

Calendar

February 18

“Autism Advocacy and Awareness Day on the Hill”
 Iowa State Capitol West Wing
 9:00 a.m.
 www.autismia.org

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LEAVING NOTHING TO CHANCE

Iowa Department of Education

Sydney Von Lehmden’s teachers knew a lot about her before she set foot in her new school. It was 2011, when the fifth grader was getting ready to make the transition from grade school to middle school.

At best, the transition for a child with special needs is challenging. But Sydney’s mother, Kelly, was determined to make it as pain free as possible. So she wrote a short book directed to Sydney’s individualized Education Program (IEP) Team.

The book contained photos of Sydney and her family. And more important, it contained information that would help the team get to know the girl inside and out, long before the first bell rang.

“When you have a plan ahead of time, you reduce the stress for everyone.” Kelly said. “If I’m not worried, it will help Sydney. Particularly when it’s a big transition year, I like to give information about Sydney and her family, what she likes to do, what Sydney may be nervous about.”

Two years later, Sydney, now at eighth-grader at Oak Ridge Middle school in Marion, is comfortable with her surroundings and eager to start class again. But that doesn’t mean that Kelly, a former chairwoman of the Special Education Advisory Panel, sits back.

“For the parent, we are always nervous about the school year,” she said. “We worry about her schedule – do the classes make sense? And how do we make sure she has quality peer interaction? We also want to make sure lunch is not stressful, and that she has friends to sit with. We want to give her as much independence as possible.”

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SUE BAKER & ANGIE CORSON HONORED

Sue Baker and Angie Corson were honored with the Stephen Tsai Award for Excellence in Autism Education at the Autism Society of Iowa Fall Conference.

Sue Baker is the Regional Autism Services Program Director for the state of Iowa, where through her job she has helped countless families, educators, and support staff in all topics autism related. Sue has worked as the autism consultant for the Iowa Department of Education and the facilitator for the Iowa Autism Council for many years. She was nominated by Josh Cobbs, a parent and director of the Pier Center in Sioux City and Steve Muller, Executive Director of the Homestead.

In Steve Muller’s nomination letter, he wrote: In the state of Iowa there are only a few names that are synonymous with the word “autism”. Sue Baker is one of those names. She has devoted much of her career to understanding this challenging disability and more importantly, seeking out ways to support these children and their families. She has trained many of our educators and speaks passionately about the needs of these children and families. It is a great pleasure to see Autism Society recognize Sue for her hard work and dedication to the autism community.

Angie Corson was nominated by Anna Hoffman, who is a young adult with autism. In a heartfelt letter, Anna read to the conference participants how Angie had helped her to mature, be able to communicate and have social skills, and most importantly, how she believed in her while she was her para-educator at Coon Rapids Community Schools. Anna is now thinking of driving, getting a job, and college.

Anna memorized Dr. Seuss books when she was young, and Angie ended with a quote from Oh! The Places You Will Go by Dr. Seuss, which Anna and the audience truly appreciated. With the support and belief in Anna that Angie provided, Anna is certainly going places.





In my last LINK message, I spoke about transitions; now that the holidays are upon us I want to remind you all to pay special attention to your loved ones with Autism Spectrum Disorder as the “holiday season” can present *numerous transition issues*. Whether you will be traveling or not, I recommend a Visual Schedule or Social Story to ease into the fun and sometimes chaos of family gatherings. Secondly, eat LESS and sleep MORE.

Thanksgiving. To our family and all the Educators who have supported our son along his journey, words can never really express our gratitude for your help! We are both blessed and humbled to be the parents of a *special* young man.

Joy. Recent challenges have brought our attention back to implementing basic strategies to achieve the Goal of Independence. We are going to focus on: Health of the Mind, Health of the Soul and Health of the Body. As parents we walk a fine line between pushing *our* agenda (what we think is best) and allowing/encouraging the choices of our children with their communication and social deficits. Go ahead and read between the lines, parenting is tough - Joy is both a noun and a verb.

