

Autism: Living in her own world

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Wednesday, 08 December 2010 22:05 - Last Updated Wednesday, 08 December 2010 22:10



Most afternoons, around 2:45 p.m., Elizabeth Belanger pulls a bag of popcorn from the cabinet and places it in the microwave.

The 14-year-old then tears sheets of paper towels from a roll and carefully places them around a table.

A few minutes later, Elizabeth pours popped kernels on each towel before she sits to eat with two paraprofessionals and another student.

Quite a feat for a child who was diagnosed at age 3 with severe autism, a neurological disorder that affects communication and social interaction skills.

“How’s the Dew?” asks paraprofessional Sheila Ahlenstorf about the small glass of Mountain Dew Elizabeth sips.

Elizabeth’s brown eyes rapidly scan the ceiling of the resource room at Gothenburg Public Schools as she leans back in her chair.

No answer.

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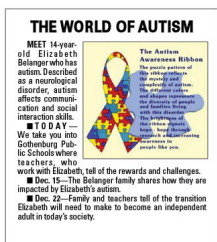
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“I think the biggest challenge is trying to figure her out and her trying to figure us out,” Ahlenstorf said. “It’s not knowing her feelings.”

Special education teacher Judy Jensen, who also works with Elizabeth and oversees her educational program, said it’s sometimes difficult discerning what Elizabeth is trying to tell them, especially when she becomes agitated.

Preparing for Elizabeth’s arrival on the first day of school last August involved all the teachers in the resource room.



Elizabeth moved to Gothenburg from International Falls, MN, last July with her two siblings. She’s the daughter of band teacher Tom Belanger and Donna Belanger of International Falls.

The special education staff at Gothenburg Public Schools, including paraprofessionals Ahlenstorf and Katherine Middleton, have all worked with people with autism.

Fortunately, Jensen said the special education room was designed to function both as a resource room, where students receive assistance for general education assignments, and as a self-contained room for students with more significant needs.

“We want to provide the support that all students need to be successful,” Jensen said.

For Elizabeth, that means staff closely supervise her 100% of her school day.

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Jensen said the teen's first couple of weeks were especially stressful because she bolted out of several exit doors in the school building.

As she became more comfortable in her new setting, Jensen said the runaway incidents decreased.

"All staff remain vigilant as Elizabeth works in the classroom and walks throughout the high school and elementary school picking up and delivering projects for the vocational component of her program," she said.

When she first arrived, Elizabeth was evaluated by Educational Service Unit 10's Central Region Autism Spectrum Disorders Team.

The team offered tips on how to work with Elizabeth, including structured teaching.

Jensen said getting-along behavior and academics are embedded into Elizabeth's vocational tasks which include such activities as sorting snacks for elementary students, counting pop tabs for a fund-raising activity, washing and folding laundry and completing elementary art projects.

ESU 10 has trained staff who work with students with autism at its training center in Kearney and at the school.

"The administration has been very supportive," Jensen said.

For the first three days of school, Jensen spent time with Elizabeth to develop a program which "evolves daily," she said.

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Jensen said she was excited when she learned Elizabeth would be joining the resource room.

“I said ‘We can do this.’ ”

Because children with autism need structure, as do all students, Elizabeth’s day revolves around a photo book.

The book contains photographs of school staff members she will encounter during the day.

Jensen said the visual format gives Elizabeth and the staff a visual schedule of her day. Pictures can be easily rearranged as the need arises.

For example, the first page shows a picture of Joni Jacobsen, school food service manager.

Middleton and Elizabeth start their day in the cafeteria where they eat breakfast.

On this day, Middleton reminds Elizabeth to put her napkin on her lap.

While eating pancakes with syrup, Elizabeth pauses and starts swaying back and forth.

Soon she is giggling and mumbling to herself.

“She’s happy,” Middleton said, leaning over to scratch Elizabeth’s back. “And she loves to have her back scratched.”

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Elizabeth also works with school speech pathologist Carol Keiser who explained that the school's goal is to help her become a useful, valuable person in society.

"Like learning socially appropriate things," she said.

Since an important part of dealing with autism is teaching communication skills, Keiser said she shows Elizabeth images and tries to get the teen to name them.

"She understands and she can speak very clearly," Keiser explained. "But there's a misconception about autism that if you don't talk,

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