A very special clinic opens
Advantage Care will serve patients with disabilities

By SCOTT BRINTON
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When Suzanne Reek, of Wantagh, used to bring her young son, Joseph, to the dentist, she would hire a team of two to six people to carry him into the office. Once there, he was strapped down to an examination table for treatment in what the American Dental Associ-

Mepham dedicates field of dreams to coach

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Thanks to a $50,000 donation, Mepham High School's baseball and softball fields were recently refurbished, complete with new cinderblock dugouts. Last Thursday, school officials and players dedicated the baseball field in honor of legendary Mepham baseball coach Mike Lurel.

The field revamp was made possible by a donation from the Oxley Foundation, which was started by John Oxley, an energy-industry executive and U.S. polo champion. Robert Tritsch, Mepham class of 1952 and a '52 Chicago White Sox signee, is married to Oxley's daughter, Mary Jane.

Tritsch, a star on the Mepham baseball squad, wanted to give back to his alma mater by redoing the fields. He asked only that the baseball field be named for Lurel.

"Bob Tritsch credited his baseball coach, Mike Lurel, with shaping and molding him as a young man by teaching him lessons and giving advice that would guide him for the rest of his life," said Bill Murphy, Mepham's baseball coach for the past decade.

"Now we stand here more than 60 years after Bob wore his Mepham baseball uniform," Murphy continued, "and honor Mike Lurel for the positive role he played in so many of the students' and athletes' lives."

The Mepham varsity and junior-varsity baseball teams were on hand in full uniform for the dedication ceremony, along with Bellmore-Merrick Central District and Mepham officials. Veterans from North Bellmore American Legion Post 1749 served as the color guard.

During his tenure as Mepham's baseball coach, from 1949 to 1958, Lurel won two league championships and 113 games, and he led the squad to a county championship appearance in 1952. He also coached at Calhoun and

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Special-needs clinic opens on South Shore

CHRIS LEDOUR, who lives in an AHRC group home, and Monica Pascutto, an AHRC residential nurse, were among the dozens of attendees at the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

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oration calls a “papoose board,” essentially a stretcher with wide Velcro braces.

In the end, Reek said, she would be hit with a $5,000 bill because her son, who suffered from extreme “dental anxiety,” would inevitably need to be sedated during treatment, which insurance didn’t cover.

Reek’s son, now 15, has autism. He cannot speak, leaving him unable to express when he feels pain or fear, nor does he understand why he must visit the dentist.

Every trip to the dental office was traumatic for the Reeks, as Joseph fought to resist treatment. Then Suzanne discovered Advantage Care last summer, and all of that changed. Suddenly, Joseph no longer needed a team of caregivers to accompany him to the dentist and restrain him, and his family was no longer slapped with costly bills.

“I’ve recommended [Advantage Care] to a lot of people,” said Reek, who is president of the Nassau-Suffolk chapter of the Autism Society of America.

Advantage Care is an affiliate of AHRC, the Nassau County-wide nonprofit organization founded in 1949 that provides a range of services to adults with special needs, from job training and placement to group homes. Advantage Care offers medical and dental services to hundreds of adults living in 83 AHRC homes and 54 stand-alone apartments throughout the county. In total, AHRC supports 2,200 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Advantage Care, which serves children and adults, regardless of whether they receive AHRC services, opened in Brookville a decade ago. On April 29, it cut the ribbon on its newest facility, a state-of-the-art medical clinic at the front of AHRC’s 92,000-square-foot Saul Steinberg Vocational Training Center, in the shadow of Village of Freeport Power Plant No. 2.

On hand to open the Frank and Margaret Riva Advantage Care Health Center were Town of Hempstead Supervisor Kate Murray, Nassau County Legislators Revan Abraham and Steve Rhoads, and Freeport Mayor Robert Kennedy; along with 106-year-old Margaret Riva herself.

“I am happy to see this building open,” said Abraham, a Democrat from Freeport. “We welcome this facility.”

The clinic is open to anyone with special needs, regardless of where they live (some come from as far away as East Quogue, on Suffolk County’s East End), but it is primarily intended to fill a treatment void on the South Shore. There are relatively few medical and dental practices that specialize in caring for people with special needs. Many South Shore families used to trek to AHRC’s Brookville facility on the North Shore, a 45-minute to hour-long trip. The new facility brings convenience for local families.

“For the special-needs community, this is much needed,” said Reek. “We’re lucky in the autism community to have a facility like this.”

For starters, Reek said, Advantage Care accepts Medicaid, so she no longer must pay out of pocket for treatment. More important, she added, Advantage Care practices “desensitization,” which is a gentle process that acclimates patients to the clinic before they are treated in order to quell their anxiety.

Olschin explained. “There’s no set formula. Great care is given to the individual patient just feeling comfortable.”

Oshin said she builds trust in her patients slowly. “It definitely takes a lot more time,” she said. “Some patients need more time than others. Generally, it’s quite a few visits. It’s work. It’s a lot more work.”

The hours spent on desensitization are not billable. Advantage Care staff members practice the method. Oshin said, because they want their patients to receive treatment as anyone else would, unrestrained and without general anesthesia, which, she noted, often interferes with the multiple medications that patients must take for a range of conditions.

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Medical homes

In addition to dentistry, Advantage Care offers family medicine, women’s health, podiatry and psychiatry services. The Freeport clinic has two dental, two medical and two psychiatry exam rooms, while the Brookville site has four of each.

The two clinics are known as “medical homes” — that is, the staff coordinate all of a patient’s care, working with doctors and nurses at nearby hospitals when more extensive treatment is needed outside the clinic. Oshin, for example, works with North Shore-LIJ in Manhasset.

All medical transcripts are filed electronically and shared via a password-protected patient portal, which in addition to medical staff is accessible by families via their home computers. Laura August, Advantage Care’s assistant director, explained during a tour of the Freeport clinic. “We’re sort of a mini-hospital,” she said.

Chris LeDour, 34, of Wantagh, is among the hundreds of adults with special needs who AHRC is helping. He lives in an AHRC group home, and through the organization, he volunteers as a server for the nonprofit Meals on Wheels Association of America, which provides breakfast, lunch and dinner for the frail elderly who cannot leave their homes. LeDour was on hand for the opening of Advantage Care’s Freeport clinic. “I know people here,” said LeDour, who grew up in Seaford. The clinic “is close to my house. I love it.”

Monica Pascutto is a residential nurse at an AHRC group home on the North Shore, and knows LeDour well. She gave him a bear hug when she spotted him at the opening. “I love my job,” Pascutto said. “It’s very rewarding and challenging on a personal level. Every day counts. You have to set small goals, and you will see things accomplished.”