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**There's** excitement in the air as a spotlight moves to the center of the gymnasium. All eyes focus on a handsome figure and the dazzling young woman at his side. Flashes

from dozens of cameras are accompanied by admiring whispers and smiles. Chris LaCroix smiles back as he and his date gracefully cross the gym floor, her arm in his. This is Chris' first prom. But it is not the first time this Anne Carlsen Center student has demonstrated his ability to overcome obstacles and embrace life.

Chris' parents, Arlene and Jerry, say experiences like prom wouldn't ever have been possible for their son, diagnosed with autism at age five, if not for ACC. "There are a lot of promising things happening right now for Chris," says Arlene. "It's such a good feeling to know he is happy."

Autism, a developmental disorder, affects the brain's normal development of social, emotional and communication skills. Like many others with the condition, Chris has experienced challenges with social interactions, delays in language skills, resistance to change, repetitive moments, and preference to being alone. But since Chris came to the Anne Carlsen Center in December of 2006, he has experienced improvements in many areas of his development.

One of the most significant differences, the LaCroixs say, is the progress they've seen in Chris' social skill development.

"Before, he would only communicate with Jerry and me," says Arlene. "Now he's no longer afraid to make connections with other people. He looks them right in the eye."

"It's what we wanted to see happen," adds Jerry. "Chris is much more accepting of others now."

### Alleviating Anxiety

For individuals with autism, unexpected events can cause immense stress and anxiety. Reactions can range from the flight response to meltdowns. While Chris has struggled with anxiety in the past, his tolerance has greatly improved.

Teachers, therapists, and all other ACC staff who come in contact with Chris tell him exactly what activities await him. They use a variety of visual communication tools—pictures combined with words—to reinforce their message. Social stories, used to teach social skills to children with autism, describe a potentially confusing situation in detail. Written in first person, the stories tell a student what he may expect to happen and the appropriate ways to respond.

"When Chris first came to the Center, he was really hesitant to get involved with activities," says Jackie Loepp, one of Chris' classroom teachers. "Social stories have helped us explain what he can expect. We've also learned to slowly introduce new experiences. When taking a field trip, we'd first focus on getting Chris to travel with us to wherever we were going. That would give him a chance to observe. On the next visit, we'd encourage him to get involved with what we were doing."

Whether the activity is kite flying, fishing, or visiting the animals at the James River Humane Society, Chris now enjoys taking part alongside his classmates. A natural leader, he ran a successful campaign for treasurer of the ACC Student Council this year. He has excelled as a track and field athlete and as a competitive swimmer.

"Chris has gone from standing in the corner to being an active participant," says Troy Duven, Chris' Special Olympics coach. "He's made some dramatic improvements. He enjoys getting out there and competing with the other athletes."



Chris and his date, Annie Hanson, dance the night away at Prom 2008.

## Thriving at ACC

A talented artist, Chris has begun to incorporate his expanding social circle into his artwork.

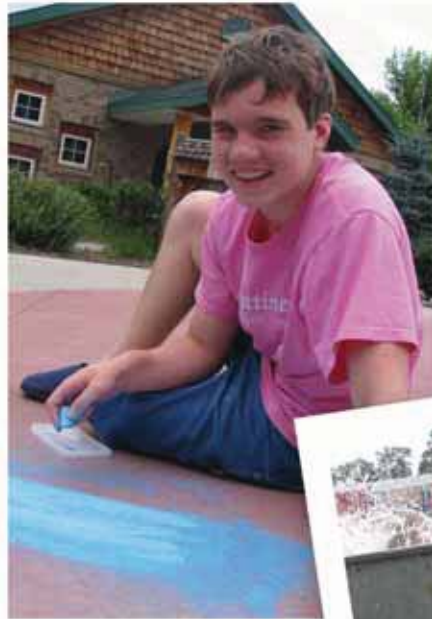
“Before, there would just be one person in his pictures,” says Arlene about her son’s drawings. “Then there were two. Eventually, there were many people in his pictures. It’s exciting to see how his world is growing.”

Once content to hide under his bed or in the closet of his room, Chris now enjoys participating in a variety of activities with the other students in his cottage.

“Before—when we would go on group outings—it was often a struggle to get Chris to leave the cottage,” says Deb Suess, an ACC Cottage Coordinator. “Other times he would refuse to get out of the vehicle once we got to our destination. But he has gradually improved. Now he goes with the flow. He goes everywhere we go.”

Fire drills used to frighten Chris. Now knowing what is expected of him, he immediately leaves his room. He also helps make sure the students with physical impairments get out of the cottage quickly and safely.

Although Chris communicates mostly through non-verbal methods, he has started to use more words—usually one-syllable—to communicate with others. Every improvement in communication has helped him



One of Chris’ favorite activities is drawing with chalk on the Center side-walks. Art has become an extremely effective way for Chris to express himself.



Chris was all smiles as he enjoyed a variety of water games during the Center’s Wet ‘n Wild Day in August.

feel less frustrated and more confident in his daily life.

Chris’ parents say they are thrilled to see all of the changes.

“We think of where Chris has been, and where he is now,” says Arlene. “He used to just watch me do activities around the house, like cleaning and baking, and not want to be a part of it. Now, when he visits home, if I’m baking, he always wants to help. He’ll crack the eggs and get the shells out. I can tell he’s having fun.”

“He is calm...much calmer,” says Jerry. “He is also a lot more flexible in situations.”

“Chris is sunshine,” adds Arlene, with a chuckle. “He laughs from his toes on up, and you can’t help but be happy when you’re around him.”

And it is with joy that the LaCroixs look to the future. Many of their dreams for their son have already been fulfilled, and each day brings more reassurance and reasons to celebrate.