New Years. Keep an eye on your inbox. The ASI electronic Newsletter is jammed packed with info. Notable in 2014: Autism and Advocacy 4th Annual Day on the Hill, Walk/Runs to *Shed a Light* on Autism (info coming), List of post-secondary education options for persons with ASD (info coming), 4th Annual Golf Benefit and finally our Fall Educational Conference. Make Autism your Resolution!

Joelle Jensen
Joelle Jensen
President of ASI

LEAVING NOTHING TO CHANCE

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Sydney’s teacher, Annette Saxion, is every bit as proactive as Kelly. Before school starts, I email parents or call them and invite them to come in.” Annette even takes the initiate with the students. “If the student is capable, I like to start an email conversation before school starts.” She said. I put them at ease and I learn something about them.”

“It’s my job to make them feel comfortable. When they are nervous, it’s impossible for them to perform in their studies very well.”

Ongoing teacher-parent communication needs to be agreed upon at the beginning of the school year. “We need to establish with the teacher how we’re going to communicate, whether a daily note, email, phone call,” Kelly said.

And of course, the student’s IEP needs to be examined – by all who work with students with special needs. “I feel good when the IEP is looked at by everyone, not just the special education teacher,” said Kelly.

And what happens in a year when Sydney becomes a freshman at Linn-Mar High School? “I will have another book ready to go,” Kelly said, “You can count on that.”

Write your *own* book

Write what you know about your child – no more than four pages. This will help school employees – from special education teachers to their peers in general education – successfully guide your child’s school experience.

Here are some good topics:

- History (family)
- Health history
- Therapy
- Personality (describe the child you know)
- Strengths
- Areas that need shoring up (such as “social skills”)
- Child’s specific needs (academic, peer/adult support)
- Parents’ expectations (such as grade-level performance)
- Parents’ concerns and fears (such as low expectations among staff, child eating lunch alone or riding bus)

-Reprinted by permission From the August 2013 Issue of *Each and Every Child*, an e-newsletter. To subscribe, contact Jim Flansburg at Jim.Flansburg@Iowa.gov

Pella Student Able to Find His Special Niche

By Amy Holmquist, The Pella Chronicle & Teresa Rietveld, Parent

John and Teresa Rietveld knew autism wasn't going to hold back their son, Lucas, after high school. They just didn't know what his future held in society as a new high school grad. A specialized University of Iowa program for students with disabilities was just the answer. Born prematurely and later diagnosed with Autism, Lucas thrived in the local schools in Pella and is much loved by his classmates, teachers and staff. As a 2013 graduate, he's excited to start a new life chapter and adventure just like the rest of his classmates through a program at University of Iowa called REACH.

The program is perfect for Lucas, according to his family. The REACH program, standing for Realizing Educational and Career Hopes, is a two-year program at the school that allows students with learning disabilities to learn applicable life skills while still being immersed in the culture of the school. Lucas will live in the dorms and go to classes, but his classes will be centered around curriculum that will teach him how to live life on his own. "The courses teach applicable life skills. I feel the whole person is integrated, it's social and it's educational," Teresa commented.

Overall, only 50 students can be enrolled in the program at a time and acceptance is very competitive. The application process was intricate and not only the Rietvelds but Lucas' teacher, Lisa Witzenburg, spent a lot of time working on the application process. "I felt like I was helping him apply for an Ivy League School!" Teresa commented. After a completed application and lengthy interviews with both Lucas and his parents, Lucas was accepted into the program. He met his roommate, who is also a REACH student. The REACH Program is privately funded and is a great financial commitment for parents.

The program is a certificate program as opposed to an earned degree, but the program is built toward teaching students, like Lucas, skills that will help them thrive in society. Lucas will be enrolled in classes like Life Skills, Computers and Technology and Money Management. He will have the opportunity to learn in a small group environment with personal advising and a very hands-on approach. "It's a certificate, not a degree," Teresa added, "Yet I feel it's just as crucial or more crucial than a degree because of the extra assistance and guidance and experiences Luke will have."

For the first two years, Lucas will live in the dorms with the traditional students, and will have an additional Resident Assistant for just REACH students on his floor. The third year is optional and will allow students to live off campus in an apartment but still have support. Staff and students working in the program will be available 24/7 to assist Lucas whenever help is needed. What greatly impressed the Rietvelds is the staff and mentors in the REACH programs are actually individuals who are working toward a degree in the special education field.

