

# Autistic youths get the special care they need

By Sharon Dargay  
staff writer

Michael loudly echoes everything he hears.

Phyllis arms bear the black-and-blue scars of self-abuse.

Doug has conquered the urge to spit, but still occasionally bolts from the classroom.

John adds decimal numbers on a computer, but interprets most language literally.

Tim has kicked his longtime fascination with shoelaces and string. He can assemble simple metal shapes and talks if prompted repeatedly by patient teachers.

A diverse set of learning problems, behavioral quirks and social skills set these autistic teens apart from other special education students in Oakland County. They aren't emotionally impaired, although their abnormal reactions to people, objects and sensations indicates emotional deficits. They aren't mentally retarded, although communication skills and learning ability may be limited.

"They're dramatically different," said Robert Tunnell, director of the program for autistic children at Lamphre High School, Madison Heights.

"Within one classroom, among four to five students, there's a wide range of abilities. We try to classify them according to age, cognitive abilities, matching verbal skills and communicative ability. But there's still a wide range of abilities even within that span."

**AUTISM IS** a developmental disability that strikes about five out of every 10,000 persons and generally is expressed by a wide variety of behavioral symptoms within the first three years of life. The disorder has been linked to chemical exposure in pregnancy and untreated rubella and other illnesses, although there is no single cause.

"If you go through the classrooms you'll see that there are no two students working on the same thing at once. The program is highly individualized."

That diversity demands highly specialized curriculum for each of the 25 students who attend the Oakland In-

**'Local districts could not cost efficiently run a similar program. It would be more expensive in the long run for taxpayers.'**

—Rob Tunnell  
director of autism program

termediate School District's program for autistic persons age 14-26.

That in turn, coupled with stringent teacher-pupil ratios and state requirements, makes the autistic center one of the most expensive special education programs run by the county.

Tunnell figures the staff-intensive program costs some \$394,000 — about \$20,000 per pupil. Six teachers and nine aides, as well as two part-time speech therapists, a psychologist, social worker and occupational therapist are assigned to the 25 students who have been diagnosed as autistic by a county team of professionals and have been placed in the center program.

Teaching materials are equally specialized. One student may understand only visual commands. Another may learn through auditory messages. Because autistic children often relate better to objects than people, computerized course work is good sense for some higher-functioning students. And nearly all require training in daily living skills, such as cooking.

A kitchen and vocational work area, for practicing assembly and collating skills, are used by autistic students in addition to six regular classrooms.

"Local districts could not cost effectively run a similar program," contends Tunnell. "It would be more expensive in the long run for taxpayers. Would it be quality education? I'd rightly question that."

**THOY SENDS** two students to the Lamphre program, two in Detroit, two in Rochester, two in Birmingham, two in Southington, two in Bloomfield Hills and one in West Bloomfield, in addition to other cities.



STEPHEN CANTRELL/Herald photographer

The autistic program is one of the more expensive to run because of individual attention given students. Here, teacher Elizabeth

Birmingham Schools runs a similar program for elementary and middle school youngsters. Like the Lamphre program, it is administered by the intermediate district as a "center-based special education program" and accepts youngsters from throughout Oakland County.

Tunnell figures both programs serve some 40 percent of all autistic students in Oakland County. The other 60 percent have been undiagnosed, misdiagnosed, placed in programs designed for children with other handicaps or remain institutionalized.

Before state laws in 1983 defined autism, requiring the lowest teacher-pupil ratio (one-to-five) of all handicaps and spelling out specific educational requirements for teachers, autistic children often were placed indiscriminately in classes for

emotionally impaired and severely mentally handicapped students. Sometimes the grouping worked. More often than not, however, the autistic child's needs went unmet.

"He'd have difficulty," explained Tunnell, enviously. "Mike" a student with echolalia (the person automatically repeats words spoken in his presence), in a class for emotionally impaired youngsters. "He'd be taken advantage of by emotionally impaired students. There's a lack of understanding of what to do with someone who has echolalia."

**TUNNELL SAID** some districts may suspect a student is autistic, but because no major behavioral problems are evident, may inappropriately place the youngster in another special education setting.

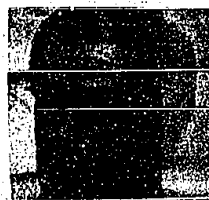
Cunningham works with a student to help him express himself through sign language.

"We're trying to educate local districts about autism," Tunnell noted. "Our ultimate aim is to have students at their most optimal level. If it weren't for programs like this, many would be in institutions or other (inappropriate) programs."

Four of Tunnell's students work in a special vocational workshop along with mentally impaired students. Another worked part-time as a custodian last year. All the autistic students are trained for a trade or sheltered workshop.

Lamphre High School students can earn credits toward graduation for their tutorial work with autistic peers.

"It's about as close to a normal environment as possible," he added.



The program aims to have students achieve their optimal level, said Rob Tunnell, program director.

# Undecided Harger House fate in limbo

By Lisa Simon  
staff writer

The fate of the Harger House boils down to three options, which range from saving the historic structure to demolishing it.

