



Sensory-friendly thrills planned

A day at Six Flags for kids with autism, plus a new school

BY BETH WHITEHOUSE
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Two new opportunities for kids on the autism spectrum are launching next month: May 3 is a sensory-friendly “Autism Day” at the Six Flags Great Adventure theme park in Jackson, New Jersey, and, beginning in May, applications will be accepted for a school scheduled to open in 2019 inside a Long Island equestrian center.

From 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. May 3, Great Adventure will be open only to people with autism and their families, says Kevin Gersh, founder and chief autism officer of Long Island’s Gersh Academy, which provides schooling, vocational and social skills programs for children on the autism spectrum. “You turn down the music, you turn down some of the games that are flashing, you have shorter lines, you have staff on lines to assist,” Gersh says of how the day will be different



Gersh Academy is planning a full-day school for students with autism at the New York Equestrian Center in West Hempstead. Isabella Rios, 21, of Howard Beach, right, at a therapy program already in place there.

than usual. “We’ve scored the rides according to their noise, sensory input and speed.”

There will also be tents where kids can decompress, with soft music, beanbag chairs and therapists, Gersh says. One hundred Gersh Acad-

emy staff will be on hand to help out.

“We’ve sold over 1,800 tickets already. We’ve got kids coming from Long Island, Connecticut, New Jersey,” Gersh says. This is Great Adventure’s first event dedicated to the autism commu-

nity. Tickets are \$32.55 per person. To order tickets, visit customeeducationfoundation.org.

Beginning in May, Gersh will also start taking applications for a new, full-time school for young people with autism that will open in September 2019

on the second floor of the New York Equestrian Center in West Hempstead.

The school is the outgrowth of Gersh Academy and NYEC’s Equine Assisted Therapy Program, which was launched five years ago and allows Gersh Academy students to work with and help take care of horses.

The school will ultimately have room for more than 100 children in eighth grade up to age 21, Gersh says. It will have 18 classrooms above the 60 horse stalls and indoor riding ring. For the first year, the school will likely accept 30 to 40 students.

“From what we’ve researched, it’s the first time in the country there’ll be a school inside an equestrian center,” Gersh says. “They’ll be feeding the horses, grooming the horses, caring for them, riding them, developing relationships with them.” There currently are therapeutic programs that offer horseback riding extracurriculars for kids with autism, but “we’re taking it to the next level,” Gersh says. Tuition hasn’t yet been determined, he says. For more information, call 631-385-3342 or visit gershacademy.org.

Meetup of authors and young readers

Young adult author Amy Giles of Huntington Station knows her audience: It’s living in her house with her.

Giles, 51, who published her first book, “Now Is Everything” (HarperTeen, \$17.99), in November, has two daughters in high school.

“When I had teenagers, I started reading the books they were reading, and it clicked — this was the voice I wanted to write in,” Giles says. “Now Is Everything” tells the story of teen Hadley McCauley, who will do anything to keep her younger sister safe from their abusive father.

Giles is one of eight middle-grade or young adult authors who will speak at the seventh annual Authors Unlimited book festival Saturday at St. Joseph’s

College in Patchogue. The event, which is geared to teens and tweens, is being co-sponsored by Suffolk County’s public libraries. The authors will participate in a discussion focused on the art of writing, and then kids will break into various sessions with two authors leading each. Books will be available for purchase and signing.

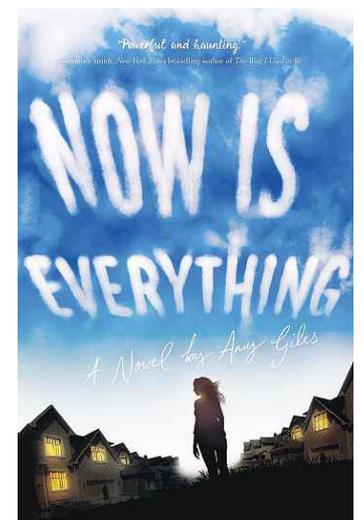
The other authors scheduled to attend are Arvin Ahmadi, author of “Down and Across”; Patty Blount, author of “The Way It Hurts”; Sarah Beth Durst, author of “The Stone Girl’s Story”; Jessie Janowitz, author of “The Doughnut Fix”; George O’Connor, author of “Olympians: Hermes: Tales of the Trickster”; Eliot Schrefer, author of “The Lost Rainforest: Mez’s Magic” and Kara

Thomas, author of “Little Monsters.”

“Authors Unlimited is a fantastic event for any kid who loves reading, who loves libraries or wants to be a writer,” says Derek Ivie, youth services coordinator for the Suffolk Cooperative Library System. “It’s a great event to meet real, published authors.”

Authors Unlimited is free and runs from 9:15 a.m. to 3 p.m., with a break for lunch. “We do recommend bringing your own lunch,” Ivie says. Ivie recommends pre-registering on the Authors Unlimited website. The event is at O’Connor Hall at 155 W. Roe Blvd., Patchogue. For more information or to register, call 631-286-1600 or visit authorsunlimited.org.

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Amy Giles of Huntington Station will be one of the writers at Authors Unlimited at St. Joseph’s College on Saturday.