

School for learning disabilities celebrates first high school graduates

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Christie Farriella for News

Ellenmorris Tiegeman, director of the School for Language and Communication Development, celebrated its first high school graduating class.

A [Richmond Hill](#) school for students with severe learning disabilities has proven that where there's a will, there is a way.

The School for Language and Communication Development celebrated its first high school graduation last week after opening its doors nearly 25 years ago with an elementary school. All five graduates passed their state Regents exams and are heading to college this fall.

"It was worth the pain and the struggle watching these kids come to the stage and accept their diplomas," said the school's executive director, Ellenmorris Tiegeman.

The school wanted to add a high school program earlier, but was embroiled in a roughly decade-long legal battle with the state, which wanted to limit the number of students at the school.

The school has its elementary program in [Glen Cove](#), L.I., and its middle school in [Woodside](#). It works with students with disabilities that, in some cases, fall on the autism spectrum.

The school provides small class sizes, extended days and a longer school year - as well as training for parents - to help the students get up to speed, Tiegerman said.

"My expectation is that they are going to complete the college program that they applied [to] and then lead independent lives," she said.

That's a life that [Denise Owens](#), 44, of [Floral Park](#), L.I., could only dream of for her son [Connor Owens](#), 18.

Doctors told her that her son - who suffered from oxygen deprivation to the brain as a newborn - would never finish high school.

"Connor couldn't speak for the first few years of his life, so he would draw," she said. "If he wanted a box of crayons, he would draw a box of crayons."

But Connor proved the experts wrong. He finished school and plans to study graphic design and illustration at the [Pratt Institute](#) in the fall.

"A lot of hard work went into it," he said about his graduation. But "I wanted to move forward from high school into college."

Valedictorian Stacey Santana said her future was uncertain until she transferred to the Richmond Hill school. The aspiring author plans to attend the [Borough of Manhattan](#) Community College in the fall.

"When I was at my public school, I was thinking it would be very hard for me to graduate," she said. "I worked so hard to be where I am today."

[Susan Hyman](#), a [University of Rochester](#) professor who specializes in children with disabilities, said these success stories are "an incredible accomplishment."

"What's so exciting about having these students graduate high school is that they surpassed expectations," she said. "We as a society need to expect people with special health needs to be contributing members of society."

http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/queens/2011/06/28/2011-06-28_grad_expectations_fulfilled.html