

INCLUSIVE TIMES

Least Restrictive Environment

Established 1975

Inspiring autistic football player wins a scholarship



Kyle Weafer leads his team-

Feb. 04, 2010
By JOE LAMBE
The Kansas City Star

An Overland Park teen who inspired Blue Valley Northwest High School and was nominated by his coach for the Rudy

Award was named Wednesday as a runner-up. Kyle Weafer, who will receive a \$5,000 academic scholarship, was one of two runners-up for the national award that is named for Rudy Ruettiger, the famous Notre Dame football walk-on. The award honors high school football players who embody courage, character, contribution and commitment.

Kyle was born on Super Bowl Sunday 19 years ago, diagnosed as autistic at age 3 and didn't play football until his senior year in high school. The doctor told his parents he might never say more than a few words.

Kyle's football coach, Mike Zegunis, said Wednesday, "We've known Kyle is a really special person, and now the whole United States knows it."

For years, Kyle had sensory problems and fixations, such as one on the family's neighborhood swimming pool, where he spent many hours each summer day. He would wear only a purple T-shirt, silver shorts and flip-flops every day. Kyle refused to wear other shoes.

Then in January of last year he declared, "I play football."

His father, Bob Weafer, was skeptical but talked to Zegunis, and Kyle started to work out in the off-season. He lifted weights. He got stronger and looked like a football player.

Bob Weafer took a chance and bought Kyle a pair of cleats.

When the day came for Kyle to suit up, he put on the uniform and the cleats.

He showed up at every practice, liked it and became a defensive lineman, wearing the purple colors of the Huskies. His experience inspired others.

When football season was over, another coach suggested Kyle wrestle. The teen said, "I wrestle," and is now on the wrestling team.

Lisa Weafer, Kyle's mother, said her son wrestled Tuesday evening and pinned his opponent.

Because Kyle cannot go to college, she said, the family plans to award the scholarship to another member of the football team.

They will call it the 88 Award after Kyle's football number, she said, and it will go to the senior who best matches the four character traits of the Rudy Award.

"Where he is today is incredible," Lisa Weafer said. "It's been a great senior year for him."

**"Your child cannot participate in band, music, athletics."
"Your child will not be able to eat lunch in the cafeteria."**

IDEA 2004 emphasized that supplementary aids and services, if necessary, are to be provided in "extracurricular and nonacademic settings, to enable children with disabilities to be educated with non-disabled children to the maximum extent appropriate...." Section 300.107 requires the state education agency to make sure that IEP teams provide nonacademic and extracurricular activities "in the manner necessary to afford children with disabilities an equal opportunity for participation in those services and activities."

Eudora High student helps classmate participate in marching band

Nov. 06, 2009
By Janet Reid
Lawrence Journal-World

Kyle Snow marches out onto Laws Field in Eudora on a recent Friday night.

He's not wearing a band uniform.

He carries no instrument.

He doesn't make a sound.

But Snow, a Eudora High School senior, may very well be one of the most instrumental members of the marching band.

"It's kind of interesting being in

the band without having to learn any of the music," Snow said.

Snow, the senior class president, runs cross country, is a member of the National Honor Society and scored a 35 on his ACT. He said he was never really interested in the band.

That all changed when he met sophomore Zach Herries.

"We make a great team, I think," Snow said.

Herries, a percussionist with the band, has cerebral palsy, which

limits his ability to march. It doesn't affect his ability to play the cowbell, however.

"He has got that thing mastered," Snow said.

But until recently, Herries, who mainly uses a walker to get around, was stuck playing on the sidelines when the Eudora marching band took the field.

So Snow stepped up and volunteered to push Herries in his wheelchair. Snow spends his

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First-grader proves teacher

December 19, 2009

By Ann Marie Bush

Topeka Capital Journal

Seven-year-old Santos Ramirez uses a machine, known as his "second voice," to communicate with some friends and family members.

But he prefers to use his own voice and hand gestures to get his message across.

"I describe him as 'Santos,' " said his mother, Teresa Gallegos-Ramirez. "This is part of who he is."

Santos, a handsome dark-haired, dark-eyed first-grader at Jay Shideler Elementary School, was diagnosed with ataxic cerebral palsy and has struggled with walking and communicating. Teresa noticed something different about her son when he was a baby.

"I knew at 6 months something was wrong," she said.

"He wasn't eating food like my other child."

