**For Scituate-based CORSE, a decade of helping kids with special needs**

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SCITUATE – Ten years after two Scituate mothers saw the need for activities open to children with autism and other developmental disabilities, the nonprofit they founded is serving 700 children a year.

The organization is called the Community of Resources for Special Education, or the CORSE Foundation for short.

Co-founder Tracy Johnston said that in 2006, her 3-year-old son had just been diagnosed with autism. She soon met another Scituate mother in a similar situation, Marynell Henry.

“We both had children in the school system, and there just wasn’t a lot,” Johnston said. “There were so many things our kids couldn’t access unless there was the right support and staffing ratios and trained staff who knew how to integrate them.”

Jumping into this gap, Johnston and Henry started by collaborating with Scituate school leaders. In the first year of creating programs and activities geared for children with autism or Down syndrome, they worked with fewer than 50 kids.

The volunteer-run organization now operates more than 30 programs, with hundreds of special-needs children participating in educational, social and recreational events.

“It just snowballed,” Johnstons said. “The South Shore just really embraced CORSE.”

When CORSE began, about one of every 110 children in the U.S. was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. By 2010, the incidence rate was up to one in 68.

Johnston stressed that CORSE is open to young people with a range of special needs and has always strived to include children and teenagers without special needs or disabilities.

“A child with special needs does not want to take a special-needs program,” she said. “They just want to be like every other kid.”

One of the organization’s primary goals is to fight the isolation that special-needs children experience. The after-school programs in swimming and bicycling are meant to get children out of their homes, away from video games and into the world, socializing and playing with their peers.

A popular program that CORSE runs in the Scituate schools is called Best Buddies, but the peer mentoring is not about pairing a special-needs student with a student who does not have special needs, Johnston said.

“We do everything in groups,” she said.

The reason is simple: It increases social contact.

“They’re going to get so many more ‘Hi’s’ in the hallway at school that way,” Johnston said.