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EVERYDAY TRIUMPHS

All in a day’s work. That’s a common refrain I hear from staff at Crotched Mountain. It doesn’t matter where my travels take me—from our campus in Greenfield, NH to our offices in Concord and Manchester to every program in between (and beyond!)—I see and hear about amazing things happening on a daily basis. And what continues to amaze me is how our staff talk about the feats they witness. To them, it’s routine!

If you were to distill Crotched Mountain to its essence, pinpoint the catalyst that drives everything we do, day in and day out, it’s this: we’re here to help our students, patients, participants—really, anyone who is part of our extended family—achieve the summits of their choosing.

It’s impossible to avoid that mountain imagery (especially since our main campus happens to be located on an actual mountain) and for good reason. The people we serve are on an upward path, with each step marked with success. Little ones. Big ones. It doesn’t matter. Every step, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, builds upon the wins that came before it, all of which point towards a goal of a rich, rewarding life.

But here’s the twist: there really isn’t any such thing as an inconsequential step. As you’ll see in the stories featured in this edition of Horizons, the breakthroughs people make every day are big-time. Granted, a young child with autism hanging his coat up for the first time may appear, at first, to be part of the prosaic, day-to-day experience. However, I assure you—for that child and for that therapist and for that family and for this organization, these huge little successes mean everything.

In the world of Crotched Mountain, the prosaic is the playground of the extraordinary.

Thank you for being part of our journey. Thank you for supporting these everyday triumphs.

Sincerely,

Michael Coughlin
President
For many students at Crotched Mountain School, especially those with autism, communication barriers can confound and constrain. But when the code is cracked and the breakthrough happens, there is relief, rejoicing, and a reminder: sometimes we just have to know where to look—and how to listen.
It always comes back to Shrek.
When the green ogre makes it to the page in Liam’s sketchbook, there is a story to tell.

Liam, a student at Crotched Mountain School, has autism and seizure disorder and his communication is limited to an utterance or two, words barely made out. And like anyone, a barrier to person-to-person communication can yield immense frustration.

For Kelsey Shannon, a speech and language pathologist at Crotched Mountain School, working with Liam to address his communication needs transcends the simple duties of a daily job; for her, it’s personal. As a big sister to a little brother with autism, she understood how he processed the outside world. This experience hardwired her desire to work with people with disabilities and, especially, to help unlock the potential of those on the autism spectrum.

Liam is one of the students she serves and for so long, the key to Liam’s communication challenges had been elusive. Like anyone, he would feel sad, hurt, happy, angry; but without the means to convey these emotions, the angst would boil over and Liam would revert to expression-through-adverse-behavior. Add to this combustible mix the looming shadow of the occasional Grand Mal seizure, and there would be times Liam, overcome, would lash out.

And one day Kelsey went to art class and everything changed.

THE MONSTER AND ME

During school, it’s Rory and Liam. Rory is his one-to-one staff, accompanying Liam as he moves throughout his day at Crotched Mountain School. Over the course of six months, the two have forged a connection. Liam knows her, trusts her, likes her. The foundation of the school’s education approach is Gentle Teaching, which is all about building relationships and fostering empathy; it is within these person-to-person dynamics that breakthroughs manifest.

And that’s exactly what happened the day Rory told Kelsey about Shrek.

Over the course of her time with Liam, Rory had noticed variations in his sketches. Always one who found contentment with a marker and a blank sheet of paper, Liam would draw constantly, filling his canvases with all manner of colors and shapes.

It was in these visual expressions that Rory made an incredible discovery: the drawings were connected to what he was feeling. What had at first seemed to be the simple, random scribblings of a teenager, were revealed to be the very vehicle that Liam was using to communicate to anyone who would listen—those pages upon pages of scrawled art were communication logs, Liam’s own Rosetta Stone.