It was a long, tough road for Teresa and her husband, Troy, but Santos eventually was diagnosed with ataxic cerebral palsy.

"There have been many ups and downs, but that is how life just is," Teresa said. "Yes, having Santos with additional needs has been difficult, but I do not see it as that and would never complain. This is how Santos is, and we will, and do, everything that we can for him."

Santos has used a DynaVox Vmax to help with communication with his classmates, teachers and friends. The device allows Santos to type responses to questions and to formulate sentences and carry on conversations. The device, by DynaVox Mayer-Johnson, is referred to as an augmentative and alternative communication product. It helps individuals with speech and learning challenges.

Santos' brother, Jesus, 9, and sister, Elena, 4, see their sibling as someone to play with, tease and wrestle.

"He's funny," Jesus said. "He has a big imagination. He is kind. We are pals."

Elena, who looks up to her brother, said Santos is a big help.

"He helps me on the computer," she said.

"He helps me on the Wii."

Santos' teachers and classmates, such as his best friend Rachel Osborn, 7, view him as any other student.

Rachel sometimes helps Santos at lunch. But she also offers assistance to many of the other students in her class by opening their milk jugs.

"He's pretty cool," Rachel said last week during lunch. "He makes me laugh."

Santos enjoys physical education class and recess along with his friends, and he walks the halls like other students, whereas just a few months ago, he used his electric wheelchair to get around.

"I just want more awareness about Santos having a second voice," Teresa said. "This last year, he has had so much more improvement in his talking, gestures and some signing — especially in the last four months — that he is not using the Vmax as much as he was last year. We still highly encourage it around people that do not understand his own voice. Santos has motor limitations and is delayed, but he has the cognitive ability to do mostly what his peers are doing, of course with adaptations and modifications.

"I just want Santos to have his voice — whether it be his own and/or the Vmax — and the opportunity to speak his mind."

Santos doesn't like being referred to as "special needs child," Teresa said, and his family and friends don't treat him like one.

"I always tell people that his Vmax is his second voice," she said. "It is a tool just like Jesus uses glasses to see better. Santos does not like to be called a 'CP' or 'special needs child,' and that is because we have brought up our kids to be themselves. We do not define him as the 'CP kid.' We acknowledge it, and it is part of him."

Before starting school at Jay Shideler this year, Santos spent his



Santos Ramirez, center, joins in with the other children in his first-grade class for some singing and dancing.

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Family-to-Family Information Center



Helping families of children and youth with special health care needs and the professionals who serve them.

www.familiestogetherinc.org

Families Together, Inc.

Assisting Kansas parent and their sons and daughters with disabilities.



www.familiestogetherinc.org

Parent-to-Parent of Kansas



Matching parents with the most valuable source of emotional support and encouragement, another parent who also has a child with special needs.

www.familiestogetherinc.org

See page 16 for contact information for the center in your region.

Wamego wrestler finds relief from CP on the mat

February 16, 2009
By Brent Maycock
Topeka Capital Journal

Freedom.

That's what wrestling feels like to Nick Hartwich.

"It's really tiring," the Wamego senior says of the sport he's loved ever since he began tagging along to watch his older brother, Cody, wrestle. "But it feels awesome. It feels like freedom."

When Hartwich steps on the wrestling mat, in a sense, he is free. The six-minute matches are a time when Hartwich is just another athlete trying to beat an opponent.

And it's also a time where Hartwich already has won, no matter what the outcome of the match ends up. In being on the mat, Hartwich is defeating an opponent he's battled virtually all of his life.

Hartwich has cerebral palsy. But it hasn't stopped the 18-year-old.

"I guess I'm an inspiration," Hartwich said. "It just shows that anything can be accomplished if you work hard."

It shouldn't be a surprise Hartwich has competed in wrestling. He's shown plenty of fight in his life.

The fourth son of David and Susan Hartwich, Nick was born with "kind of a hard stomach," David

said. When Nick was about a month old, David came home on a Friday night and Susan was concerned.

"My wife said, 'I don't think Nick's color looks very good,'" David said. "So we called the pediatrician to see if they'd look at him. They thought it was the flu bug and said to wait and bring him in on Monday."

Instead, the Hartwiches decided to take Nick to the hospital in Manhattan. "I'd never had a boy with that kind of color," David said.

