

A Special Boy Finds a Special Place in Mohegan Lake

By Anna Lillian Moser

Phillipa Sheard and her husband tried for over a decade to have a child, and almost four years ago, on Jan. 13, they were blessed with their son Howard. Although you wouldn't know it to look at him, Howard suffers from multiple, severe, life-threatening food allergies. Almost anything can make Howard go into an allergic shock.

"Howard is allergic to all foods except for cocoa," Sheard said, adding that he can't eat anything without taking medication beforehand. "He sees a slew of doctors."

Howard also suffers from seizures and every four to six weeks he comes down with a fever.

"He almost died in April over an Oreo cookie," Sheard said. "My son is really in a class by himself, and it's very hard for us."

And when it came time for Howard to go to nursery school, life for the Sheard family became even harder. They were turned away from virtually every area school. In one case, Sheard recalls, the school gave her money back.

"Nobody wanted him. They said they couldn't handle it," Sheard said. "There is discrimination against food allergies."

That is until Nancy Brophy and her preschool, Tom Thumb in Mohegan Lake, entered the picture.

Brophy opened Tom Thumb in 1968 after she herself was discriminated against. A middle school teacher, and planning for her second child, she was told by the Lakeland School District that she wouldn't be allowed to teach if she was pregnant.

"I never looked back, and it's 43 years later," Brophy said.

Unlike other schools, the Sheards weren't turned away from Tom Thumb.

Brophy believes strongly that every child, no matter what behavioral or physical disabilities they might have, deserve to learn and to interact with other children.

"We try to make it a happy life for them here and that's all we want," Brophy said. "We want them to be happy and the rest will come."

Brophy and Sheard purchased hypo-allergenic art and crafts supplies for all of the Tom Thumb classrooms and set up a system with the neighboring Mohegan Lake Fire Department (which has a station literally next door to the school) in case Howard ever suffered a severe health emergency while at school.

"She's the first one ever to make her school allergen free," Sheard said. "You can check the entire state, and she did it for just one child."

Sheard said she nearly broke down when she got to see her son playing with other children in a normal environment.

"At school he's being a kid. She made us very, very happy, and she made Howard happy," Sheard said of Brophy.

Earlier this month Brophy received an award from Cortlandt Supervisor Linda Puglisi and the Cortlandt Town Board for her caring and compassion towards her students, especially Howard, but Brophy refuses to take credit. She believes instead that it's Howard's mother who is the real hero.

"She's phenomenal. She teaches us about this particular need that he has and we work it out. I have to give all the credit to the mother. She is the driving force and she is an advocate for the child and she is going to have success all of her life with that child because she's strong and she knows what needs to be done."



PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM THUMB PRESCHOOL

Nancy Brophy, owner of Tom Thumb Preschool, stands with her student Howard Sheard and Cortlandt Supervisor Linda Puglisi after having received an award from the town for her continued compassion and caring.

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