



MATTHEW'S CENTER HELPS NON-SPEAKING STUDENTS

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MANASSAS

--"Eehh, Eehh, eww, ewww." At Matthew's Center, Sam Green, 10, practices sounds, part of a carefully timed regimen to condition the non-speaking child.

What Sam lacks in words, he compensates for in personality. When he noticed an audience, he shyly turned and tugged at his shirt, but not without flashing the special grin that's famous among the center's staff.

He then shuffled away to a spot in the corner of the room and plopped down on the floor, still smiling for his crowd.

"Work first, then break," said Stephanie Kerr, the teacher training Sam that day.

Kerr got him back to his table, where he moved building blocks to indicate "more" or "less" and scribbled on a doodle pad, a close attempt at writing "S-A-M."

Sam was shuffled around among eight public schools in Stafford County before landing at Matthew's Center two years ago, his mother, Ollie Green, said.

Before going there, he'd completely regressed, she said.

Time spent in public-school classes "un-toilet trained him, and he's still wearing pull-ups," Green said. "It breaks my heart because it was such a big accomplishment for him."

Green drives Sam and his sister Erica, 7, from their Falmouth home to the Manassas school. It's almost an hour and a half each way. Green said she opts for back roads instead of Interstate 95 to provide a calmer trip for Sam.

"We have no life, really," Green said.

Though Matthew's Center closes for two weeks in August, the family didn't travel during the break last summer. "People ask if we're going anywhere on vacation and I tell them, 'No, our vacation is not driving,'" Green said.

She and her husband, Larry, met while serving as attorneys for the military. Ollie Green stopped working to have children, and though she planned to return, she said she knew it wasn't possible after Sam was diagnosed.

Erica is "car schooled" while Sam spends the day at Matthew's Center, Ollie Green said. She and her daughter go to places nearby such as the public library for lessons. They have to carefully time when to drop Sam off and pick him up, because the school buses frighten him.

Green said Sam has developed at Matthew's Center in ways that "sound simple" but are very important. "He can now use utensils, and though he's non-verbal, he can understand and respond to some instructions."

He can now identify his mother. "He knows I'm different from other people," Green said through tears. "That was really special."

Ollie Green eagerly awaits the day when a Matthew's Center opens in Spotsylvania County, because of the opportunities that it would offer for Sam and their family.

For example, the center exposes its students to the public--in shops, restaurants and more--to acclimate them to society. Green hopes her son will get to know his own community.

For Sam, that would be another good reason to smile.

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