Autism center gets $40,000 donation

By Jacqueline Bostick | The News Herald
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PANAMA CITY — Children with autism are getting critical therapy thanks to George Butchikas’ contributions.

Butchikas, founder of George Butchikas Foundation for Autism, donated $40,000 to the Early Childhood Autism Program (ECAP) at Florida State University Panama City Wednesday. The annual gift will be used to fund ECAP’s scholarships, to which the foundation has already given $385,000 since 2001.

The scholarship starts with families who least can afford to pay for autism services, then, moves upward to help families that can afford to pay a portion.

“The average cost per year is $60,000 to raise an autistic child,” Butchikas said. “Most people don’t even make $60,000, so you can imagine that therapy is not even going to be an avenue for them to even look into.”

Although his daughter Camille Butchikas is now 26 years old and demonstrates the success of therapy, “We want to continue to [make contributions]; it’s giving back,” he said.

About one in 68 children have autism spectrum disorder (ASD), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. The developmental disease is becoming more common; one in 150 children born in 1992 was diagnosed with ASD.

Zsuzsanna Darvai’s 8-year-old son Balazs Darvai peeked around corners and sang an apparent made-up tune at the Butchikas Foundation check presentation Wednesday.

With his blue-framed glasses secured to his face by a blue strap attached to each arm, he jumped around and threw and chased a colorful ball throughout the conference center.

“You cannot do a conversation with him yet,” Darvai said, “but I’m sure we’re on the right track.”

Balazs has been in ECAP since he was 3. In the early stages of therapy, he couldn’t talk; but, now he’s able to use his language more appropriately, Darvai said.

One-on-one therapy he’s getting at ECAP three times a week helps in what’s most important to him, she said, such as clothing himself. Balazs receives the Butchikas scholarship and Darvai said she’s grateful for it because the therapy has helped her son tremendously.
Notably, Darvai said, “all of a sudden,” he’s able to complete a 49-piece puzzle on an iPad. Previously, it took Balazs three years to master a nine-piece puzzle.

“And that’s amazing because it means cognitively something came together and he understands,” she added. “He makes much more sense and we’re excited.”

About 30 children from ages 2-18 participate in ECAP. The scholarship allows more children to have access to therapy and, in turn, more graduate students to work on their practicum, according to ECAP clinical coordinator Kassi VanderPloeg.

“Because we have the clinic, even more kids are served by his donation than kids that are just on the scholarship,” she said. “We need the training, kids need the services, but funding is a problem because there are few insurances that cover it.”

Seth Higby, 10, was one of the first ECAP clients to use the Butchikas scholarship.

“We wouldn’t be where we’re at today, it changed, not only his life, but our life as a family,” said Julie Higby, Seth’s mother.

Services cost about $100 an hour and it was recommended he do 40 hours a week, Higby said.

“Our insurance did not ever applied behavioral analysis; we could never afford it,” she added. “God helped me through it, sent all of these people to help.”

Now, Higby said, Seth does what he loves and what other children love: swimming, gymnastics, jumping on the trampoline and LEGOs.

He takes regular classes at the campus University Academy since having met goals to graduate out of the program.

“I didn’t foresee that,” Higby said. “He’s come a long way.”

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