By Stephanie Shapiro

In the airy lobby of Gateway School in Baltimore, 5-year-old Elena Pearstein bounces out of class and into her father’s arms. She cups his head in her hands and says in adoration, “Your face.” Then Elena jumps down. It’s late in the morning, time to leave “Little Ears, Big Voices,” Gateway’s preschool program for children with hearing loss, to resume the second half of the school day at St. James Academy in Monkton.

A year and a half ago, Jonathan and Michele Pearstein couldn’t imagine that their daughter would be ready for a mainstream classroom. “We had a child who wasn’t speaking and we were afraid that she wasn’t going to be able to go to kindergarten at the age she should have,” Michele Pearstein says. “Now she’s splitting her time between Gateway and a mainstream school and she’s holding her own.” Next year, Elena will leave Gateway to attend St. James Academy fulltime.

At age five, Elena entered Gateway’s preschool, where intensive speech-language therapy, an onsite audiologist and a nurturing early learning environment have brought her up to speed developmentally with hearing peers.

At first, the Pearsteins had reason to worry that their daughter’s disability would always hold her back. Elena’s hearing loss wasn’t appropriately diagnosed until the age of three. By then, she had never had the consistent hearing experience that is critical for speech and language development. “The one-on-one fits all at Gateway and the Hartford County’s public preschool program,” says in addressing Elena’s particular challenges.

As her parents searched for schools, Elena began retreating into her own quiet world, opting not to play with other children or exhibit behavior problems. The stress took its toll on the couple, who also have an eight-year-old daughter.

Then they discovered Gateway and paid a visit. It didn’t take long to know it was the right fit for Elena, although it would mean an hour commute to Baltimore and a super-sized financial commitment. Ultimately, Michele and Jonathan Pearstein realized that their daughter’s welfare was well worth any such inconvenience.

“Since Elena was late in being diagnosed, we were not going to look back on this and have any regrets,” says Jonathan Pearstein, a self-employed financial advisor who works on his laptop in the school’s parent resource library while Elena attends school.

A less costly program closer to home “may or may not have worked. We would always wonder if there was something better out there,” Pearstein says. Today, there’s no wondering. Elena has become a change, outgoing child who makes up songs in the car and is on the verge of reading. She cracks jokes, takes ballet lessons, wants to do karate like her sister and will play lacrosse at St. James Academy, coached by her father.

Elena has come so far that “a lot of kids in her class at St. James don’t even know she has hearing aids,” Michele Pearstein says. “We were afraid she’d stand out. She doesn’t.”

Marguerite Loeschke follows her imagination down railroad tracks and under the sea. The five-year-old girl would like to become the engineer of a historic steam locomotive out West, but also ponderises life as a mermaid who swims with the “King of the Blue Whales.”

Taking a break from her kindergarten class at Gateway, Marguerite, who has an autism spectrum disorder, draws that big blue whale, plus a tiny mermaid to keep her company. She composites the picture with a boat and her nearly printed name.

Since coming to Gate- way, “Marguerite’s progress has been amazing,” says her mother, Catsi Hollander. Like other parents of children with communication disorders, Hollander and husband Paul Loeschke first struggled to understand their daughter’s dif- ficulties and how to help her.

At the age of two and a half, Marguerite’s social isolation and poor verbal skills became apparent. “It was very clear that she was bright, but in other ways she was atypical of kids her age in the way she communicated and related to other children,” says Hollander, who noted Marguerite’s atypical behavior in having issues with morning or leaving after the birth of a second daughter.

Monthly, and then weekly, speech-language therapy pro- vided by a social worker helps the five-year-old with other children in her class.

“Yet, when I’m with her and watch a child,” Hollander says, “Looking back it’s pretty obvious. But when it’s first child it’s difficult to recognize the signs of developmental delays.”

At three and a half, Mar- guerite was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, known as Pervasive Develop- mental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Deter- mined to find the services that best served their daughter’s needs, Hollander and Loes- chke began the arduous process of developing an indi- vidualized Education Program (IEP). Under federal law, an IEP guarantees a free and ap- propriate education to children with special needs.

But the search for the right school for Marguerite contin- ued until Hollander mentioned their predicament to an uncle. He referred her to Gateway, describing the school as a “miracle worker” for a child’s eventual who went on to college and a career. As soon as Hollander and husband Paul Loeschke met the “King of the Blue Whales.”

“Gateway,” she quickly began to flourish. “You have this amazing team of people, a special education teacher, an instructional assistant, speech-language and occupa- tional therapists, a psychologist and a social worker taking a comprehensive approach,” says her grateful mother. Deter- mined to find the services that best served their daughter’s needs, Hollander and Loeschke began the arduous process of developing an individualized Education Program (IEP). Under federal law, an IEP guarantees a free and appropriate education to children with special needs.

But the search for the right school for Marguerite continued until Hollander mentioned their predicament to an uncle. He referred her to Gateway, describing the school as a “miracle worker” for a child’s eventual graduation, who went on to college and a career. As soon as Hollander and husband Paul Loeschke met Gateway’s language- based curriculum might be the right choice for your child, call 410-338-4270 for more information.

Visit www.hasa.org for details about our summer programs.

The Hearing and Speech Agency
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