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One frequent visitor to Liam’s pages was a monster. The monster would be interacting with a boy, or surrounded by different marks and swirls and colors. Eventually, staff realized it wasn’t just a generic monster—it was Shrek. Rory and Kelsey figured out that Shrek’s illustrated circumstances told the story of Liam’s feelings that day. If there was a blue box around Shrek, Liam was sad. A red box meant he was angry. If there was a picture of a boy hugging Shrek, Liam was happy. And if there was a red line going across Shrek’s forehead, Liam was in pain—and a seizure was on the way.

THE FIRST PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

The cliché is “If you’ve met one person with autism, then you’ve met one person with autism,” but it’s oft-repeated for a reason: it’s 100% true. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the needs of people with autism; each person requires their own cryptographic sequence. Maybe it’s Shrek. Maybe it’s something entirely different. But the story is there to be heard.

“Liam has done a lot of the work for us,” Kelsey says. “Now, it comes down to how we take that next step, from drawings on paper to him telling us ‘my head hurts’ or ‘I need medicine.’ It’s all about smaller victories, especially here.”

There is a way to go before that happens, but one of the biggest puzzle pieces has snapped into place. For Rory and Liam and Kelsey, a new communication expressway has opened up, a thoroughfare marked with potential that hadn’t been there before.

Everyone is, finally, on the same page.
There are few things more fun in life than playing with a parachute and some Wiffle balls—clutching the edge of the nylon and on the count of 1!–2!–3! everyone lifting in unison, watching the plastic balls bounce like popcorn from the billowing air. That’s what going down in the “Motor Room” of Ready, Set, Connect! and you only have to take one glance at the gigawatt grins on the children holding the parachute to know that, despite the fact all of them have varying degrees of verbal and vocal challenges, today they’re speaking in the universal language of: “This rules!”

Crotched Mountain’s Ready, Set, Connect! (RSC) delivers autism services to young children with a pioneering clinic-based model. Instead of isolated, one-on-one supports, RSC kids experience growth and learning with one another. The 1:1 ratio still exists as each child has a therapist by their side, but the journey is taken together, as a group. And there’s a very simple reason for this: because that’s life.

“The goal is to get them responding more to group instruction,” says Amy Rollins, RSC’s Board Certified Behavior Analyst. “It’s a crucial skill for success in the public school.”

Amy comes to Crotched Mountain from the Seacoast Mental Health Center, where she worked with older students on the autism spectrum, many of whom had not received basic skills at an early age. As such, she was forced to reverse-engineer behavior,
introducing the protocols that should have been in place before kindergarten.

Now at RSC, she has the chance to ensure children with autism get off to a great start, with the ultimate destination being the one common answer she hears from parent after parent when they’re asked “What do you want your child to grow up to be?” Their response: “I want them to be independent and happy.”

That is not a controversial goal, but for children on the autism spectrum, there is no expressway. It takes work and patience and unrelenting encouragement to help them achieve that future, which is why Amy starts early, one step at a time.

“It’s easier to teach an uncooperative four-year-old than an uncooperative 17-year-old,” she says. “What we’re trying to do, really, is just get that first snowball rolling.”

The “snowball” is made up of little victories: learning to stand in line or hanging up your coat or take turns or abide by a schedule or work together as a group to launch Wiffle balls into the air with a giant parachute. Each achievement, no matter how small, represents another layer upon which future success is built.

And if there are stumbles along the way—that’s okay. Because that’s life.

“We all have those moments when we’re unhappy and struggling,” Amy says. “We’re helping families realize that it’s okay for their children to be angry and frustrated with someone telling them what to do. They are just expressing it differently.”

Eventually the lessons take hold and the frustration subsides. The lines form and the jackets are hung. And slowly—but surely—the little victories pile up, the successes accumulate, and these children begin to see, with ever-increasing clarity, a future of independence and happiness.
In the punishing dry heat of the Texas summer, 17 year-old Randy Jorgensen put the final touches on his magnum opus, the result of a year’s worth of scavenging salvage yards and scrounging parts: a 1970 GTO Judge. With a turn of a key, this slab of American muscle cleared its throat and bellowed out the unique growl only a 400 horsepower Ram Air engine can muster—a primal sound that filled a teenager with deep satisfaction.