"One thing that I think is neat is that a lot of the mentors or students working in the REACH program want to go into the field of working with special education. They really want to be into it, because that's what they want to make their life career out of," John said.

It's a great opportunity for Lucas and his family is ecstatic about finding the perfect college fit for him. The REACH program gives Lucas the opportunity to attend a Big Ten University while helping him advance in his life. When the program was founded in 2008, REACH was one of the first programs of its kind in a popular, public university. Furthermore, The REACH program also assists students

in transitioning into careers after the program, so students are easily transitioned from college life to the working life. "For Lucas and us as parents, and Molly his sister, I think this is a dream come true, truly. As Lucas put it, it's an answer to prayers," Teresa commented.

Although Lucas is University of Northern Iowa's biggest sports fan, Lucas is excited to root for the Hawkeyes. He has his season pass purchased. "Football is my favorite sport, so I'm excited to go to games. I'm very happy about college, meeting new people and new teachers," Lucas said.

As his mother, Teresa said, "It was difficult to "let go" and build on teaching him to spread his wings by encouraging him to actually FLY. During his 19+ years at home, we didn't dream of an opportunity such as this and therefore, we really weren't mentally/emotionally prepared for him to leave the nest and go to a "college program", especially in what we consider a decent sized city! I did a lot of mourning and rejoicing from the moment we were contacted that he had been accepted, until we left him at the U of I following student/parent orientation in August. I am very proud of him and so happy for this wonderful opportunity for him, that the actual "good-bye" went extremely well with very few tears shed by mom. Lucas has had a great fall term thus far.

Teresa reports the REACH students were kept busy for their first week with orientation activities. Being from a small town where he rode his bike where he wanted to go around town, I'm sure learning the University Campus routes and the Iowa City/Coralville routes were a bit overwhelming. At this point he is able to go where he wants and needs to go, without issue via busses. He has gone to the mall a couple of times and to Wal-Mart in Iowa City as well. His roommate is a 2nd year REACH student which is very helpful for providing guidance and help for Lucas. Their personalities were matched by the REACH staff very well in determining roommate assignments! Lucas has also become friends with some of the other students in the program and enjoys having his buddies come to his room to socialize and play Wii games. Lucas says that he likes his classes, and his REACH advisor, shares that he is doing well.

He has been to all of the Hawkeye football home games, and immensely enjoys doing so. He even signed up to become a member of the "Hawks Nest" club! It has been great visiting him as well as spending time with him when he comes home for the week-end. He tells me that he hasn't been homesick, for which I am grateful! I honestly thought I would visit him more often, but, he is quite busy on week-ends with various activities and events. When our schedules coincide, we get to see each other and/or he comes home – mostly so he can go to the Pella home football games.

Some of his classes this fall are: Health and Sex Education, Money Management, Career Exploration, and various computer skills. "I feel that he is receiving the support necessary from the REACH staff and the REACH mentors in order to succeed! I feel we, as his parents, have received great support as well," Teresa said. Lucas will be interviewed and taped about his experiences with the REACH Program, and the interview will be shown during halftimes of the Iowa Hawkeye Games on the Big Ten Network.

For more information on the REACH Program, go to www2.education.uiowa.edu/services/reach/



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Determined to Understand the Puzzling Pieces of Autism

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

“Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” – John Kennedy

The National Autism Society reminded the state chapters of this quote recently and how it still applies to society today. We must make our nation more caring, responsive and accountable to the individuals who live with Autism Spectrum Disorders, giving them the highest quality of life possible.

There are many organizations, school districts and care providers in Iowa who do amazing work, with limited budgets, to help those with autism spectrum disorders live their life with dignity. We also must continue to have an effective response from our government and work together to establish policies to help those with autism spectrum disorders.

In Iowa, we will have our 4th Annual Autism Advocacy and Awareness Day on the Hill on Tuesday, February 18th, at 9:00 a.m. in the West Wing of the Capitol, to remind legislators that they are a part of the equation to help. Please join us to share your story with your elected officials and help develop policies to help those with Autism in Iowa.