The news they received when they got to the hospital wasn't good. After checking Nick over, the doctor told the Hartwiches Nick was too sick to be treated there and he was life-flighted to Kansas City. Nick's heart was beating too fast.

At the KU Med Center, Nick was given a shot to slow his heart rate down. It not only slowed down, but stopped. His other vitals started shutting down as well and Nick was put on life support for 10 minutes.

"We went from wait and bring him in Monday to we don't think he's going to live, all within about eight hours time," David said.

But here's where the fighter spirit in Nick came out. His vitals started back up and he survived. The doctor told the Hartwiches there could be long-term effects. A little more than a year later, Hartwich was diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

"That was quite a shock and I couldn't believe it," David said.



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Holley swims in Braves final home meet

February 6, 2008
Mark Lee
Bonner Springs Chieftain

Freshman Sean Holley is enjoying being a member of the Bonner Springs High School swim team.

Holley, who is an autistic student at Bonner Springs High School, swam in his first meet of the season for the Braves on Wednesday, Jan. 31, at the Bonner Springs YMCA pool.

Braves swim coach Lynn LaNoue said that Bonner fans were thrilled to see Holley swim in their final home meet.

"The results do not tell the big story of the evening," LaNoue said. "Sean Holley competed in the 50 free and completed the race to a standing ovation from the crowd. He is not listed in the meet results because he was a late entry. It was something else to see."

Both coaches and team members have treated Holley as the important 12th man on their team all year long.



Assistant coach Jaye Shaer said team swimmers and managers spend time with Holley.

"Teammates share a lane with him and have been very supportive of him," Shaer said. "Team managers help him learn appropriate body posture and practice strokes."

Both team managers take turns working with Holley at practices.

"Sometimes he was just doing a dog paddle," manager Kaley Withers said. "We have been helping him learn swimming skills. We are helping him swim more vertically. Now he tries to do a stroke or two more every time."

Manager Bailey Nairn also works with Holley. "We switch off days we work with him," Nairn said. "We help him get motivated to swim. It makes me feel good to teach someone what I know. He has been doing good."

Sophomore swimmer Ryan Holcomb shares his swimming lane with Holley at practices. "He swims just like any other person," Holcomb said. "I have an autistic brother who likes to swim. He (Philip Holcomb) will probably be up here (on the high school team) next year because he is just in the eighth grade now."

Ben Berlin: Growing up, moving on

April 27, 2009

By Jan Bilies

Topeka Capital Journal

Seventeen-year-old Ben Berlin has mixed feelings about graduating next year from Shawnee Heights High School. He is looking forward to going to a small college and pursuing a career in engineering, but he will miss the familiar setting and activities of the school and his little brother, Alex.

"Next year is another big step toward the real world," Berlin, a junior, said, "but I've enjoyed my years here."

Berlin, of Topeka, who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome at age 5, has never viewed himself as having a disability.

"I see it as a perk I have," he said. People with Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism, usually have average to above average intelligence and no delays in language skills. But they often struggle with social skills and repetitive behavior.

Berlin said his parents "made a big deal" about getting him the help he needed, such as physical therapy and occupational therapy, so he wouldn't get "the red stamp of special

education." Since kindergarten, his parents have insisted that he be integrated into regular classrooms.

This year, Berlin and school personnel are working with vocational rehabilitation officials to make a smooth transition from high school into adult life.

Mari White, his mother, said she and her family have focused on her son's strengths rather than his disability.

This summer, Berlin will be an ambassador with the People to People program and travel three weeks in Europe, including stops in France, Italy, Austria, Switzerland and Germany.

Berlin, a member of the school's JROTC, hopes to attend a JROTC camp in the summer of 2010 that will allow him to spend time on a naval vessel. Last summer, he was the first person with an autism spectrum disorder to serve as a Congressional Page in the nation's capital.

For other teens who might be dealing with autism, Berlin has this advice:

"I'm not going to tell them it's an easy thing to deal with," he said. "There's many times I've wanted to be 'normal.' ... But everyone is different.

"If they're calling you 'weird,'" he advised, "say you're different and difference is good."

White said she wants her son to live independently, have a job he enjoys, raise a family if he wants and be happy as an adult.

