

# Hopewell Express

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## Golf as therapy

Stony Brook pro helping autistic children learn on the links

By STAN VITELLO

In 2009, professional golfer Ernie Els and his wife Liezl formed The Els For Autism Foundation after their four-year-old son, Ben, was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, or ASD. The stated mission of the foundation is to help people on the autism spectrum fulfill their potential to lead positive, productive, and rewarding lives.

This year, Els for Autism has launched a nationwide pilot for the Ernie Els #GameON Autism Golf Program. The #GameON Autism Golf Program is aimed at developing life skills, encouraging social interaction and promoting healthy living through golf for individuals on the autism spectrum.

Currently, six golf courses in the U.S. are piloting golf programs for people with autism. Two of the sites are in New Jersey: Galloping Hill Golf Course in Kenilworth, and Stonybrook Golf Club in Hopewell, where PGA golf professional Joe Porter is among the pioneers working with young people to help them make progress in life through the playing of golf.

More than 100 children are taking part in the pilot program, which started in April. Mike Attara, president of Spirit Golf, the management company for

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## Class of 2015 graduates



PHOTO BY MARTIN GRIFF

Brothers Sami, Muhammad and Ali Aneizi celebrate Muhammad's graduation from Hopewell Valley Central High School, held Thursday, June 18, 2015 at Ackerson Field on school grounds. For more photos, turn to Page 10.

## Staying in the fold while getting older

By MEAGAN DOUCHES  
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Across the country, people have been adapting their approach to aging in hopes of establishing a better quality of life for seniors. Instead of moving to care facilities or retirement communities, many people are now focused on remaining in their homes. With all of the unique attributes that

New Aging in Place group hoping to help locals stay local after they retire

attract people to the Hopewell Valley, residents have established a group dedicated to Aging in Place.

Marion White has been a resident of Hopewell Township for the past 37 years. She and her husband Carl White have

enjoyed living in the area and can't imagine being anywhere but their home of the past four decades.

"Everyone wants to stay in Hopewell Township, it's a wonderful place to live," White said. "There are so many groups and

interests. You get the sense that you're living with people that are committed to the community."

"The township is simply a nice place to live," Carl White said. "The fact that it is rural and richly wooded, there are public parks everywhere thanks to the Delaware and Raritan preservation. Who'd want to live someplace else?"

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Stonybrook Golf Club and a member of the N.J. Golf Foundation, said in a statement that he is pleased that Stonybrook is part of the program.

"It's a natural fit with our company's values and mission of helping grow the game and reaching into the community," he said.

The Ernie Els #GameON Autism golf program consists of nine group lessons having a specially designed lesson plan that delivers golf instruction incorporated with specific autism-focused behaviors. For example, students practice repetitive motor movements from simple motion-based drills, slowly building toward a full swing movement.

A swing movement by continued practice will result in proper contact of the golf ball and develop muscle memory. Other behavior that is reinforced includes communication skills (students respond to questions), social skills (students wait to take his turn), and motor skills (eye-hand coordination, frequently a deficit for people with ASD).

Each session is designed to help build self-esteem and confidence in a fun, welcoming and supportive environment, encouraging participants to learn golf skills while practicing specific autism learning concepts.

"To have golf used as an effective supplementary therapy for people with autism is a pretty exciting concept for me, and I have been lucky enough to have seen first-hand the incredibly positive effect that the one-day golf clinics can have on participants. Our end goal

is to develop #GameON Autism Golf into a comprehensive program that can be rolled out so that more individuals with autism can have access to this specialized program world-wide. The pilot series is a crucial step in helping us reach that goal," said Els for Autism founder Ernie Els.



Porter

Porter received training to enable him to offer specialized lessons to people with autism. He possesses the combination of a love of golf, good humor, and the natural ability to relate to his nine students. The players look forward to their bi-weekly lessons.

Porter has quickly come to know which parts of their golf swings need improvement. He is assisted by five volunteers who serve as instructors. That enables the players to receive individual attention on their golf swings.

In August 2015, the Els Center of Excellence is set to be opened. The center has been established by the foundation with the goal of showing the world what should be available to children and young adults on the autism spectrum.

Autism is a developmental disability defined as a spectrum that includes a varying severity of symptoms. Among the most common symptoms are a lack or delay in speech limiting communication skills, repetitive motor movements, compromised sociability, and sensory motor deficits. Each person with autism has a unique pattern of strengths and weaknesses.

One in 68 children in the U.S. is afflicted with autism spectrum disorder, one in 45 children in N.J., and more boys than girls. The U.S. Center for Disease Control estimated that 2 million people

have autism in the U.S.

The most effective evidenced-based intervention to date has applied behavior analysis. Behavioral therapists are trained to reinforce positive behaviors while extinguishing negative behaviors. For example, praising the way a child responds to a question while ignoring inappropriate sounds he or she makes.

Jack Nicklaus, one of the greatest golfers of all time, called golf "a great teacher that confers lifelong lessons on sportsmanship and humility while continuously

testing character." With the aid of programs like #GameON, such benefits are within the reach of people with autism.

Stanley Vitello, Ph.D., is a recently retired professor of educational psychology at Rutgers University who has worked with Porter on the Els Foundation program. In 1990 he was awarded a Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Public Policy Fellowship and served on the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Disability Policy.

Material from a press release was used for this article.

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## Titusville church to offer Vacation Bible School in July and August

The Titusville United Methodist Church plans to hold a Summer 2015 Vacation Bible School from Monday, July 6 through Friday, Aug. 21.

The church is located at 7 Church Road in Titusville and the VBS will be held in the church's separate Education Building.

All children from the greater Mercer County area are invited to attend the seven-week, full-day, educational summer-enrichment program. The program is designed for children ages 4 through 12 and will be held from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. each day. The 4- and 5-year-olds will meet separately in their own class. Parents may pick and choose the weeks that best suit the needs of their children's summer schedules.

The featured daily curriculum will focus upon what it means to be a Christian and serve God in everyday life. Along with the VBS curriculum, children will have opportunities to enjoy crafts, nature walks, water play, scooters, skate boards and bikes. TUMC's

pastor, The Rev. John Wesley Morrison, plans to gather all the children and their teachers and aides for regularly scheduled chapel time.

One highlighted outreach activity will be a weekly Muffin Ministry, where VBS children will make cards and deliver homemade muffins to local community residents or church members within walking distance of the church.

Children are asked to bring their own lunches each weekday. Morning and afternoon snacks will be provided. Children are encouraged to bring their own bikes, scooters, other appropriate fun stuff, helmets and good walking shoes for daily play time and nature walks in the park.

The cost is \$135 per child each week. A one-time, nonrefundable \$25 registration fee will serve as a place-holder for each child's reservation for as many weeks as desired.

For more information and further details, contact (609) 221-8634 or emmal.eemorrison@yahoo.com.

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