Today, over three decades later, Randy is still in the shop, up to his elbows in WD-40 and 1/4” sockets and filled with that same kind of satisfaction. But instead of Mustangs and GTOs, he spends his days working on Permobile C 500s and Winnie Lite Supreme Walkers and Pride Revo Three-Wheel Scooters.

Randy is the Program Administrator for Crotched Mountain’s Refurbished Equipment Marketplace (REM), which is part of ATECH, Crotched Mountain’s Assistive Technology program. ATECH is New Hampshire’s largest distributor of used medical equipment, all priced to be extremely affordable. That Permobile C 500 for example? New, it costs $24,000, the same price as a 2017 Chevy Silverado. REM sells it for $500.

Here’s how it works: donated equipment rolls into ATECH’s Concord, NH location regularly. Some of it’s in good condition. Some have seen better days.
Randy and his co-gearhead Mark Hall then put the equipment through its paces. From simple walking canes to Hoyer lifts to the highest of high-end power chairs, they all get the full REM treatment: taken apart, cleaned, tweaked, torqued, and tested. If it passes muster, the equipment lands in the REM inventory, listed on the shoprem.org website for digital browsing and available to peruse at the Concord showroom.

“"I got a call one day from someone looking for a computer display on a power chair," Randy says. “This is a unit that is integral to the operation of the chair. But the manufacturer doesn’t even make it anymore. We had three of them.”

Alternatively, if the equipment doesn’t get the Randy and Mark seal of approval, the piece is harvested for parts, which can be just as useful to potential customers. Currently, there is no used parts warehouse for medical devices in New Hampshire, and REM has been methodically building up inventory to address this market. You just need to take a look at the workshop, an impressive floor-to-ceiling cabinet of curiosities loaded with all manner of gizmos (many of which, new, cost more than your average BMW dealer part).

“I got a call one day from someone looking for a computer display on a power chair,” Randy says. “This is a unit that is integral to the operation of the chair. But the manufacturer doesn’t even make it anymore. We had three of them.”

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These parts—like their more complete brethren on the showroom floor—are served up at a major discount. The driving force of REM and ATECH is connecting people in need with the technology that will improve the quality of their lives. For those who, daily, rely on a patient lift or a wheelchair, this equipment, out of action, can have devastating effects.

Because, in the end, these devices are more than inert pieces of metal and circuitry; they are extensions of a person. Randy knows. He’s seen the bonds form between people and technology, and the impact it can have on their loved ones.

Like the woman who called him one day. Her husband had passed away a month before. In the twilight of his life, his house had been modified for accessibility—lifts, wheelchairs, you name it. She finally felt ready to donate it all. As Randy inspected the equipment in her house, she was pacing. “Are you alright?” Randy asked. She broke down in tears. “How am I supposed to go on without him?” she said.

The equipment was more than equipment; it was what allowed him to remain in the home with her. Randy consoled her. Told her he knew the feeling, that he had lost both of his parents, that he had lost his brothers. The woman took a final, longing look at the equipment, then turned back to Randy and said:

“This will help somebody else,” she said. “And I am so happy that it will.”

So Randy bid farewell and drove back to Concord, his van loaded with a trove of life-changing metal, padded, and plastic treasure, bound for his workshop where he’d strap on the safety goggles, get out his 3/4” wrench and get down to doing what he’s always loved—restoring.
When Ray Benoit and Jerry Hunter were walking the halls of Crotched Mountain School, a student paused to say hello. Jerry’s face lit up as he chatted with the young man, asked how his day was going and then bid a fond farewell. The two men continued their business, talking about Crotched Mountain’s I/T infrastructure and how Ray’s company, RTM Communications, can help. The encounter left an indelible impression on Ray.

“I saw that from all the staff,” Ray says. “The students were treated with respect and dignity and love. It was an amazing thing.”

