

MARCH 30, 2007

Autistic boy wins award for communication

When a teacher's aide walked into the classroom to greet 13-year-old Peter Leja, the dark-haired young man grinned from ear to ear and uttered a cheerful guttural sound as he took her out-stretched hand and squeezed it.

This was only one sign of how delightful a person Peter is, according to his teacher Connie Pavur.

Teaching for the Southwest Cook County Co-op for 'Destiny Elementary Education,' her classroom is in Old Quarry Middle School in Lemont. While I visited the room, Pavur encouraged Peter to demonstrate a few of his abilities.

Peter, who received an award for excellence in developing better communication through use of a special device, was completing his daily exercise routine, but smiled hello.

"Peter has autism, which has nothing to do with intelligence," Pavur explained. "It is a neurological communication disorder with varying degrees of disability."

In Peter's case, one aspect is interfer-

ence with speech. It was obvious he could count the 10 jumping jacks he did. However, as Pavur pointed out, he said no part of the lower numbers, at least this time, and said only "ea, nh, t," for eight, nine, and ten.

Earlier in the year, she found Peter wanted to say more than a simple Velcro board with pictures would allow him. So she looked into a touch-screen communication device that was available through Infinitec Southwest, a division of the United Cerebral Palsy Association of Greater Chicago.

An evaluator recognized Peter's interest through his quick early

interaction with the unit and the school rented it for him.

Noting he has done well with the device, Pavur said within a short time Peter was communicating complex desires and full sentences.

A bit of his ability became evident after he completed his jumping jacks.

He took the device and pressed a food

icon, which moved him to another screen. Then in succession, he pressed keys that caused the device's mechanical voice to say, "I want a cupcake," and he beamed at Pavur.

Promised a small cupcake after he finished his exercises, Peter completed his task, took the device and reminded his teacher of her promise.

Once satisfied, he communicated his next wish — a desire to listen to a particular CD. He has even gone to a keyboard screen and typed words to ask for things, including typing "Oreo," for cookies, Pavur said.

She also noted that because of his progress, Peter was one of seven children to receive a 2007 Outstanding Student Technology Award from Infinitec Southwest March 22.

He was even invited to provide the blessing before dinner.

Following the banquet and award ceremony, Pavur said, "He did beautifully and the program was very moving. There were seven different recipients at the event and although Peter was very proud, he was interested in the other kids, too.

"It was inspiring for all of us to see them, learn about their handicaps and learn what they had to overcome," she

Lemont Notes

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Staff photo by Ron Koopmann

Peter Leja communicates his thoughts to his special-needs teacher Connie Pavur using a touch-screen communication device.

concluded.

If you have news of your club, organization, church group, scout group or school, call Nancy at (630) 257-9027.