



ROOTING for Ben

ACC Student
Learning Skills,
Independence
for Adulthood

A question is asked and suddenly his brow furrows. His eyes seem to be looking inward for a moment, examining his options.

His deep thought breaks with a wide smile, pushing his animated brows above the ridge of his glasses.

And then he speaks.

It is a scene replayed multiple times for Ben Kilzer in his Pieces of Life class. The 19-year-old Anne Carlsen Center (ACC) student is talking about emotions—and what situations bring out those specific feelings—and is having no trouble answering any question directed his way.

He's comfortable opening up to the group, sharing himself. When Ben first came to the Center, he may not have done it. But as he's come to be at ease with students and teachers, he is willing to just be Ben.

Pieces of Life

Rebecca Cordell, the Center's Community Integration Training Specialist, sees Ben each week in her Pieces of Life class. She says she has seen the changes in Ben.

"He talks about goals and is really shining," said Cordell. "He's become comfortable with the setting and sharing his thoughts."

The class prepares students for life outside the ACC Campus, through topics such as first aid, money management and occupational training.

"We want students to be able to handle things in a healthy way as they learn for success in an independent setting," explains Cordell. "One week we went to living

apartments in Jamestown. We wanted to show the students this possibility is available to them."

Corby Maddock is also a large part of Ben's learning process.

"Ben came to the Center looking for more experience," said Maddock. "So we are working on functional skills for adulthood."

Those skills include cooking with recipes, communication, scheduling and organization. Each day he tracks his day by highlighting upcoming events and crossing off completed tasks. These are skills that can be used as Ben goes about the business of his adult life.

Living at Home

Ben grew up like any other farm kid in southwest North Dakota. It's Cowboy Country in that part of the state and a person makes his or her way through hard work and a determined spirit. Ben's family's farm and ranch, nestled near New Leipzig, was no different. That farm helped shape Ben's personality from the time he was very young.

"He loved to visit with people," recalls Renee, his mother.

"He had such a great sense of humor," adds his father, Darrell. "He was real sharp-witted about things."

Ben's life changed dramatically about eight years ago, when he was 11 years old. A defect in his heart caused him to stop breathing temporarily, depriving his brain of oxygen. That lack of oxygen affected his motor, memory and learning skills.

Today, Ben uses a wheelchair to get around and, at times, his memory is impaired. But he still likes to laugh and meet new people, and he knows he still has a life full of possibilities in front of him.

"Ben has a keen sense of humor," says Maddock. "He enjoys a good joke or some sarcasm. When it comes to class, he is always positive and is quick to have a smile on his face. He is a very likeable young man. People really pick that up with him."

As the youngest child in his family, Ben saw brothers graduate from high school, move away from home, and begin adult lives. Meanwhile, Ben continued to live with family, attending high school and living much as a typical teenager. But he never forgot how his brothers left home after high school to begin crafting their own lives. He wanted that type of independence for himself. Yet, in high school, independence was something that was, at times, hard to come by.

"We were getting burned out," admitted Renee. "We were taking him to Bismarck once a week for therapy. That was a 200-mile trip every Friday and the rest of the week we would work with Ben on what the therapist would tell us. I think Ben got tired of it, too. He wanted to be more independent and not have his parents doing therapy with him."

Moving to ACC

Ben's therapist had suggested the Anne Carlsen Center as one option for the family, and ACC perked the

Kilzers' interest.

When Darrell and Renee asked family about the Center, they received glowing endorsements. These family members had interned at ACC and spoke highly of the Center's Campus and the expert staff. Ben attended ACC Week at Camp Grassick that summer, meeting other students and Center staff at the yearly Techno-Camp. The family then met with Center staff and was further pleased.

"We attended a planning meeting and were really impressed," Renee said. "They were committed to determining what his interests were and taking him into the community. The staff determined all that by working with him. They took the time to figure out who he was."

Ben started class in the fall, moving to Jamestown and living away from family for the first time. The separation isn't always easy—Ben is Darrell and Renee's youngest child. Though the Kilzers are separated by many miles, they remain close. Ben and his parents stay in contact throughout the week by e-mail or telephone calls, and Darrell and Renee visit their son at least once a month. Each time they visit, the family enjoys their time together by visiting and learning about the new skills Ben is learning. On Sundays the family goes to church and then out to eat.

"We go to Jamestown now—and as we go to Perkins, or any restaurant, or to church—people, that we have no idea who they are, are saying hi to Ben and asking how he's doing. They like him, and enjoy being around him," says Darrell. "It is so neat for Ben to be associated with people on that level."

Future Preparations

ACC offers many vocational opportunities for students ages 14 and up. At Jamestown's West Country Products, Ben has the opportunity to get back to his roots.

"Ben is a country boy and West Country Projects is a good place for him," said Renee Spitzer, one of the Center's Community Integration Specialists. "He can use both hands and a lot of the jobs here take using two hands. There is some problem solving, and Ben and I try and have a good time, too."

Later in the week, Ben is off to Prairie Veterinary Hospital to place syringes into plastic holders and to catch up with some canine friends. He also helps keep the commons area at the Buffalo Mall clean, using an adapted mop that hooks onto his power chair.

"Ben's jobs have to do with a lot of problem solving where he needs to follow certain steps," said Spitzer. "It requires a good thinking process and coordination."

After completing tasks around town, it's time for Ben to get into one of the Center vans that brought him to the business site. In minutes, he'll ride off into the sunset with the satisfaction of another job well done.

Message from the CEO



Fortitude, Friends Help in Flood Fight

The Anne Carlsen Center is—as this issue of *The Ambassador* goes to print—in the middle of a flood fight and evacuation of our campus. Students and staff are spread out at relocation sites throughout Jamestown, as walls of clay and sand protect our campus from the rising James River.

While we recognize the importance of the buildings we call home, the spirit of the Anne Carlsen Center resides in our staff, the people we serve, and the many individuals who support our mission. They embody the character and compassion of the Anne Carlsen Center—no matter what challenges we face.

Our students have demonstrated courage, resiliency and patience since our March 23 evacuation. We are so proud of the way they continue to learn, grow and reach new milestones. At our relocation sites throughout Jamestown, they have forged new friendships and created fun memories.

Community members help keep ACC strong, and during this flood fight, their kindness and generosity have been overwhelming. Whether hefting sandbags, donating supplies, or offering safe shelter, our friends and neighbors have shown us their love in so many meaningful ways.

I have marveled at the efforts and energy of ACC staff during this time. Each has demonstrated adaptability, calmness, creativity and cooperation. Many have come in early and left late, to make sure ACC students are comfortable, cared for, and engaged in meaningful activities. Other staff members have waged a brave battle against floodwaters, forsaking sleep to keep our campus safe. I have been deeply touched by this level of commitment.

Our donors have also helped our organization thrive during this flood fight. Because of you, the Anne Carlsen Center has many of the resources needed to support and empower children, young adults and families affected by developmental disabilities. Thank you for your faith in, and generous support of, our life-changing programs and services.

It's only appropriate that an organization focused on empowering the individual should itself be strengthened and safeguarded by people. Working together, there's no end to our abilities to transform lives, eliminate obstacles, and face the future with hope.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Howell".

Dan Howell
Chief Executive Officer