

# 4

**It's 11:30 A.M.** and the mouth-watering aroma of cheese and pepperoni fills the air. At Domino's Pizza in Jamestown, N.D., half a

dozen employees keep busy taking orders, spreading toppings, and sliding discs of delectably-covered dough into an enormous oven.

When each pizza is finished baking, it's tucked into an appropriately-sized box—and chances are, on this day, into a box assembled by Chris LaCroix, a 17-year-old student at the Anne Carlsen Center. In less than an hour, Chris has folded 230 pizza boxes—a contribution he makes every Tuesday at this Jamestown business.

"He is very energetic and very focused," says Frank Jensen, owner/franchisee of Jamestown's Domino's. "We all fold boxes too, but without Chris, we'd have to fold a lot more. He never quits."

And there are others benefitting from Chris' hard work and determination. As part of ACC's vocational training program, Chris spends time each week at two other Jamestown businesses, as well as an area church. He stocks shelves at Loaf N' Jug, preps hotel rooms for housekeeping staff at Comfort Inn, and collects friendship rosters at St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Previously, Chris washed lunch trays, rolled silverware, and shredded documents.

The contributions Chris is making in the Jamestown community are significant. Even more impressive is how far he has come in order to perform successfully in each of these settings.

Chris has autism, a complex developmental disability resulting from a neurological disorder. The disorder affects the normal functioning of the brain and impairs an individual's ability to communicate and relate to others.



Chris holds a photo taken following his confirmation. It was a dream fulfilled when Chris was confirmed in November at The Basilica of St. James in Jamestown. His parents, Arlene and Jerry, were beaming with pride throughout the entire ceremony.

Chris' parents noticed the signs early on and sought help. That early intervention helped reduce some of the challenges associated with the condition. Yet, there have been major struggles and heartaches. Over the years, Chris has had difficulties with communication—verbal and non-verbal—and with social interactions. He has exhibited physical over-activity, self-abusive behaviors, tantrums, obsessive attachment to objects, and low tolerance for abrupt changes.

Since becoming a student at the Anne Carlsen Center in December 2006, Chris has made significant strides in many areas. Staff members have used a highly-individualized program to help him become more comfortable and compatible with his environment—whether that environment is the classroom or the community.

### A Community Life for Chris

Much of the time Chris spends in the community is as a job trainee, and he is steadily learning the appropriate behaviors and work habits for each job site. His vocational trainer at the Center, Renee Spitzer, has worked closely with Chris for the last two years, helping him learn a variety of social and job skills that will carry over into adulthood.

"The more he understands, the more comfortable he is," says Spitzer. "He should be a very employable young man because he has a lot of skills. He will gain even more."

That is encouraging for Chris' parents, Arlene and Jerry.

"Chris needs to have a job that can get him satisfaction each day of his life," says Jerry. "We don't want him just sitting in a room watching television. He has so much to offer the world."

For most of Chris' childhood, encounters with the outside world had brought pain and disappointment.

"Sometimes, when we'd go places, Chris would have a meltdown," Arlene remembers. "People didn't understand that something in Chris' environment had caused him to act that way. They would never see him for who he really was. It hurt when some people said things like, 'There are places for kids like that' or 'You're too soft on him.'"

Every Tuesday, Chris folds more than 200 pizza boxes at Domino's in Jamestown. As a reward for his hard work, he was able to treat his parents to a pizza dinner.



Because of the difficulties Chris often had in public places, the LaCroixs tried to meet as many of his needs as possible at home.

"Before, only his mom had cut his hair," explains Michele Well, ACC's Director of Education. "Chris was very afraid of the unknown. Eventually, when we gained his trust, he let us cut his hair in the classroom. The next step was to go to a stylist in Jamestown, and Chris did really well."

Now, it's more than just trips to the stylist that have become routine. Along with his classmates, Chris has dined at restaurants, shopped for groceries, gone to movies, and volunteered at the James River Humane Society. With the guidance of ACC staff, he has learned to handle most any situation in public, which has become readily apparent—and appreciated—during visits home.

"He's calm when you take him out into the community," says Jerry. "It's reassuring to see Chris living in the world instead of being afraid of it."

### Reaping the Rewards

One of the most memorable experiences happened over the summer, when the LaCroixs were able to attend a sporting event together—for the first time in many years. Chris' younger brother, Mark, was playing in a baseball tournament. Before, either Jerry or Arlene would have had to stay at home with Chris. A baseball game would have been too overwhelming for him; the sensory overload likely causing outbursts of negative behavior. But on this occasion, Mark's parents and his big brother were there to support

him and cheer him on. People who recognized Chris approached him to say hello, some pausing to give him a celebratory high five. It was a day the LaCroixs say they will always remember.

And while they have enjoyed watching Chris become more accepted in the community, one of their biggest dreams for their son has been to see him acknowledged in the community of the church.

“It’s something we have always worked for,” says Arlene. “But when we went to church, Chris would scream or stand up in the middle of the service. We’d go home and feel defeated.”

On Nov. 6, that all changed. Chris, along with three other ACC students, was confirmed at The Basilica of St. James in Jamestown. Calm throughout the entire confirmation ceremony, he looked confident as he took a major step in his journey of faith.

“It was a long wait, but a special part of his life has finally come together,” said Arlene with tears in her eyes. “We didn’t think this would ever happen. So many people at the Anne Carlsen Center worked hard to bring this about. Chris is a member of a church now. He belongs.”

While Chris receives food for the soul, he’s getting another kind of nourishment—the kind he can make himself. “Kids in the Kitchen” Club and home economics at ACC have provided Chris with important skills for the future.

Chris has had a chance to hone his leadership and organizational skills. Last school year, he was elected treasurer of the ACC Student Council. This November, he ran a successful campaign for the office of secretary.

“It’s amazing how far he’s come,” says Patrick Hellam, one of Chris’ classroom teachers. “There is room for improvement, but he has made such a big leap in the last two years. It makes you wonder what will happen in the next two, since he’s already made so much progress.”

#### Pondering the Future

The LaCroixs say they hope Chris, now 21, can continue as a student at ACC until he graduates in four and a half years. In North Dakota, individuals can receive Special Education services until the age of 21. Following graduation, Chris’ parents envision him living semi-independently, with assistance and supervision. They picture their son living with a roommate and working at a job he finds interesting and fulfilling.

At the Anne Carlsen Center, Chris is learning valuable life skills, such as cooking and shopping for groceries.



It’s a promising future they credit ACC for making possible. “Chris’ days have been filled with meaningful activities,” says Arlene. “He’s had a chance to build his own life.”

“We miss him,” adds Jerry. “We really miss that daily contact, as his father and mother. But when you see what he has accomplished and what he is experiencing—he is much better off at the Center.”

Each day at the Anne Carlsen Center, Chris reaches another milestone, makes another friend, or learns another vital skill for his life as an adult.

And all of that hard work at Domino’s each week is being recognized in a very tangible way. Chris enjoys free pizza and pop after every eighth training session.

Earlier this year, he chose to trade several personal-sized pizzas in for a pizza meal for his entire family. The LaCroixs couldn’t have been any prouder when they were treated to dinner by their son—the same son who, at one time, was unable to set foot in any restaurant because of the traits of autism that once controlled their lives.

“Nothing is impossible when you are working with someone who believes in you, someone who is advocating for you,” says Arlene about the Anne Carlsen Center.

“The groundwork has been laid,” adds Jerry. “Someone else knows our dreams and is working towards those dreams. We are all seeing a response. We are all growing.”