Sensory Friendly Space to Open at Ocean County Library



By: Victoria Ford

A new sensory friendly space on the second floor of Ocean County Library headquarters on Washington Street in Toms River will serve children and adults. “The goal of the sensory space is to provide an area for (those) with a variety of disabilities, including autism spectrum disorders, developmental disabilities, post-traumatic stress disorder, cerebral palsy, memory loss, dementia and sensory processing disorders,” Ocean County Library Director Susan Quinn explained. “While these individuals are welcome to visit all areas of our library branch, this space is especially designed for them.”

New Jersey’s rate of autism, 1 in 32, is the highest in the country, compared to one in 54 nationwide.

Assistant Library Director Sara Siegler described the variety of products in the sensory space as visually stimulating, tactile, calming and interactive. “The purpose of creating this space,” she said, “is to provide an environment that develops the senses, encourages communication and social interactions, relieves stress and anxiety, and produces a feeling of calm and well-being.”

In addition to assorted lighting products and specially made furniture for the room, users will find an Iris Musical Touch Wall, where they can engage in visual and auditory stimulation using musical sounds, shapes, numbers and a rainbow of colors; a Sensory Canopy, a system of billowing, magnetic fabric sheets that go together to create a cloud-like ceiling; LED Light Illuminators that help with color recognition, increasing sensory stimulation and visual attention; a Bubble Mirror which creates entrancing optical illusions; an Ocean Wave Ceiling Projector which combines ambient or other customizable audio, with colorful lighting effects to provide an ocean wave-type of projection on any ceiling or wall to create a relaxing, enjoyable mood; a water/sand LED Play Light Cube, a color-changing cube that engages children in a dynamic sensory activity that promotes relaxation and makes learning fun; a Bubble Tube, which cycles through hundreds of different shades to produce a calming, relaxing effect and can be helpful for persons with dementia.

The Ocean County Library Commissioners in October dedicated the Toms River Sensory Space in honor of Ocean County Commissioner Director Joseph H. Vicari, liaison to the Ocean County Library.

“This action recognizes Commissioner Vicari’s strong support for the Ocean County Library in its many initiatives to support children, families, and people with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” said Ruthanne Scaturro, chair of the Ocean County Library Commission.

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Sensory friendly space.
Photo credit: Ocean County Library

Vicari commended the library staff and library commissioners for their innovative approach to helping citizens with autism. "This room will serve as a centerpiece of our efforts to be all-inclusive in the programs and services we provide at the library," he said.

While it was anticipated the room would be open to the public earlier in 2020, those plans were delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic. In the meantime, library staff continued to add finishing touches to the room.

Vicari said the library recognizes there are many residents of Ocean County who, due to sensory processing issues, may feel they cannot visit their local library.

"The Ocean County Library is a leader in recognizing a need and addressing it, in an effort to make sure the library is a place everyone can visit," Vicari said. "There is a true sense of community that exists at all of our branches. This new program has been a cooperative effort and a true partnership with librarians working with facilities staff to create this room."

He added the Ocean County Library has been a longtime advocate for individuals with autism and other disabilities.

"This room really stems from the annual Autism Fair hosted by the library, usually in April in recognition of Autism Awareness Month," Vicari said.

The library also provides resources designed to assist individuals with autism and their caregivers during these challenging times, Quinn said.

When the library's in-person 2020 Autism Resources Fair was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic, she said, the library staff worked to continue the work of the fair by creating an Autism Resources Center (available at **theoceancountylibrary.org/autism**), which includes resources for caregivers and autism-related library programs and community events.

Vicari said he believes the space will also serve as an educational center for visitors who want to learn more about autism and the various programs and services that are available.

"As a lifelong educator, I have seen the difference early intervention can make and want to encourage Ocean County residents to participate in activities to become better educated about Autism Spectrum Disorders," Vicari said. "It is important to learn how to relate to children and adults who have autism, and all of these resources offer a great opportunity to find out ways to do so."