In the Farmington Hills Municipal Offices Monday afternoon, City Manager William Costick and Mayor Jan Dolan presided at a meeting of the principal parties.

A decision is expected by Thursday, Oct. 10. That is when Standard Federal Savings of Troy, majority landowner of the Farmington Hunt Club subdivision, brings a revised open space plan before the Farmington Hills Planning Commission.

The Harger House sits on the subdivision's common area, which is intended to be used by all residents. At this point, it appears that subdivision residents will dictate which option is pursued.

Standard Federal has agreed to put the three options in writing by Friday. Hunt Club residents then will vote on them. The one chosen will be added to the revised open space plan by Oct. 10, according to Allen.

**THE OPTIONS are:**

- To demolish the Harger House.
- To allow residents to use the Harger House as a homeowners' association building that can be rented for their own purposes, or as the home for a groundskeeper.
- To try to sell the Harger House.

"The council's main concern is that the house be saved," Dolan said at the beginning of Monday's discussion.

On hand for the discussion were five Hunt Club residents; Durwood Allen, vice president, and Mary Fowle, attorney, for Standard Federal Savings of Troy; three Farmington Artists Club representatives; Jean Fox, Farmington Hills Historical Commission president; and two city officials, Hal Rowe, zoning supervisor, and Rick Lampi, community development coordinator.

As an investor, Standard Federal "has no intrinsic interest in the preservation of the Harger House," Allen said. The Farmington Hills Hunt Club has a "uniquely elusive, difficult thing to deal with."

**ALLEN, ALSO** president of the homeowners' association, said he was made aware of the Harger House's historical significance just about a year ago.

For Farmington Hills Hunt Club residents, quality of life is a major concern. Following failure of the subdivision's stable and riding estate establishment last year, plans for the subdivision's common area remain unformulated.

Sept. 19, planning commissioners approved Standard Federal's first revised open space plan stipulating that the Harger House does not necessarily have to be shown on its final draft. The two barns where Hunt Club horses were housed are shown as demolished on that plan. Demolition is scheduled for next week, according to Allen.

Both the Farmington Artists Club and the Farmington Area Jaycees were to submit written proposals by Sept. 30, delineating plans that coincided with historic-district building requirements.

According to Fox, the Jaycees withdrew their tentative plans to use the Harger House.

**THE FARMINGTON** Artists Club representatives, however, arrived at the city hall Monday armed with a written proposal.

According to the proposal, the club would use Harger House rooms as gallery, meeting room, office and storage space. Plans to expand the house to include more than 10,000 additional square feet were proposed.

The expansion included a reception area; multipurpose space for exhibits, meetings, general monthly meetings; and workshops, laboratories, classrooms and support areas.

Residents balked at that proposal. "The cost is immaterial. No one would offer enough to make it worthwhile to the residents," one resident said.

The residents expressed concern about parking for the artists club and for twice yearly art fairs, as well as for general traffic through their subdivision.

"We thought it was a great opportunity to do something for Farmington Hills," said Walter Reddig, Artists Club building committee chairman.

"You'll find an appropriate facility," said Ronald Rembre, Hunt Club resident. "It isn't appropriate where we are."

"IT'S UNFAIR to expect the residents to donate property to the community," said David DeFervernier, another Hunt Club resident. "It's (the Harger House) not our problem. Why is it our duty to donate property? Why, as a homeowners' association, would we give this (the Harger House)?"

"It (the Harger House) shouldn't be a free-will gift from you," Fox said to Hunt Club representatives. Eventual reimbursement would be in order, she added.

Several residents said a limited use facility would be more appropriate for the Harger House than a large community center. Suggestions at an Aug. 12 public hearing included a small office space or a specialty library.

"A city, or by nature a small group, couldn't preserve it," Reddig said. Costa, he said, would be prohibitive.

**BOTH REDDIG** and Allen pursued preservation appraisals for the Harger House before Monday's meeting. Allen reported that an appraiser quoted \$183,000 was necessary to bring the house back to its original historic state. Reddig said \$40,632 was his consultant's figure.

"Someone has to do it for love," Fox said. But costs appeared to be unimportant. The prime issue is whether the house should remain standing or be destroyed, Dolan said.

"It's (the Harger House) gotten very emotional," Allen said. "Some residents just want it ripped down to be through with it."

## Pure wool slacks by Arthur Winer

A TRADITION

OF COMFORT

CONTINUES



**F**or years you've known that 100% wool is the best way to keep warm and look good at the same time. That's one tradition that will never change, though styles may come and go. Our exclusive 100% wool slacks by Arthur Winer are double pleated in front, in the newest style of traditional dress. It's a feature that adds to your comfort and ease, as well as your fashionably good looks. Combine such styling with the natural properties of wool, its warmth and long-lasting wear, and you have an exceptional pair of slacks. Naturally. Available in wool or tweed/wool blend. Sizes in U.S.A. \$70 and \$85. Men's Slacks.



HUDSON'S

USE YOUR NEAREST HODSON'S CLOTHING STORE OR THE HODSON'S EXPRESS STORE.