

# It Takes a Village...

by Kimberly Glover

You often hear the quote, “It takes a village to raise a child.” As music teachers, we all know this to be true. The same sentiment goes for a special needs student. We all have different experiences with teaching a special needs student and we all know that, without help, it would be far more difficult to be successful. In my situation at Norwin High School, we have a plethora of villagers. One specific student, Chris, has the outstanding support of his parents, the Norwin administration and school board, his aides, the band booster organization, the band directors and also the students of the Norwin Band. I would like to share my experiences teaching Chris, a student with autism. There is **nothing** that only one person can do to make it work, it takes a village.

## Perfectionist

One early memory: During a rehearsal, Chris began to loudly crash the cymbals during one of his moments of frustration because he was being told numerous times to “play louder.” Chris wanted to prove that he could do it. When the rep ended and the head director was giving instructions for the next rep, Chris went over to the cymbals and began crashing as loud as he could, over and over (great sounds, mind you). He was showing us that he could do it. This one specific instance opened the door to many questions... 1) Is this a normal reaction for Chris? 2) Is he going to do something like that during a competition or performance? 3) What did I do to set him off? 4) What do I need to do to better instruct him than how I just did?

Chris **must** be right, but not in a defiant way. Rather, he will obsess about it until he has a chance to show you that he can play it right. This took some getting used to. It was a rough start for all of us at the beginning of Chris’ ninth grade year. We all learned on the fly about how to teach Chris using tools we acquired from college and our district in-service workshops. We had help from Chris’ emotional support teacher and parents about certain specifics concerning Chris. Although I had seen him in middle school, he didn’t regularly attend the percussion classes I taught during their activity period. Once he came to the high school, he was here every day.

So, when band camp started in the summer of 2007, it was definitely an adjustment period. The Norwin Band has a pretty intensive summer schedule, and for ANY freshman it can be difficult. My first memory teaching Chris and having that, “Oh no, what do I do?” thought was during summer band when we were working with cymbals on the parade tune and

Chris became frustrated. Looking back on it, I realized I was moving too fast in trying to accomplish too much in a short time frame. Luckily, an aide was there to help him calm down. From that day forward, I knew I needed to learn as much as I could to see how to teach Chris. Eventually, these moments of perfectionism, were starting to make sense. I was learning that Chris **must** be correct. He is a perfectionist.

## How to Teach Him

Soon, we all began to figure out teaching strategies that did and didn’t work. Words like “no” or “wrong” didn’t seem to go over too well with him. The first time I tried, “Chris, let’s change this,” it seemed to work wonderfully. Because I wasn’t telling him he was wrong, he was ok with it, even though what I was changing his performance to was the actual music on the page. He realized now that we would probably do that section of music **many** more times during rehearsal, so it was ok to wait patiently until the next rep. As he has matured, he has become more patient and his need for validation isn’t as intense. In the past, he would pace back and forth, seeking approval and ask everyone around him, “All Better?” until someone, usually a student, would tell him “yes.” Now, he will ask you, “Better?” and a simple thumbs up works just fine.

One strategy I use with Chris is what I call the “20% method.” This basically means, get 20% today and then get the other 80% gradually over time. For example: if we are trying to make a bigger crescendo, one day I will tell him to get louder at the end. Once that is set and he is used to it, we will talk about the first notes being much softer. Last, we will talk about how each note will be louder than the previous note. It works for him. It just takes a little more time to accomplish than just saying to make the start softer and the end louder.

## Routine

Chris is very routine-based. He comes in every day, gets his music binder from his locker in the percussion room and then starts to warm up on either scales or rudiments. During marching season, he was assigned an instrument to bring out every day and would **always** be the first one out during first period. When Chris needs to get his music folder out of the percussion room, and the percussion door is locked, he will come to me to ask for the keys. A few years ago he would pace back and forth until I asked him where his folder was and he would point to the percussion room. Now, we are working on him being able to lock the door back and turn off the light.

