

Calm & CONFIDENT

Teen with autism making remarkable transformation at ACC

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Arlene LaCroix
Chris’ mother

This is the second in a series of articles in The Ambassador about 16-year-old Chris LaCroix and his experiences with autism. While Chris has faced some painful struggles, he has also enjoyed some meaningful victories. His parents and the Anne Carlsen Center (ACC) staff tell readers about this remarkable teenager.

Chris LaCroix faced a frightening threat to his health in February of 2006. What started out as a sore the size of a pencil eraser quickly turned into something painful and potentially deadly. The streptococcal infection in the fourteen year old’s ankle required three operations and a ten-day hospital stay.

Early on, one of the biggest frustrations for Chris was not being able to share his thoughts and feelings. Now, he easily communicates with staff by pointing to pictures in his communication book.

Even after the danger had passed, the Bottineau, N.D., teenager was still suffering. For nine months, while he healed, he was unable to enjoy many of the activities he once loved, like swimming.

“We had neurological testing done, and they said that he was depressed,” says Chris’ mom, Arlene LaCroix. “After his hospital stay, we couldn’t get him outside to the swings and the sandbox.”

For Arlene and Jerry LaCroix, it was heartbreaking to see their son endure so much. The strep infection was not the first major challenge Chris had faced.

Chris was diagnosed with autism, a complex developmental disability that currently affects one in 150 children born, when he was five years old. Like others with the disorder, he experienced difficulties with verbal communication and social interaction. Other struggles included sensory problems, anxiety issues, tantrums and self-abusive behavior. The behaviors took a toll on Chris’ family. But what hurt the most was seeing that Chris was unhappy.

“Life is too short not to be happy,” the LaCroixs said. They had heard about the Anne Carlsen Center and decided to visit in July of 2006.

They were impressed by the Center’s experience with autism, individualized education, excellent medical care, and nurturing atmosphere. The LaCroixs knew they had found a partner to help Chris build a more independent, meaningful life—a life filled with happiness. Chris began as a student in December 2006.

“The time was right for us and it was right for him,” Arlene explains. “It wasn’t that we gave up. It was all about hope and opportunity. We looked at the Center as if it was college for Chris.”

Concerns about Communication

While the LaCroixs were excited for Chris, they realized their son had a lot of obstacles to overcome. His classroom teacher, Michele Well, says there were some struggles early on.

Chris faced a life-threatening infection in his ankle when he was fourteen years old. His parents grew concerned when, even after his recovery, Chris seemed unhappy.



By taking field trips with ACC staff and classmates, Chris has become more at ease with social situations. A trip to teacher Michele Well’s farm sparked an interest in horses.

“When he first came, he had very few communication skills,” she says. “If he couldn’t communicate with others, his first line of defense was to bite his hand or his shoulder. He would hit his head on the side of the door frame or the side of the table if we didn’t understand him.”

That frustration also became apparent in the student lunchroom. “The first time he ate lunch at the Center, he took his whole plate, threw it into the garbage, and ran back to the

classroom,” Michele remembers. “Early on, we thought he didn’t like the food on his plate to touch, so we would spread his meal out on five different plates. But he still wasn’t eating very much.”

The staff found visual support to be the most effective way to help their new student communicate. By pointing to pictures, Chris could tell staff what he was hungry for, when he was finished eating, and when he was ready for dessert. Pictures of objects, places, activities and feelings were laminated and placed in a binder for Chris to take with him throughout the Center.

Social stories, groups of pictures paired with words, informed Chris of the kind of activities he would be involved with, as well as the type of behavior expected in each situation. These visual aids greatly helped facilitate learning in the classroom, in the living areas, and in therapy sessions.

“We’ve gotten to know Chris,” says Ron Bendewald, an ACC occupational therapist. “And Chris has gotten to know us. The communication is easier now. He’s more trusting. That’s a means of introducing more activities.”

“His behaviors have gone way down,” says Rachel Coppin, a speech/language pathologist at ACC. “He has a greater tolerance of the things that happen to him. His ability to cope has improved.”

Steps to Success

One of the biggest adjustments Chris made in his first few weeks at the Anne Carlsen Center was learning how to handle events in large, open areas, such as physical education class. At first, he would get to the gym door, look in, and run back to his classroom. Later, he would beat his head on the gym floor or water fountain and then run back to class. *(continued)*

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Gradually, staff increased the amount of time Chris was spending in the gym. They started with five minutes, then 10 minutes, and worked their way up. Eventually, Chris was not only willing to spend the entire class period in the gym, he was even having fun.

Chris also became more at ease in public places. Before, his parents had a difficult time taking him out into the community because Chris would throw tantrums or try to run away. “We were a ‘split family’ for many years,” Arlene remembers. The LaCroixs were not able to go to church or sporting events together, because someone always had to stay home with Chris.

On field trips with ACC staff and classmates, Chris learned how to act appropriately at the mall and how to enjoy a meal at a restaurant. He began to understand social situations and develop appropriate responses.

More Independence for Chris

As Chris has become less disruptive and more independent, Chris’ parents have become more hopeful for his future.

“We aren’t young parents,” Jerry admits. “I turned 54 in April. We won’t be around forever. There are things that need to happen now for Chris.”

And what has happened since Chris first arrived at the Anne Carlsen Center in December 2006 is what his parents call a remarkable transformation. “He’s happy!” Arlene says. “He’s much calmer. He’s into a routine.”

And the nurturing, highly-structured setting at the Center has helped Chris’ true personality shine. An extremely creative and artistic student, he enjoys drawing and painting. But what has made the biggest impact is the way he treats others.

As Chris became less anxious and disruptive, he blossomed as a student. He enjoyed last year’s Cinco de Mayo celebration in his classroom.



Staff helped Chris grow more comfortable with large, open spaces—like the ACC gymnasium. He smiles during a ceremony in the gym, as Coach Troy Duven presents him with his track and field awards.

“Chris is a caring, young man and a good role model,” Michele says. “Our students teach us more than we teach them. We have learned that we need to step back and figure out their needs and focus less on our own needs. They teach us about what’s important.”

Arlene and Jerry are thankful for the high level of caring, dedication and training that the ACC staff has.

“They really care for the children and respect their rights,” Jerry says.

“The staff is exceptional,” adds Arlene. “They are there for the kids. They treat Chris as an individual. They give him what he is deserving of.”

And the boy who once would not even set foot in the ACC gym, impressed everyone when, last year, he served a very important role in the annual Christmas program—an event held in the same auditorium as gym class. Chris was chosen to run the PowerPoint presentation for the hour-long program. The urge to run away was gone. In its place was calmness and confidence.

As Chris continues to flourish at the Anne Carlsen Center, the LaCroixs look to the future with hope.

“Before, Chris was so structured into our world that he wasn’t able to blossom in his own world,” Arlene admits. “Now he’s really blossoming.”

In the next edition of The Ambassador, see how Chris has continued to blossom at the Anne Carlsen Center, participating in a wide array of activities that allow his strengths to shine.