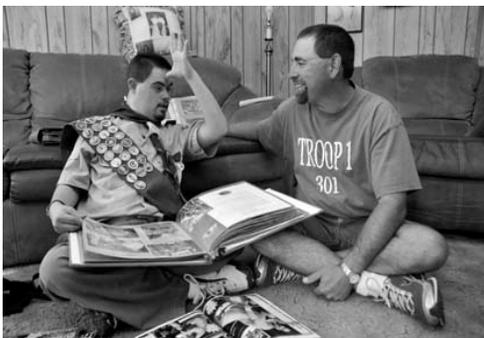
"I want people to see him for who he is," she said.



Ben Berlin, a Shawnee Heights High School junior who has Asperger's syndrome, has never allowed his disability to stand in the way of accomplishing his goals. Berlin, 17, plans to attend a small college and possibly major in engineering after he graduates.

A most able Scout

Teen with Down syndrome has gained far more than badges, rank in program



Lucas Wondra, 16, makes the sign meaning "Dad" to his father, Corey Wondra, while looking through a scrapbook detailing some of his experiences in the Boy Scouts. Lucas, who has Down syndrome, recently earned his Eagle Scout rank after years of work with Hutchinson Troop 301.

September 3, 2009

By Ken Stephens

The Hutchinson News

Lucas Wondra has Down syndrome and communicates with a few words, sign language and a PDA with a speaker and voice software. But when it comes to the Boy Scouts, he concedes no disability.

On Monday, Lucas, a 16-year-old freshman at Hutchinson High, became an Eagle Scout, the highest rank in the Boy Scouts of America and the latest in a collage of medals and merit badges covering his uniform.

Scout Master Bill Whitlow said Lucas is the first Scout with Down syndrome from Troop 301 to achieve his Eagle rank.

"I feel like it's been a community effort," his mother, Leann Wondra, said. "The school helped with physical therapy, occupational therapy and communications therapy so he could earn merit badges."

He also had the support of church leaders, his parents, brother Evan and sister Alicia and all his friends in Troop 301.

"While Lucas achieved his Eagle, the troop also benefited," his father, Corey Wondra, said. "I'm not sure who benefited more. How many times do kids get a chance to hang out with a kid with a disability? And Lucas is a cool kid to hang with."

A few years ago, when Lucas was a Cub Scout, his parents were debating whether

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Bella - Takes a Bow

Brother Alessandro is Bella's best and biggest friend

November 20, 2009

Story and photos by Jill Ragar Esfeld

The Leaven

Theresa DeBrevi prepared her daughter Bella well for her first audition for live theater. DeBrevi wanted to make absolutely sure Bella understood that — even if she did her best — she might not get a part.

“We went over and over that,” said DeBrevi. “I told her, ‘Sometimes you get a part and . . .’ then Bella would finish it for me, saying, ‘Sometimes you don’t!’”

But Bella, a third-grader at Holy Cross School in Overland Park, prepared with her typical resolve and went with her mother to the Christian Youth Theater (CYT) auditions for “Scrooge: The Musical.”

When her turn came, Bella plucked up her courage, climbed to the stage all on her own, introduced herself, and sang.

Her mother sat in the audience with tears in her eyes.

Halfway through Bella’s song, DeBrevi felt a hand on her shoulder. A woman sitting behind her had leaned forward to whisper, “I don’t even know who you are. “But I’m crying, too.”

It seems Bella has spent most of her life inspiring people she doesn’t even know. “Everything that Bella does, she always works hard and gives her best to,” said

DeBrevi. “I think it’s inspiring to people because, if all of us did that, imagine what we could accomplish.”

Bella was born with Down syndrome, but she doesn’t let that stand in the way of anything she wants to accomplish — stardom included.

“One of our really big goals for Bella is her independence,” said DeBrevi. “If there’s something she can do herself, then I like to see her do it. “If there’s something she needs help with, I like to see her try to do it herself first, and then ask for help.”

With that philosophy in mind, DeBrevi and her husband Michael thought getting Bella involved in theater might be a good way to help her build self-confidence. They enrolled her in CYT, a nondenominational program that teaches drama, dance and singing through camps and after-school class sessions.

CYT appealed to the couple because it welcomes children with special needs; its HEART program is specifically designed to help them acclimate.

“They’re just part of the cast like everyone else,” explained Amy Cox, director of PR and marketing for the Kansas City branch of CYT. “If they have extra needs that we need to meet,” she said, “we do that through our staff and parents, and we don’t make a big



Bella listens carefully as the director gives last-minute instructions to cast members before they go on stage.

deal out of it.” CYT believes working side by side with children who have special needs teaches other children valuable life lessons.

