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Boy's determination keeps barriers at bay

Positive outlook helps brothers handle life with cerebral palsy

By Bill Gaines

For FLORIDA TODAY

Cheyne Joslin has always been one to attack issues head-on -- whether they affect him and others. When the exceptional-education students at Lockmar Elementary School in Palm Bay needed a sidewalk to have wheelchair access to playground equipment, Cheyne went to the principal and made his case. In less than two months, a new sidewalk was in place. When he decided electric doors were needed to make it easier for students in wheelchairs to enter the school's two buildings, Cheyne wrote Brevard County Schools Superintendent Dr. Richard DiPatri, and three sets of electric doors were installed. While Cheyne's persistence in these matters has earned the praise of students and faculty, it pales in comparison to this sixth-grader's everyday struggle with cerebral palsy. Lockmar Principal Norma Hostetler said the results of the boy's efforts can be seen on the faces of her students.

"I noticed children using the doors right away," she said. "I've watched them open the doors with smiles on their faces."

Hostetler said Lockmar added the exceptional-education program in 1990. There are 100 full-time exceptional-education students attending the school.

"He has a very positive attitude, and that has helped him," Hostetler said. "He tries to do as much for himself as he can."

Earlier this year, the 11-year-old attended a disabilities conference in Orlando with his family. Gov. Jeb Bush also attended. In a sea of people eager to get the attention of Bush, Cheyne lured the governor to where he and his family were standing.

Not only did Cheyne get to say hello, but he came away with a picture of himself with the governor.

"He was going from one side of the stage to the other," Cheyne said. "There were so many people that I had to walk through in the crowd. I got his attention by calling his name."

"He walked right over and said, 'Yes, sir?' " said Cheyne's mother, Laura Joslin.

Knowing the governor's ear is a precious commodity, the young advocate wasted no time going right to work.

"I told him that I was an honor-roll student, I did well on my FCAT, and that I'm on the student council and an advocate for the school," Cheyne said. "I told him that my brother was adopted from the DCF (Department of Children and Families)."

The governor said, "Wow, keep up the good work," and

shook hands with Cheyne, his brother Matt, 5, and his parents, Laura and Lane.

Cheyne's positive attitude has helped him leap barriers many healthy children might

never negotiate.

The Joslins first noticed a problem when their son was an infant. They realized his motor skills didn't seem to be developing at the same rate as other children.

Doctors at first dismissed the possibility of any serious problem, saying children develop at different speeds, and that, perhaps, their son was just developing at a slower rate.

At 13 months, Cheyne was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a brain injury caused by deprivation of oxygen to the brain. Often, the lack of oxygen occurs during childbirth, but the indications are not recognized until the child is slow to walk or roll over in the crib, as in Cheyne's case.

Lane, who was prominent surfboard shaper on Cocoa Beach, sold his shop, knowing his son, who is named after champion surfer Cheyne Horan, would not ride a wave, at least not right away. He now works at Florida Tech as executive chef, so he can be close to home if he's needed.

It didn't take long for the medical expenses to escalate. By the time Cheyne was 9, his \$1 million insurance policy had maxed out. But that didn't stop the Joslins from making sure Cheyne had every chance to live a normal life.

Instead of purchasing expensive therapeutic equipment, Lane began designing and building equipment for his son.

There was also an addition to the family.

Terri Williams, the occupational therapist working with Cheyne, was also helping another Brevard County child with cerebral palsy. Each time Williams visited the Joslin home to work with Cheyne, she talked about Matt and the opportunity he was missing because he was in state custody.

"I met Matthew when he was 11 months old," Williams said. "He always had this inner glow -- you know, like there is this little light on inside."

Williams had contemplated adopting Matt just to improve his quality of life.

"This little boy touched my heart," she said. "In the course of talking with Laura, I think she had the same idea."

Laura worried the boy wasn't going to reach his full potential if he continued to live in foster care.

"I needed to figure out if I could handle what Matt had," she said. "I had to get my husband to say yes."

Matt has been part of the Joslin family for two years. As Cheyne outgrows equipment, toys and clothes, they get passed on to his little brother -- along with plenty of love and care.

The affects of the outpouring of love were visible immediately in Matt's progress, said Williams, who still works with both children.

"He's one of the most gracious children I've ever met," Williams said. "One of the most visible changes is that he now carries a conversation with people on a 5-year-old level."

Today, the Joslin household looks like a child's dream. Cheyne's room is painted in an Elvis Presley scheme, while Matt's features a big, blue sky, with billowy, white clouds hovering above.

Laura, who formerly worked at a rock station in Orlando, can't figure out where her son picked up a fondness for Elvis.

"Of course I like his music," said Cheyne, who owns just about every Elvis CD. "I like

his hairstyle, too."

While toys are abundant, so is coordination-building equipment. On the floor is an inclined ramp, which Cheyne and Matt call "the mountain." It is used to increase the boys' muscle coordination as they climb to the top.

Outside, by the pool, is a device similar to a baby walker that hangs from a doorway. This helps simulate walking while preventing falls that frequently come with learning the skill.

Cheyne knows what he wants to do with his life some day. His love of video games helped cement his choice.

"I want to be a computer animator and make games," he said. He's even found a college in Seattle that specializes in the field.

And if his accomplishments are any indication, he'll make it to Seattle.

Last year, he ran for student council with the campaign slogan, "You're insane if you don't vote for Cheyne for student council."

He won.

The next challenge for the Joslins will begin Sept. 16, when Laura and her children travel to Pontiac, Mich., to take part in a new two-week program called Euro-Peds. Developed by the parents of a child with cerebral palsy, the program involves a revolutionary approach to treating the disease that includes wearing a suit that enables the child to walk without the assistance of more than one person.

"This program can provide the opportunity to walk," Williams said. "It will reteach the brain the right way to use the muscles."

Though Cheyne, who uses canes to walk, and Matt, who uses a wheelchair, will miss school to undergo the treatment, the long-range prognosis for both will be greatly affected by the program.

Besides, you'd be insane not to root for Matt and Cheyne.