



Texas Parent to Parent

Jake Empowered

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Hays High School student promotes self-advocacy

Ryan Sachetta
Special to the Hays Free Press

Jake Pinner, 18, carries himself with an unmistakable aura of pride. It goes beyond the navy t-shirt emblazoned with the American flag across his chest or even the Rebel Pride award he won as a sophomore in 2007 at Hays High School.

Simply put, the soon-to-be senior just loves to be part of the team, especially the fandom associated with rooting for football. Jake speaks confidently of his Rebels' chances of returning to the playoffs this season. He believes in Colt McCoy's ability to lead the Longhorns down the road toward redemption in response to last season's title game snub. And his confidence in the Cowboys is weathered, but he admires the risk of parting ways with Terrell Owens.

If football is Jake's dessert, then the game's statistics stand as the maraschino cherry on top. Don't let the innocent, glistening smile and the vibrant red hair fool you, Jake is an animal when it comes to statistics. He can chew you up and spit you out with a full-on blitz of football figures and trends that could leave even John Madden in complete awe.

It's delayed, but if you keep drilling Jake will speak of his own individual accomplishments. It's a list that includes the Mighty Mustang Award, Rebel Spirit Award, and accomplished High School choir competitor with perfect pitch and the ability to sing in English and German.

Recently and most notably, Jake won the "Empowerment Award for Excellence in Promotion of Self-Advocacy" at the 34th Annual State Convention of the American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Texas Chapter in Corpus Christi. Jake was presented the award in response to his work as a self-advocate with Asperger's disorder, a high-functioning form of autism.

"This baby was riding home with me all the way back to Buda, Texas," said Jake as he admired his hefty trophy. As he brings the award over he walks with swagger in his step, confident but never cocky.

According to the Autism Society of America, Asperger's disorder was discovered by Austrian pediatrician, Hans Asperger in 1944. Both autism and Asperger's are considered "spectrum disorders" because they can affect the diagnosed individual in various forms and degrees of severity.

Individuals with Asperger's generally possess normal intelligence and language development. But they lack social and communication skills like empathy and the ability to share excitement in other's accomplishments. People with Asperger's also demonstrate extremely high levels of fascination for certain topics.

"Asperger's is a part of my life, but it does not define me," said Jake. He subscribes to and has advocated People First Language, which can best be summarized by describing someone as the preferred "person with autism" as opposed to an "autistic person."



Jake and his dog Reagan relax on the couch. Jake recently won an award for his work as a self-advocate with Asperger's disorder.

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As we sit over dessert at Cherry Creek Catfish Restaurant, Jake has two of his favorite things within an arm's reach: Chocolate Lover's pie served up by his sister, Laney, who manages the restaurant, and copies of the Maple Street Dallas Cowboys and Texas Longhorns press guides.

Jake approaches his dessert with the same intensity he analyzes the glossy pages lined with team schedules and projected records.

"Son, slow down," said Jeanine Pinner.

Mrs. Pinner serves as training and outreach coordinator for Texas Parent to Parent, an organization that aims to provide information and support to families of children with disabilities, chronic illness and other special health care needs across Texas

"I truly believe that Jake is living proof of what can be accomplished when the self-advocate, family, friends, teachers, therapists and community members work together toward a common goal," Mrs. Pinner said.

Jake and his mother have a strong visible bond. There's the obvious mutual love and respect, but then there's the shared interests. Both are admitted lovers of technology, with Jake constantly playing flight simulator on his computer or college football on his Sony PlayStation 2, and mom glued to her Kindle wireless reading device. Both have their iPhones on hand, especially when needing to check whether or not Jake correctly picked the day of the week I was born on in 1986. By the way, he got it right. Not surprising.

Jake hasn't completed any passes or caught any touchdowns for the Rebels. But he doesn't need to do those things to feel like football has touched his life.

"There's a magic in sports and football helps me think about what I can do in life," said Jake. "I like to say that sports got me out of hiding in high school, and from there on I became more involved in activities."

Throw out the specifics of autism and Asperger's and their varying degrees of effects on the individual. They are both classified as disorders, but there doesn't seem to be anything disorderly about Jake. And if you want to talk about empathy for others, just listen to how sunken his voice sounds when he talks about the disappointing end to the Rebels' playoff run last season. That doesn't keep Jake down, though. He sees what the team is capable of because he knows what it's like to have doubters.

Better yet, he knows what it's like to be on a team: implementing a "we" over "me" attitude.

Jake doesn't need face paint to wear his pride. For him, it's innate.

When asked what he is most excited about this upcoming school year, Jake pauses for a second, sits up straight on the couch and a giddy grin comes across his face. He exclaims...

"Jake is most excited about Rebels football this upcoming school year."

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