



Ryan Lajoie, a former student of WABAN, thrives as a mainstream student at Carl J. Lamb School in Sanford.

Program Proves Key To Ryan Lajoie's Success

By Shawn P. Sullivan Sanford News Editor

Ryan Lajoie could only speak three words when he was 4 years old.

"No" was one of them, according to Ryan's mother, Pam.

"Mom," she thinks, was the second one.

"Buzz" was the third. Ryan really liked Buzz Lightyear from the "Toy Story" movies, Pam added.

Pam and her husband, Mitchell, really started to worry about her son right around this time. He threw incredible tantrums, cried a lot, banged his head on things. He used to focus intensely on the sharp angles of tables.

Pam concluded that Ryan was acting this way because the family had been through a lot lately.

"With everything that was going on with my family, I thought it was a behavioral thing," Pam said.

It was more serious than that. Pam took Ryan to a doctor, who diagnosed him with autism.

That was then. This is now. These days, Ryan's a sixth-grader at the Carl J. Lamb Elementary School. He reads, he writes, he speaks in full sentences, his mother says. He can tell you how he's feeling. He can read other's emotions.

He loves movies and video games and has a good friend next door named Michael.

"He's an all-around, great kid," his mother beams.

Ryan's transformation didn't just happen. Waban Projects, Inc. made it happen with its Early Intervention Program.

The organization, based for decades on Route 4 in Sanford, reached into Ryan and worked with him, cared for him, and carefully helped him and his loved ones sculpt him into the young man he is today.

"It all leads back to early intervention," Pam said, during an interview at Waban's Childhood Development Center last week. "Waban is where kids can thrive. Kids like Ryan can learn so much at Waban if they come here early. Waban is a special place."

James Kilbride, the program director of Waban's Child Development Center, agrees.

"This program has a very strong influence on kids," Kilbride said. "I've been in education for 37 years, and I have seen the difference between kids who have had services and those who have not."

Pam says Waban's services have had a positive impact on her son's social life.

"Ryan doesn't isolate himself anymore," she said. "He gets right in there."

"The Child Development Center is divided into three programs," Kilbride said.

The first program focuses on infants and toddlers with special needs. Two teachers and an aide actively work with children ages 2 and younger.

The second program assists preschoolers, those between the ages of 2 ½ and 5. A teacher, an assistant teacher, and an education technician instruct the students.

The third program, Room for Individualized, Supported Education – RISE – is the most intense one, in which a staff member is assigned to two students, rather than a whole class. RISE has been designed to meet the needs of children whose special needs fall into the category of "Pervasive Development Disorder".

According to Kilbride, more than 70 students attend Waban's Child Development Center in Sanford. Approximately 15 attend Waban's satellite location in Arundel. Waban, in general, works with people with special needs of all ages.

"There's nothing more enjoyable than watching kids grow and develop skills and then succeed at school," he said.

This Saturday's an important day for Ryan and others who benefit from Waban's services. The organization is holding its 36th Annual Telethon at the Knights of Columbus Hall on High Street from 10 am to 6 pm.

Neal Meltzer, Waban's Executive Director, is hoping that residents in the Greater Sanford area will do as they have always done – support the telethon as best as they can. Last year, the telethon smashed all previous fundraising records by collecting more than \$100,000.

"We appreciate anything the community can do to support the work we do at Waban," Meltzer said. "I hope people can continue to do what they can to reach into their hearts and help us and help the kids."

A lot of activities are planned for the telethon – see the sidebar on the front page of this issue – and Kilbride suggest one event that's sure to be a winner. Children from Waban's Child Development Center will sing "When You Wish Upon a Star" at 11 am.

"The kids have been rehearsing," Kilbride said. "They seem to be enjoying it."

Wayne Wormwood, Waban's founder, will be honored with a tribute during Saturday's telethon. Wormwood passed away earlier this year, after dedicating his life to building Waban from a summer camp during the 1960s to the expanded, year-round service it is today.

Contributions can be made to Waban before and after the telethon at Sanford Institution for Savings at 900 Main Street in Sanford.

During the telethon, donations can be made by calling 324-5344 or 1-877-544-4275.

For Pam Lajoie, the telethon's an important fundraiser for the organization that made a positive difference in her son's life. These days, years after Ryan's time spent at Waban, Pam works there as a substitute, helping out wherever she's needed.

Like she said, "Waban's a special place".

When Ryan started going to the Child Development Center he only knew three words. A year later, when he finished Waban's program, he knew many more.

Best of all, he knew that three words that counted most.

"The one thing I wanted to hear was my son telling me that he loved me," Pam said. "Within one year, when he graduated from Waban, he told me, 'I love you'. That was the greatest gift to me."