

Life after final bell rings

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Parent, school officials discuss what's next for child with autism.

Tom Belanger knows his 14-year-old daughter Elizabeth will never perform in the high-school band he directs.

Nor will she attend slumber parties with other teenagers.

Or have a best friend.

And she won't go to college or live by herself.

Because she has autism, Tom said Elizabeth doesn't relate to people in accepted ways or have the awareness to know she's in danger.

"It's a safety issue," he said.

For example, Elizabeth wouldn't know food is outdated and not safe to eat.

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“She wouldn’t have the awareness not to eat chicken that been’s sitting out or how to cook it thoroughly,” he explained. “And that’s just one of many things.”

However Tom, and others who work with Elizabeth, hope that at some point she might learn the skills needed to live with other adults who have autism where she can cook, clean and perform vocational tasks with supervision.

District 20 special education teacher Judy Jensen, who oversees Elizabeth’s educational program, said the transition to life after secondary school has already begun.

“We work closely with Elizabeth’s dad to facilitate family goals which include helping her to become a student who contributes to the well being of the school and community,” Jensen said.



To reach this goal, she said teachers provide the support Elizabeth requires to complete daily living and vocational tasks as independently as possible.

Elizabeth is based out of the school’s resource room which she leaves for part of the day to complete various tasks and interact with others.

She eats in the cafeteria, washes laundry in the consumer science room and makes deliveries to the superintendent’s office and elementary classrooms in addition to other things.

Jensen said educators also try and help Elizabeth demonstrate “getting along” behaviors in school and the community.

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“Functional language and academic goals are embedded throughout her daily living and vocational activities,” she explained.

Elizabeth’s “semester test” for her life skills class, Jensen said, will be to accompany her teachers and dad to a local restaurant where she’ll indicate what she wants to eat, use “getting-along” behaviors and pay for her meal.

Throughout the year, Jensen said Elizabeth’s family receives information and access to adult service agencies.

The agencies will be responsible for providing vocational, community and residential services when Elizabeth reaches the age of 21, she said.

At home, if his daughter isn’t too tired after a day of school, Tom said she helps cook and clean and sometimes goes with him to the grocery store where she takes items he requests from the shelves.

“She can put tomato soup in a pan, clean the windows and really can do quite a bit.”

However he noted that teaching her cooking skills can be a “Catch-22” because Elizabeth is unable to grasp the concept of a hot stove or why burners need to be turned off.

In addition to loving his daughter and teaching her skills at home, Tom said he sees his role as an advocate.

“Now is the time to work with the people in school and other agencies,” he explained. “And I have to be on top of it and working with them to

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