John Solomon, a parishioner of Church of the Ascension in Overland Park, has found

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Placement must be individually determined

The overriding rule in placement is that each student's placement must be individually determined based on the individual student's abilities and needs. It is the program of specialized instruction and related service contained in the student's IEP that forms the basis for the placement decision. In determining if a placement is appropriate under IDEA, the following factors are relevant:

- the educational benefits available to the student with disabilities in a traditional classroom, supplemented with appropriate aids and services, in comparison to the educational benefits to the student with disabilities from a special education classroom;
- the non-academic benefits to the student with disabilities from interacting with students who do not have disabilities;

and the degree of disruption of the education of other students, resulting in the inability to meet the unique needs of the student with disabilities.

However, school districts may not make placements based solely on factors such as the following:

- category of disability
- severity of disability
- configuration of delivery system
- availability of educational or related services
- availability of space or administrative convenience

“All children with disabilities are to be educated to the “maximum extent” with children who do not have disabilities.”

~ Federal Law I.D.E.A ~

Eudora High student helps classmate participate in marching band

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fourth period practicing with the marching band, learning the formations and making sure Herries is exactly where he needs to be at the precise time.

"It's kind of tough," he said. "Sometimes it's hard to keep up with everybody else, but I just do what I can, and it works out."

Snow gives up his Friday nights to help Herries during the pregame and halftime shows at Eudora's home football games.

He has also traveled to a couple of the band's weekend competitions.

"It's really generous of him," Eudora band director Mac Knight



Kyle Snow pushes Zach Herries on the track around the football field during a Eudora High School band performance before the start of the football game on Oct. 23. Snow's participation allows Herries, who has cerebral palsy, to perform with the band.

said. "He's just a great kid who wants to work hard and has taken time out of his day and his weekends to come help us. It's just a really great experience to have him with us."

Snow said when the principal first approached him about helping Herries, the two didn't really know each other. But a bond has grown between the duo during their time participating in band together.

"You could just see the friendship growing," Zach's dad, Richard Herries, said. "It was really cool."

As the two take the field, they move as one unit. Herries makes the music while Snow handles the marching.

Communication between the two isn't a problem, even though Herries wears hearing aids, has a cochlear implant and often has a sign language interpreter with him while at school.

"I tell him what to do, and he does it perfect," Herries said.

Snow's help has made Herries a true member of the marching band.

"I think he's more engaged with everyone out there on the field," said Knight, the band director. "He feels like more of a part of the team, and we're glad that he's with us, because that's where he belongs — out on the field with the rest of us."

And Herries' parents, watching from the sidelines, agree.

"It's the greatest feeling in the world to see your kids perform," Richard Herries said. "It's really cool because the other kids, they treat him just like another kid, and that's what he is."

"Inclusion is a right, not a special privilege for a select few".

~ Federal Court - Oberti v. Board of Education ~

First-grader proves teacher

Continued from pg. 8

kindergarten year at an out-of-state school learning how to make cookies instead of learning his ABCs, Teresa said. The family moved back to Kansas this summer, and the move has made a world of difference for Santos, who now is in a regular classroom with other first-grade students.

"He's a neat kid," his teacher Lisa Hamilton said. "He has that sparkle in his eye and a great sense of humor."

Hamilton said she was nervous at first about having Santos in her classroom.

"He won everyone over," she said. "He's a regular kid trapped in a body that won't work the way he wants it to. He is capable of the first-grade curriculum. He is very intelligent."

The Ramirez household is filled with laughter and love. One day recently after

school, the three children watched television together, played games and visited with family friend Connie Hupp, of Topeka.

"He's a real caring, lovable kid," Hupp said. "I think he is lucky to have this family."

Santos' room is on the top floor of the home next to his siblings' rooms. There is a photograph of each child hanging outside their bedroom. Troy and Teresa selected their favorite photograph of each child to place in the hallway near their doors.

Inside Santos' room, there is a cut-out of a Storm Trooper along with other Star Wars items. There also is a piece of paper taped to Santos' clock beside his bed. The paper reads "6:45," which is the time Santos is allowed to leave his room. He is an early riser, often up before the rest of the family.

Each child is asked to share in the responsibility of taking care of the house. Santos empties his clothes basket, along with his brother's. He also collects the trash from the upstairs rooms and helps with recycling.

