under the leadership of several organizations since it was founded in 1908 by six nuns from the

Sisters of St. Francis. They opened a program "for crippled and atypical children," the first of its kind in the Archdiocese of New York.

The students there vary in mental and physical ability, and more than half the graduates receive intensive medical rehabilitation services on-site.

The majority of the graduates will attend their home districts, most will attend special-education classes, but others will be integrated into regular classes. Others will attend Board of Cooperative Educational Services programs and a few will go to private schools.

The rehabilitation center, sponsored by the Sisters of Charity and operated by the Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center, has proposed to build a \$152 million long-term care facility for medically fragile children in the Executive Boulevard area of Yonkers.

The plans are being reviewed by the city's land-use boards and the state's Department of Health, said Patricia Tursi, the pediatric center's president.

When the new building is ready, the Coleman School will be moved to Yonkers, but that won't be for a few years, Tursi said.

Parents like Regina Thomson of Eastchester said yesterday that she is excited for her son, Peter, 5, to attend kindergarten in their hometown school district.

"We've had so many experiences here that it won't be easy to step away from this place," said Thomson, who just months ago met the Pope at St. John's Seminary as part of a group from the school. "I'm sad to leave, because we feel safe here, but I'm also excited to see what new things we have ahead of us."
