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## 'New frontier in education'

By *MIKE KILEN*  
*REGISTER STAFF WRITER*

Jim Autry was driving along Fleur Drive when his cell phone rang. He answered it because son Ronald was away at college and called often, homesick, begging to come home.

He heard his son's pleading voice.

"Dad," Ronald said, sniffing, "I miss you."

Autry's immediate reaction: Pull that car right around, head straight to Evanston, Ill., and bring his sad boy home.

But lodged in his mind were years of raising Ronald, who has autism, and the steadfast advice of his wife, Sally Pederson: We need to encourage him to make it on his own.

Like when he was 3. Because his motor skills were delayed, he was taking his first independent walks. Ronald fell often, leaving swollen berries on his forehead. They let him keep trying.

Ronald eventually ran track at Des Moines Roosevelt High School. Autry videotaped his first run through teary eyes: Ronald finishing the 400 meters, dead last and shoes untied, but to a standing ovation.

So Autry didn't turn the car around that day. Ronald dried his own tears and learned to adjust at National-Louis University in Illinois. He graduated in 2006, wearing a cap and gown, with the rest of the student body. The skills he gained, along with the certificate of two years of study, help him today. At age 24, he lives in his own Des Moines apartment, drives his own car, and works a job and pays taxes.

Their son's accomplishments spurred Autry and Pederson to ask: Why doesn't Iowa have a similar integrated program for students with disabilities at one of its public universities?

These two aren't the kind to sit and complain without action. Autry is a former Meredith Corp. executive who lectures and writes about personal inspiration in life and work. Pederson is a former lieutenant governor of Iowa with a can-do spirit and connections throughout the state.

The result of their action is a new program at the University of Iowa beginning in the fall.

The REACH program - Realizing Educational and Career Hopes - is interviewing people who hope to be among the inaugural class of 25 students. It's only the second program at a major public university in the United States; the other started last fall at UCLA.

"This is the new frontier for special education," director Dennis C. Harper says.

Students with multiple disabilities will be integrated into the student body, live in residence halls, take classes, do laundry, manage their money.

And learn to fall and get up, just like any young adult.

## Structure, Skills

Ronald's experience became an example for Iowa officials.

"Ronald is skilled, but he has autism," Harper says. "Ron's life would not be anything if he had not gone to (National-Louis University), which gave him structure and the ability to learn those skills. He has a life."

On a recent spring day, Ronald drives up in his Scion XP and parks outside the Autry home where he grew up on Des Moines' west side.

Autism, a developmental disorder, is diagnosed along a spectrum, from low functioning to high functioning, determined by communication and social skills and repetitive behaviors.

Autry said Ronald falls in the middle of the high-functioning range.

Ronald quickly joined the dinner-table conversation.

"I take flying lessons," he said. "I have 45 hours. Eighty take-offs and 80 landings."

He said learning to keep the Cessna 172 flying steady in the wind is the biggest challenge.

He talked about his apartment, his job at CD Warehouse, where he sorts materials and enters data in the computer, his past roommates and his girlfriend, who is the "sweetest, nicest girl I've ever met."

Despite their son's diagnosis at age 2, Autry and Pederson had high hopes for him. They wanted what any parent would for their child, a meaningful life of gainful employment, independent living and love.

## Hoped for a miracle

At first, as Autry would write in his book, "Looking Around for God," they hoped for a miracle. During several years, they consulted experts in visualization therapy, megavitamins, even psychic healers.

At the same time, they sought to integrate Ronald into the Des Moines Public Schools and saw great progress.

Finally, a neurologist in New York could only ask them what they had done to bring Ronald's progress forward so quickly. They told her about the special education in Des Moines.

"You pay attention to those educators," she told them. "They know much more about these children than we do."

From that point on, the couple continued their quest for a miracle, but focused on Ronald's education.

He graduated from Roosevelt High School and took classes at Des Moines Area Community College.

Autry and Pederson knew Ronald could handle more.

"We didn't go from living in our parents' home to living on our own," Pederson said. "They also need a transition."

Students with disabilities, she continued, need the social and real-life education of a college campus. Several private colleges offered programs, and they chose National-Louis University in Evanston.

Ronald's initial bouts of homesickness were tough on everyone.

"If we rescued him, we knew we would never get him out of the door again," Pederson said.

Ronald was offered a choice. Stay or quit and enroll in another program. Faced with two potentially unpleasant choices, Ronald said he would stay.

Not long after, his life began to click.

He called his parents one day to announce he had a part-time job in Chicago. He took the el train three days a week.

"It scared the hell out of me," Autry said. "Ronald taking the el?"

Not only could he handle it, but one day he switched trains three times when one broke down.

He also learned to budget his money and do laundry. He discovered Greek mythology.

"He was learning the things taught about love for a thousand years," Autry said, beaming.

In a year, Ronald transformed from a scared youngster crying for rescue to a leader teaching new students how to adjust to campus life.

## A chance at life

Pederson was still Iowa's lieutenant governor during Ronald's college years and had the will and ways to advance the idea of bringing a similar program to the state.

"Sally is a very forward-thinking person in many ways," Harper said.

It helps that she was a parent. Most programs in special education come from parents, he said.

Pederson said the idea's time had come.

Just 40 years ago, many of these students were in institutions, then in group homes and now they live independently. The same continuum of advancement is occurring in special education.

Pederson began by approaching the three large public universities in Iowa. The University of Iowa showed the greatest enthusiasm.

But start-up money was needed. Pederson made contacts, using Ronald as an example. Jon and Lillian Lovelace, the Mryon and Jacqueline Blank Fund, Fred and Emily Weitz of West Des Moines and Michael and Barbara Gartner of Des Moines all kicked in money.

Contributions reached \$1.4 million for start-up costs and scholarship funds for those who can't afford the \$22,000 annual room, board and tuition, roughly \$4,000 more than standard student fees.

What will the program offer the students?

"A chance at life," Harper said.

The students must have a high school diploma and several high-functioning skills for the certificate program. They will live in residence halls and face rigorous expectations.

"Expectations make all the difference in the world," Harper said.

The program will give them the self-confidence and training to make their own choices, he said.

While limited special education courses have been offered in the past at Iowa, this is truly a mainstreamed program.

"It is not only the right thing to do but also the proper thing," Harper said. "Diversity means something for everybody."

## Off and running

Pederson said her desire for Ronald's future is common to parents of a child with disabilities - to feel confident about the child's life when they are gone.

Ronald appears confident. Once he tasted independence, he found living with parents after college too limiting. After three months at home, he got his own apartment, where he could go to bed when he wanted, and budget his money to buy a used Scion - or even a package of Betty Davis DVDs for \$60 because he loves classic movies.

He would love to talk more, but ...

His cell phone rang with a call from a friend, just as Ronald was hurrying to jump on the treadmill for a 30-minute walk before work.

He's running forward on his own, even if occasionally his shoes are unlaced.

"Ronald is in the race," Autry wrote in his book.

Reporter Mike Kilen can be reached at (515) 284-8361 or [mkilen@dmreg.com](mailto:mkilen@dmreg.com)

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