"I want them to all be independent," Teresa said. "Santos is not able to spit because of his motor development nor hold his breath. Every time I brush my teeth, I think about Santos. Can you imagine wanting to say so much but your body not allowing you to say everything you wanted to say? My husband and my kids mean everything to me. They are my No. 1 priority.

"We have learned to be thankful for so much. Santos brings out the best in us. So do our other children, but Santos pushes me to be a better mom, a better friend and a better wife."

Wamego wrestler finds relief from CP on the mat

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"His older brothers, one was all-league football, another made it to state in wrestling. With Nick, we thought he'd be another tough little Hartwich kid. He's tough in his own way."

Indeed, he is. Nick has rarely used a wheelchair to get around, instead learning how to pedal a heavy-duty tricycle that David modified through the years as Nick grew. He's relied on a walker, crutches and braces, but walks on his own.

And then there's wrestling, with Nick starting in junior high and continuing through all four years of high school.

"I went to a lot of his practices and meets and had a lot of fun there," Nick said. "I learned a lot about wrestling and I think that's how I got interested in it."

His parents encouraged him in the sport, as well.

"It took some getting used to," Susan said. "It was hard to watch him at first, but he's gotten strong enough now. JV is a little more his capability. It's pretty neat to be able to see him flip those kids over."

Though he can't perform in any of the team's running exercises, Nick participates in everything else at practice. He works out with weights, particularly those that strengthen his grips and arms.

"There are moves we've adapted for what he can do," said Wamego coach Kevin Cathcart. "He chooses top a lot because he's got good strength, and he's good at Peterson rolls on bottom."

For all the work Nick has put in during his career, it had gone without the reward of tasting victory at a meet. It might have been

disheartening, but Nick was determined to keep wrestling.

"I think there's been a few times where it's felt too tough," Nick said. "But this is my senior year and the last time I can do this, so I have to do it."

Finally in January at the Abilene JV Tournament, Nick broke through with an 8-4 victory.

"His goal was always to get a win," Susan said. "Dave called me and said, 'You aren't going to believe this, but Nick won a match.' We called his brother, Cody, and everybody was pretty elated."

"It felt great," Nick said. "I thought it would never come, but it finally did."

Nick didn't get to finish his senior season, breaking his left thumb in practice in early February. But his future is bright. A stellar student, Nick already has several academic scholarships and plans on studying mechanical engineering at Kansas State after he graduates in May.

His time on the mat, however, was time well spent.

"I think he's a huge inspiration," Cathcart said. "(Others) see him competing and, if they're whining about their knee or shoulder, think maybe I should suck it up. Nick's out here competing with all that life has handed him. The other coaches realize it too and he's gotten inspirational awards at tournaments."

Susan agreed.

"If he can inspire somebody who thinks they can't do something, then it's amazing," she said. "We're just so proud of him and what he's done."

- For early childhood service providers and families of young children.
- Demonstrations of and information about the effective practices of inclusive educational programs for children from birth through age eight.

Kansas Parent Information Resource Center

www.kpirc.org

- Connects people with disabilities and health conditions of all ages with the assistive technology they need to learn, work, play and participate in community life safely and independently.

800-KAN DO IT (800-526-3648).

Assistive Technology for Kansans

www.atk.ku.edu

- A collaborative of professionals and agencies interested in improving the skills of educators to meet the learning needs of students who qualify for special education.
- Free consultation is provided by teachers and related service persons to teams serving students with special needs in public schools across Kansas

Kansas Inservice Training System (KITS)

www.kskits.org

- For early childhood service providers and families of young children.
- Demonstrations of and information about the effective practices of inclusive educational programs for children from birth through age eight.

KU's Circle of Inclusion

www.circleofinclusion.org

- Assist educators in knowing, understanding and using Kansas curriculum standards.
- Website provides free, quality lesson plans and resources
- Ideas for accommodations for students who need general accommodations, who has Section 504 plans or special education Individualized Education Programs (IEP).

The Kansas Education Resource Center (KERC)

www.kerc-ks.org

- Free consultation is provided by teachers and related service persons to teams serving students with special needs in public schools across Kansas

Inclusive Network of Kansas (INKS)

www2.ku.edu/~inks

Brother Alessandro is Bella's best and biggest friend

Continued from pg. 11

that to be true. His son Jack has been involved with CYT for years.

"It's almost impossible to describe all the benefits," said Solomon. "They learn about responsibility, respect, and the dignity that you treat everybody with."

