

Freshman and family cope with autism

Amidst all of the changes and struggles, Kyle's family could not be more proud of the kind of person their son is becoming and how far he has come. In trying to teach Kyle basic skills, the Johnson family has learned more than they could ever imagine about life, things like unconditional love, patience, flexibility, and hope.

by junior Payton Sherwood

In 2002, parents Jodi and Brad Johnson began to worry. They noticed their toddler wasn't acting like other kids his age. He preferred to play alone. He obsessively enjoyed lining things up, repeating phrases, and doing things in a certain order every time he did them. Every. Time. They decided it was time to find answers.



The Johnson Family

Their son Kyle, then 2 ½, was diagnosed with autism. According to autismspeaks.org, Autism is a condition "characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behavior, speech and nonverbal communication, as well as unique strengths and differences."

This diagnosis brought a million questions to the Johnsons. What did this mean? Would our boy ever communicate with us like other kids? Would we ever get to play ball with him or go on bike rides? Would he ever be independent?

Kyle's parents soon learned that simplicity and consistency were key in order to not impede on Kyle's development of fundamental skills. But the changes did not stop there.

The Johnsons experimented with different diets, biomedicine, craniosacral therapy, and medication, all without much success.

"Nothing was helping us bridge the gap between Kyle's world and ours," said Jodi.

The Johnsons finally found what they were looking for... Over 1,000 miles away. After strenuous amounts of research, Kyle's parents found information on a program through the Autism Treatment Center of America in Sheffield, Massachusetts.

"After reading parent testimonies, I knew we had to go," said Jodi.

The Johnsons began a home-based program when Kyle was 8-years-old, focusing on where



photo courtesy of Jodi Johnson

Kyle Johnson watches YouTube videos, one of his favorite pastimes.

Kyle's immediate strengths and challenges lied.

"The program focused on accepting and teaching the child where

he's at rather than trying to condition him to be something we want," said Jodi.

Shortly after, Jodi resigned from her job teaching first and sixth graders in the Cedar Falls School District in order to stay home and focus full-time on Kyle.

For three years, Kyle made great progress meeting his goals, so they felt he was ready to return to school. This sense of readiness was confirmed when Kyle told his mother he wanted to go.

Years later, Kyle began his first year of high school. Kyle is often seen with a big smile on his face, high-fiving his classmates on his way to class with his aid, Amanda Schneider, close behind. Over the last several months, Schneider has watched Kyle both struggle and succeed in his classes.

Some of Kyle's biggest struggles are comprehension, time management, and overall focus. But despite these challenges, the Johnsons press on.

Today, Kyle is, in many ways, not just a normal freshman who loves music and being with his classmates, he's exceptional.



photo by sophomore Brooke Busch

Kyle Johnson works on homework with his aide, Amanda Schneider.

"He does well in so many things," said Jodi. "His memory is amazing. We are often in awe at the number of facts his brain can retain. He (also) loves music and has perfect pitch! He can hear a song and within a note or two tell you the key it's in."

Kyle even manages to amaze his teachers away with his kindness and offering to participate.

"Kyle is always willing to volunteer in class," said Schneider. "In fact, if he has already volunteered to read a paragraph and his classmates are not volunteering, Kyle will raise his hand as an offer to read more."

It has been a long journey for Kyle and his family, but a rewarding one that isn't over yet.

"Hope is my driving force," said Jodi. "It's what pushed me to continue (to) hope that our son would one day come out of his world and join us in ours- which he has."

"I am like my peers because we all have tough times and nobody is perfect."

- Kyle Johnson



by sophomore Morgan Hansen

Sophomore Orion Polendo, who has been playing the bass guitar since Grade 6, shares his passion for heavy metal.



photo courtesy of Dave Polendo

Q: Why did you want to learn to play guitar?
A: "My dad used to always play acoustic guitar when I was little, and I wanted to follow in his footsteps. I just found it fun and interesting."

Q: When did you know you wanted to be apart of the band?
A: "I wanted to be a part of a heavy metal band because I find the vocal and instrumental techniques very unique...When you want to be in a band it's usually because once you get good enough, you're going to want to make your own music and not just play music that other people made."

Q: What is a favorite memory of being in a band?
A: "My favorite memory was when I was a part of the band Youth Gone Wild. We opened for the well-known band, Hairball, at the McElroy Auditorium. I liked how big and energetic the crowd was."

Q: Where can we see you perform?
A: "Phoenix Curse usually performs at Spicoli's Bar in Waterloo on Saturday night around 8 p.m."