

A Mother's Story: *Where would he have all these opportunities for self growth and personal development if he weren't able to come here?*

Note: You may have read about this child in an in-depth article in the Democrat and Chronicle a year ago. His mother, former director of a Women's Outreach Center, was asked by a drug-addicted prostitute in 2006 to raise her baby. Jen Wolfley immediately said "yes" without even consulting her husband. They had three grown children and a 14-year-old.

"Perpetual time-out" is how Jen Wolfley remembers the day care experiences of her son Sergei who will soon be 4. She describes it as revolving day care with Sergei given two weeks notice at three different centers because of behaviors. Next a cadre of therapists came to the family home, delivering various services. This arrangement offered no socialization opportunities for Sergei, there was no therapeutic equipment and the whole experience of so many people coming and going was disruptive to the household. When the offer came to send Sergei to Mary Cariola, the family jumped on it immediately.

Here Jen knew her son would get to be who he is. Appreciated, accommodated and worked with, able to achieve rather than be punished for having disabilities.

"Coming here had a very interesting feeling, she said. It felt like the right place. It was hard to leave a complex child for the whole day. Hearing 'autism' scared us and we were thinking he was not going to improve as we had hoped."

Jen went to the parent support group and her husband went to sign language classes. "That saved us. Parents of older children shared what to expect and it was very good for us as a family. We don't feel like we're sending our son off to another world, instead it feels like being part of a family."

That summer, Jen transported Sergei to school and she came to think of what she saw each morning as an amazing, carefully orchestrated performance. "Everybody comes out with little Lowe's tool aprons and it is a procession of people waiting for buses, happy to see kids come off in variety of apparatus. Everybody knows exactly what to do. It should be set to music. They are waiting for primary actors coming on stage. It is quite amazing. There has to be place for education and health purposes where people can go. Not everybody can go to the same places like the rest of society. It is very healthy to have a balanced diet of neurological type people and others."

"Sergei was very excited when he came – not in fear like he was at day care. I could see on his face that this was the right place...intrinsicly he knew he was with other people like him. He could let his guard down and be with other people who were going to understand him. It must have been very fascinating for him to see that not everybody was punished for being who they are."

"Now he is upset when there are breaks. He is excited to come here. I don't know what we would do if he couldn't have come here. Sergei has grown by leaps and bounds. He is happy, refers to friends, gets the necessary services including all the therapies, (physical and occupational therapy, speech, music, and behavioral therapy) has



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access to safe toys that are adapted for his needs. He is treated in a dignified manner, appreciated for who he is and not punished.” Where would he have all these opportunities for self growth and personal development if he weren’t able to come here?

Jen will bring a cake on May 16th so his classmates and the staff in Julie’s room can help Sergei celebrate his 4th birthday. The good news is that he will get to come to Mary Cariola for another year and the family is grateful. People don’t understand what a godsend this is. It is an integral and vital part of this whole community.

Certain things can’t be measured. A time traveler would see differences in my son in the year he has been here – depth, breadth, and a fully-functioning person. Before he was very limited and I was very limited. I see a lot more confidence in my ability to participate and feel secure that he is here and safe. It makes me a better parent and gives me opportunities to educate the community rather than feel sorry. I would not have had all of these insights if he wasn’t able to come here.”