"A sense of family is created through diversity," he explained. "CYT is made up of public school kids, home-schooled kids, disabled kids, special-needs kids — just a myriad of kids that [Jack] would otherwise not come in contact with."

Bella fit in perfectly with this diverse family and fell in love with the CYT program — so much so that she decided to try out for a spot in the winter musical.

Moment of truth

A few days after her audition, Bella, her mom and her biggest fan, older brother Alessandro, went to the CYT Web site to check the cast list. "She found her name on there and she said, 'I did it!'" recalled DeBrevi. "It was just a great moment, and I was so glad Alessandro was the first one to congratulate her."

A fifth-grader at Holy Cross, Alessandro has been his sister's biggest fan, best friend and greatest support from the moment he first laid eyes on her.

As a matter of fact, it was Alessandro who taught his mother how to care for this special child. DeBrevi still remembers the day Bella was born — and how she sat in the hospital feeling overwhelmed and lost as she held her new daughter and processed the realization that she had Down syndrome.

"I didn't really know much about it," she said, "and a lot of the things I did know were inaccurate." And then Alessandro arrived to visit his new sister.

"The first time that he came in, I saw the love in his eyes," said DeBrevi. "The fact that his sister had Down syndrome was insignificant. I watched him with her and

thought, 'He's teaching me; we're going to just love her.'" The two children have been close ever since. "With everything she does, he's always the first one to tell her what a great job she did," said DeBrevi. "Often I will see him helping her with homework.

They'll be reading together. They just really enjoy each other's company."

Because the two were so close, the DeBrevis wanted them in the same school. They feared Bella's Down syndrome would prevent her from being able to go to a Catholic school. But the Holy Spirit had a plan.

"The Holy Spirit led me exactly where I needed to be and to the people that were supposed to be there to help me along the way," said DeBrevi. When it was time for Alessandro to start school, DeBrevi went to visit Holy Cross and told the principal at the time, Maureen Huffy, that she wanted a Catholic education for both of her children.

"She welcomed us, as did the entire school, with open arms," said DeBrevi. "And we started working together and were able to make an easy transition into kindergarten. And every year since, things have just fallen into place."

Bella's Holy Cross teachers have been especially supportive of her participation in the musical, allowing her to adjust schedules and take extra time with homework.

"And all the kids at her school are very excited about this," said DeBrevi.

"There will be several of them who come to see her."

Break a leg

When Bella made her acting debut, her dad and brother were in the audience.

But DeBrevi had volunteered for greenroom duty, so she had to watch the opening number on a small remote television.

As she squinted at the screen trying to pick her daughter out of the chorus, her phone buzzed. She checked a text message and smiled. "It's from my husband," she said.

"Bella is singing." A few moments later, her phone buzzed again.

"The opening number is over," she said. "Bella did great."

And suddenly the greenroom was filled with excitement and chatter as dozens of children dressed like street urchins poured in. A small group of girls congregated in one corner. "Did you see Bella?" one asked.

"She sang!" another replied. "She got right up there in front and sang!" And then, as if on cue, Bella walked into the room — a small bundle of enthusiasm filled with smiles and congratulations for everyone. No one could doubt Bella was thrilled with her first experience on stage. And no one could doubt that the children who immediately surrounded her were thrilled, too.

Bella has worked hard to keep pace with fellow cast members, and it's been well worth the effort. She's gained friends and the confidence her parents hoped for her.

"Watching her flourish with this experience is a dream come true," said DeBrevi. "She has made so many new friendships, and it's so nice to watch as she walks in and there's a new child greeting her."

Bella's also shared a few lessons with her new friends.

"I think she's really taught them about what's important in life," said DeBrevi. "That it's not always about racing to the finish line, but it's about all the steps you take to get there and how you treat people along the way."

As part of the Cheapside Company Chorus, Bella will sing and dance her way through 11 performances of

"Scrooge: The Musical." Her parents are as impressed with her talent as they are inspired by her spirit and determination.

"It's funny. When she was first born, there was part of me that thought I would always be teaching her things," said her mother. "But the part of God's plan in all this that I didn't realize," DeBrevi concluded, "was all the things that she would teach me."

