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Lakes student dies before receiving honor

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Daily Herald Staff Writer

Ryan Swanson loved macaroni and cheese, chocolate milk, Christmas presents and the Three Stooges.

He could track storms on his computer, and his blue and white bedroom is filled with Sponge Bob Square Pants and pictures of his older brother, Eric.

Ryan was going to tell all of this to the United Cerebral Palsy Association of Greater Chicago when the group honored him April 27 for his outstanding use of technology.

It would have also been his 16th birthday. But the Lindenhurst boy died April 7, before he was able to receive his award.

"Ryan had a very strong will, and first and foremost was Ryan's will to communicate," Mary Wirth, his occupational therapist, said during his memorial service Saturday. She had

worked with him since he was 6 months old.

The Lakes Community High School freshman was physically disabled and diagnosed with cerebral palsy shortly after he was born.

Cognitively, he was fine. But instead of being discouraged by what he couldn't do, Ryan excelled at what he could.

That included using a voice-activated squirt gun during a family graduation party.

With the help of an Augmentative Communication Device, Ryan could tell family and friends everything from what he wanted to eat to what he wanted to watch on television.

The computer helped him produce and understand speech using a board with pictures representing his daily needs.

It was his progress with the device and his expertise on a laptop computer that earned Ryan the award.

His mother, Jennifer Swanson,

said he needed assistance in everything he did, but he accepted it with a smile and laugh that was contagious.

Even while confined to a hospital bed with a tube in his mouth, Ryan would grin ear to ear and the nurses couldn't help but laugh, Swanson said.

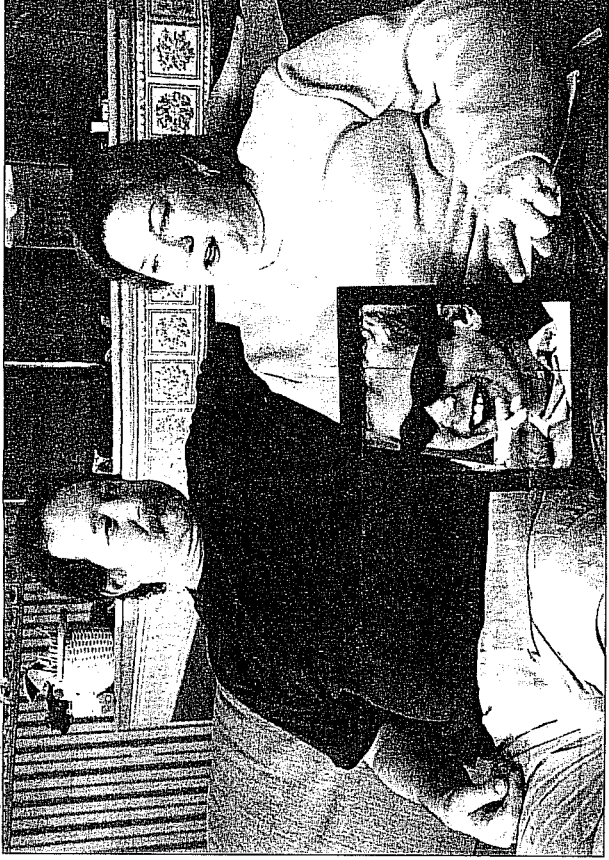
Receiving the award from Infinitec North, a division of the United Cerebral Palsy Association, was one of Ryan's proudest moments.

"He was our little techie," Swanson said. "He wanted to be a computer programmer. He had even printed himself a degree in computer programming."

Ryan's teacher at Lakes, Maureen Wynne, called him the model student.

"He had a great sense of humor," she said. "Every where you look there is evidence of Ryan. Now there is an emptiness."

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BOB CHWEDY/DAILY HERALD
Chuck and Jennifer Swanson hold a picture of their son Ryan, who died April 7, just weeks before he was scheduled to receive an award from the United Cerebral Palsy Association.

Honor: Teacher says Ryan was model student

Memorial fund

• The Swanson family has established the Ryan J. Swanson Memorial Scholarship fund to provide money to children with computer needs.

"We hope some of his dreams can be realized in other children who are as strong and motivated to succeed as he was," said Ryan's mother, Jennifer Swanson.

• To contribute, send donations to:

State Bank of the Lakes
440 Lake St.
Antioch, IL 60009

After Ryan's death — caused, in part, by his lungs collapsing and pneumonia — his parents decided not to attend the April 27 award banquet. "I'm starting to think we should follow through for him," Swanson said. "We should celebrate something he was so excited about. It is going to be hard, but I think we owe it to him."

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