Ray was so moved by this experience, he joined Crotched Mountain’s Board of Trustees. His relationship with the organization was a professional one, but in the students and staff and teachers he saw his personal life philosophy reflected back at him in surprising ways.

“I want to live my life as an example of what you can do instead of what you can’t do,” he says. “What was so amazing to me is how the students at Crotched Mountain overcome challenges on a daily basis. They’re using technology to move a mouse cursor with their eye or walking down the hallway for the first time on their own using new equipment.”

For his 55th birthday, Ray blended his can-do drive with his desire to support Crotched Mountain School. So, on April 15, his birthday, Ray laced up his sneakers and challenged himself to an epic run. And by the day’s end he had run an astounding 50 miles! Even better, thanks to his supporters, he raised over $5,000, with all the proceeds going to support Crotched Mountain’s students. He called this challenge “The Epic in All of Us.”

“I may not have any children at the school,” he says. “But if I ever needed a place like Crotched Mountain, I need to make sure it continues to exist—and that’s why I volunteer.”

Interested in organizing a fundraiser for Crotched Mountain with your friends, family, or coworkers? We can help! Contact Jeannette Nieder at 603-547-1486 or jeannette.nieder@crotchedmountain.org.
In September 2016, a young structural engineer named Arpita left her apartment one day and was struck by a falling tree branch. She sustained a spinal cord injury, which left her paralyzed with only limited use of her arms and no use of her legs. She came to Crotched Mountain Specialty Hospital for rehabilitation in December, but there was a clock ticking—Arpita needed to return to her job to remain in the United States on her work visa. With her parents by her side (they flew over from India), Arpita worked relentlessly with hospital staff to achieve that goal. It was a textbook case of inter-disciplinary teamwork. The clinical team helped Arpita learn new ways to manipulate a computer, drive a motorized wheelchair, and transfer safely. The medical team, including respiratory and nursing, helped restore her health. A case manager helped her find a new home right on the bus line and near her workplace, outpatient therapies, and shopping.

And on April 3, Arpita left Greenfield and moved to Concord, back at her old job (her employer, GM2 Associates, kept the position open for her to return—another unsung hero in this story), starting a new chapter of her life.

“I cannot imagine how my life would be without the excellent work that Crotched Mountain Rehab Center has done for me,” Arpita wrote in a card to the hospital staff. “It has truly shaped me into a strong and confident person. Thank you for supporting me through this incredible journey.”
UPCOMING EVENTS

15th Annual Crotched Mountain Golf Classic
June 26
Crotched Mountain Golf Club
Francestown, NH

Wine Tasting
June 8
Devine Millemet
Manchester, NH

For more information, contact Jeannette Nieder at jeannette.nieder@crotchedmountain.org or call 603-547-1486

Recreational therapist Tyler Rodgers helps Crotched Mountain School student Cole negotiate the vertical terrain of the brand new bouldering wall, located in the school gymnasium. The wall was funded by a grant from the Constance O. Putnam foundation and officially unveiled on March 21 at a special ceremony in the gymnasium, with students, staff, and teachers in attendance.

For their “alternative spring break” from March 6 to March 10, 12 students from Vanderbilt University spent the week volunteering at Crotched Mountain School. There they supported the teachers and staff, spent time with the students, participated in afterschool activities, and learned a whole lot about what makes Crotched Mountain School so unique.

“It was amazing to see interactions between students and staff,” said Wayne, a neuroscience major studying autism and behavior. “I’ve read so many papers, but it was so exciting to actually experience it. I learned so much.”

Watch what the experience meant to them in their own words at our YouTube channel: youtube.com/crotchedmountain.
“This isn’t like mom.”

You can’t put your finger on it. The house isn’t as clean as it used to be. The dishes have piled up. Something seems - different.

If the aging process is beginning to affect your loved ones and you don’t even know where to start, call Crotched Mountain Community Care. Our experienced, compassionate staff will help you navigate these new, uncharted waters.

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