A most able Scout

Teen with Down syndrome has gained far more than badges, rank in program

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and how he could advance into Boy Scouts. His mother felt he could do it all along, but his father freely admits he had doubts until he and Lucas' younger brother, Evan, went to a Scout summer camp in Colorado and Korey saw a Scout from a Texas troop who also had Down syndrome. He made a note of the troop number on the Scout's shoulder and looked up the Scout master, who told him that Danny had just completed the requirements for Eagle Scout.

Korey came home prepared to let Lucas give it a try.

In fewer than four years, Lucas has earned 28 merit badges.

He loves cooking, almost as much as eating, so that was a natural one.

Physical fitness wasn't a problem. He runs the 100, 200, 400 and 800 meters and relays in the Special Olympics, so five 10-mile hikes and a 20-mile hike to earn another badge wasn't a problem.

He loves photography. "So we just gave him the digital camera and he did his thing and put them all on the computer and created his slide show," his mother said.

Communication was more of a challenge, especially before he had the PDA, or personal digital assistant, talker to help. So his mother created a paper sash covered

with icons instead of merit badges. Lucas then was able to talk about himself by picking out icons of things he liked or disliked.

He did a presentation on professional wrestling - one of his favorite things - on a computer with talking software.

He fulfilled another requirement by serving as a chaplain's aide, during which he used his PDA talker to offer a thought for the day and lead others in the Lord's Prayer.

For his Eagle Scout project, he led a group of Scouts who created the horseshoe-shaped John Baldwin Memorial Garden at Reins of Hope, which aims to aid people with physical, mental or emotional disabilities through therapeutic horse riding.

"The troop is really proud of him," Whitlow said. "When he first came into the troop, he didn't interact with other people, other than his family, that much. But after a few months, he really blossomed. He did really well with all things."

And Whitlow said that the Scouts and the leadership of the troop learned a lot from being around Lucas.

"When he started in the process, we didn't have any hesitation, but we didn't know what we were doing, either," he said.

"So we just took it one step at a time. We had to modify some things. For instance, he couldn't swim. But he could walk 20 miles,

so he did hiking instead of swimming."

Korey Wondra remembers being in a tent with 10 boys who at first wanted to know what Down syndrome was, whether it was contagious and why Lucas couldn't talk.

But now, he said, those Scouts look out for Lucas. If someone starts to say something rude to him, they protect him, and they watch out for him during camps and other activities, Korey Wondra said.

"That's been one of the interesting things," Korey Wondra said. "They've taken him in, and he's taken them in. They've really bonded."

"... I'm really hoping these boys take what they've learned from Lucas, from being around him, and take that through their lives."

Twenty years ago, his mother said, children like Lucas might have been hidden in a back room. Today, it still might be easier to park them in front of the television and let them play video games than to work with them.

"It's scary putting kids in a situation where they might fail, but we felt we needed to give him the opportunity," Leann Wondra said.

And Lucas has done anything but fail.

"It gives me hope that he can be a productive member of society and an accepted member of society," she said.

A New Definition of Inclusion

Inclusion is a shared value which promotes a single system of education dedicated to ensuring that all students are empowered to become caring, competent, and contributing citizens in an integrated, changing, and diverse society. *Stevan J. Kukic, PhD VP, Cambium Learning/Sopris West (During presentation at 2009 Kansas Multi-Tier Systems of Support Symposium)*

Coop's Guiding Beliefs

"We believe that students learn best when educated with their peers to the extent possible. Children learn from each other. Highly qualified teachers in the general education classroom provide appropriate instruction in core content. Incidental learning is often an added bonus for children with disabilities when they are in the general education classroom." *(From the Guiding Beliefs and Practices of High Plains Educational Cooperative)*

"Inclusion is a right, not a privilege for a select few"

~ judge in *Oberti vs. Board of Education*~

Inclusion! The Bigger Picture

Our key question as we initiate a new millennium is "How do we live with one another?" Inclusion is about learning to live with one another. Inclusion means "being with." Inclusion means inclusion! It means affiliation, combination, comprisal, enclosure, involvement, surrounding. It means with . . . Inclusion means being with one another and caring for one another. It means inviting parents, students, and community members to be part of a new culture, a new reality. Inclusion

means joining with the new and exciting educational concepts (cooperative education, adult education, whole language, computer technology, critical thinking). Inclusion means inviting those who have been left out (in any way) to come in, and asking them to help design new systems that encourage every person to participate to the fullness of their capacity as partners and as members. *By Jack Pearpoint & Marsha Forest (Quoted from KU's Circle of Inclusion website.)*