Because we rehearse many hours, routine is inevitable. One thing we had to work on was getting Chris’ instruments set up for Concert Band and Percussion Ensemble.

The students were always really good about helping him and we would usually divide and conquer to make sure Chris had everything. Now, Chris knows what to expect during a rehearsal: warm up, tuning and then rehearse. He is even starting to set up instruments when instructed and gets his own music out during concert season.

### **Performance Etiquette**

This was one thing that really concerned me when I first met Chris. How will he act/react in a performance situation? I have noticed that when Chris has his marching uniform or tuxedo on, he is much calmer. Some time in his upbringing, he learned that a performance is serious and he must stay calm. I have even seen him mess up in a concert, which is rare for him and during the next series of rests, he fixed the erroneous passage by playing it on his leg as opposed to on the drum because he knows that the performance is going on and he doesn't want to interrupt the music. He successfully played the missed passage on his leg, while at the same time successfully completing his rests in the music he was performing.

His performance etiquette has helped with his reasoning skills as well. During one Friday night football game performance when he was a sophomore, he picked up a drumstick and accidentally knocked off a mallet from the percussion cart. He looked down at the mallet on the ground a couple of times and then kept his rhythm going on the cymbal while he made his way around the cart and bent down to get the mallet. He didn't miss a beat. He knew that it was a performance and we weren't going to get another chance to do it again, so he kept going. I know his aides and the people who work with him most were quite impressed that he was able to reason out a solution while not interrupting what was going on at the moment. I literally shed a tear that night because I was so astonished that he figured it out so quickly and kept everything going without a pause.

### **Peer Response**

Another early memory: During Chris' ninth grade year, I noticed that he had a habit of wandering off. I remember when we were at a BOA competition in Towson, MD I was watching Chris from afar trying to keep my distance when I noticed a large group of band students walk by him. He slipped into that group so quickly and easily that you would think he was running from authorities! I remember running over, my heart pounding from worry, and quickly yanked him out of the mob. Although he is much better now and will usually stay with Norwin students, he still can be quite elusive at times. Just last week he tried to get onto the bus for the band students that were taking the PSAT test at a local school. I told him the bus wasn't for him and that he needed to go back into  
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the band room for first period. He quickly turned around and headed back. Every marching season I introduce Chris to the incoming percussion freshmen and tell them that CB (Chris' initials) is **never** to be left alone in a public place.

Those of us who teach band know that, usually, the type of student we get is pretty well-behaved and will do anything for you. Norwin band students are definitely that and more. Not only do these students work really hard and perform well, they take care of each other. I have been astonished at the care and compassion these students show Chris. I see, first hand, these students helping him, many jumping at the chance to do so. Although this is great to see, there have been times that Chris needed to do things on his own.

It got to the point that I had to sit the rest of the percussionists down and discuss some goals that Chris' team had



*Chris in action with the Norwin High School Band*

for him to become more independent. We had to explain to the students that it was OK not to help Chris when they knew it was something he could do on his own. During his freshman and sophomore years, when I would try to demonstrate something for him he would try to grab the sticks or mallets out of my hands to play. For awhile I let him do it, but now he knows he has to wait his turn. If he is ever impatient and resorts back to his old habits, I tell him no and I start the passage again. He has learned that if he waits he will only have to listen to me play it once.

Another thing that seemed to help was that the other students started to realize just how good of a musician Chris was. To this day, he has a bigger vocabulary of rudiments than other students I have taught. We are all amazed with the skills he possesses. His ability to remember changes and memorize quickly are things that astound us. He is often the

student that demonstrated our weekly rudiment in class.

Sometimes, Chris will critique the other students, and boy, can he be honest. I have found that the best way for him to communicate is with thumbs up or thumbs down. We do a lot of peer critique with the percussion students. Every now and then, when I ask Chris how another student played, he will either give them a thumbs up or down. It is pretty interesting how the students feel crushed when Chris gives them a thumbs down, like it's the end of the world!

Laughter is definitely something that helps in the occasional stressful situation. Most of the time, we are very serious with the students and sometimes Chris will say something that just makes you laugh. I have, many times, caught him repeat-

*(continued on page 26)*

(continued from page 25)

ing something I said. One morning I said, “snares, measure 92 was wrong” and Chris said, in a very loud prominent voice, “WRONG, try again.” The students laughed because it was a funny moment and even Chris giggled too. When Chris is in a good mood, it puts you in a good mood.

Many times we have “happy circles.” When things start to get tense, monotonous or we just need a break, we will sit down at lunch or a break in rehearsal and have a happy circle. The entire percussion section, all 30 of them, will sit in a circle and they will say something nice about someone two people to their right, or left, or whatever was decided upon before we began. It is always nice to hear the students compliment Chris and say how he has changed their lives and now they have a better understanding about special needs students and what they can bring to the table. I know every one of these students that have the privilege to be around Chris is forever changed for the better.

### **Public Response/Parental Support**

I lost track of how many emails I have received about Chris, whether it is how well he did in a parade, a competition, a concert or trip. Each year he does a solo on our percussion ensemble concert and he always receives a huge round of applause and cheers from the audience... they love him! So many people tell me how good of a job I do with him, but honestly, he is just another student, another individual that you have to figure out how they learn and work with that. Chris has a huge support system: parents that drive him to every practice, performance and even accompany us on trips; aides that take great care of him; a supportive administration; and students that care deeply for and take care of him.

Recently, the Norwin Percussion Ensemble has earned invitations to play at different conventions. In 2009 we performed at the PMEA conference in Valley Forge. This was the first time a group from Norwin had been invited. When I received the invitation, I had an immediate worry about logistics with Chris, but because of past overnight marching band competitions, I was quickly comforted knowing that he would be fine. Fortunately, Chris’ parents came with us on the trip. Having support like that is, in my opinion, the main reason Chris does as well as he does. His parents are **always** willing to do whatever is needed to make sure he can fully participate and has everything he needs to be successful. Anything from helping Chris change into his uniform, packing his lunch for a long Saturday full of band, providing an aide in rehearsals outside of school time and even being proactive in getting information that I forget to tell them.

Last year, when the group was invited to perform at the MENC All-East Convention in Baltimore, MD, I had absolutely no worries about Chris because his parents came along. The Norwin School District and the Norwin Band Aides have been more than accommodating when it comes to his participation in band. They have graciously paid for the parents or an aide to accompany Chris on these and other out

of state/overnight trips and understand how he is important to our program.

Federal law mandates that special needs students can work to complete their IEP goals until they turn 21. When I found out Chris would be with us for this fifth and final year, I was quite happy. He is such a dependable player and a great student. He brings a smile to our faces and a warm feeling to our hearts. It is going to be hard not having him around next year. Hopefully Chris’ future involves music in some way. Music seems to be what he enjoys doing most. Because of support from many different people, Chris has been able to experience the wonderful things that music has to offer. Belonging to a group of students that go above and beyond in everything they do has helped Chris in many ways other than just having fun. He has learned that band is an extension of his family as he is an extension of ours. With the help of his parents, the Norwin School District, the Norwin Band and Band Aides, Chris is able to be a member of one outstanding village!



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### **A word from the Special Learners Coordinator**

Do you have a story to share. Please send to Jeff Cooper at [jcooper@colonialsd.org](mailto:jcooper@colonialsd.org). As the PMEA Special Learners Coordinator, I’m very much interested in increasing the awareness and dialogue regarding special needs students in our music classrooms. If you are a Facebook user, you can be part of our PMEA Special Learners Forum. After logging in to your existing Facebook account, simply go to our [www.pmea.net](http://www.pmea.net) site and, in the left column, click the Special Learners link. You can also contact me at [jcooper@colonialsd.org](mailto:jcooper@colonialsd.org) with any questions or suggestions for future articles. I look forward to hearing from you.



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