

FINDING COMMON GROUND

by Brian Hudgins

For parents—especially first-time parents—the words can be haunting. A doctor tells them that their child is autistic; or they suddenly hear, “Your baby has Down syndrome.” For two families, those conversations didn’t mark the end of their dreams, but the beginning of a journey to help others who would someday hear the same words.

Adoptive families take part in a Reece’s Rainbow Buddy Walk, below. Facing page top, Reece and his brother, Owen, proudly wear their UA jerseys, and bottom, Andrea Faris Roberts with Kullen Bedford, adopted from Bulgaria



REECE’S RAINBOW

“Reece was our first child, and we did not know he had Down syndrome until after he was born,” said Andrea Faris Roberts, ’93, who has University of Alabama bachelor’s degrees in criminal justice and Spanish. “We were learning to be parents, and be parents of a child with Down syndrome.”

After Reece’s birth in 2002 and during the first two years of his life, Roberts went through both grieving and learning. “It was really hard the first two years,” she said. “It was hard to let go of the dreams we had. I was expecting him to be the quarterback at Alabama.” And she also did some reading. One of the first things that her husband, Rich, did was pick up a copy of former UA football coach Gene Stallings’ book, *Another Season: A Coach’s Story of Raising an Exceptional Son*, which describes the joys and challenges of parenting a child with Down syndrome.

Living in the Atlanta area provided the new parents access to assistance. A Down syndrome support group in Gwinnett County and local medical facilities gave the family some resources. Another source of support came from a staff member at Northside Hospital in Atlanta, where Reece was born. The attending nurse at his birth did not forget about him. In 2004, Roberts received a phone call. “She wanted to have new parents of children with Down syndrome visit with other parents before they left the hospital,” Roberts said. “When a baby was born, I would go talk to families when they were still bawling their eyes out.”

During the crying, the questions and the talking, Roberts had a half-dozen-word message waiting for the new parents: It is going to be okay. “I didn’t have



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—Andrea Faris Roberts



that [support],” Roberts said. “I got a diagnosis, a packet of information and ‘have a nice life.’”

Finding common ground with the new parents was easy in some respects. “As a parent, when you have lived it, it’s really quite easy to grieve with somebody and tell them, ‘I was in your shoes. You are going to be so immensely blessed by this child, but you don’t know it yet,’” Roberts said.

By the time Reece was three, he was a bundle of sunshine, Roberts said, and she couldn’t imagine life without him. But as she gradually learned more about Down syndrome, Roberts found out some things that were not okay with her. “I learned how these children are treated, neglected and abused abroad, and dumped in an orphanage,” she said. “They are sent to adult mental institutions when they turn four. It’s hard to believe that is still going on.”

The plight of those children across the globe caused her to wonder how anyone could see her child that way. She decided to reach out, through the development of Reece’s Rainbow, an international Down syndrome orphan ministry, which she started in 2004. For the last four years, she has applied for grants and raised funds from private donors to help potential parents cover the cost of international adoption. Because these adoptions can cost roughly \$25,000, mostly due to travel expenses and adoption fees, many couples need assistance to meet that financial requirement. Reece’s Rainbow has already helped find homes for 350 kids.

Roberts has received national recognition for playing a vital part in bringing those new families together. She was selected as *People* magazine’s



2010 Readers' Choice Hero of the Year, and Maryland Congressman Chris Van Hollen nominated Roberts as a 2010 Angel in Adoption. The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, which coordinates the Angels in Adoption program, honored her at an October 2010 ceremony in Washington, D.C.

"The work that Andrea and the entire Reece's Rainbow organization are doing on behalf of children with Down syndrome around the world is an inspiration," Van Hollen said. "Without her efforts, many of these children, who are ultimately adopted, would have languished in institutions, with no hope of a family or a future."

The first meetings between new parents and their adopted children continue. Through its fifth annual Christmas Angel Tree Project, running from Nov. 1 through the end of the year, donors can provide a \$35 donation to receive an ornament to hang on their holiday tree, decorated with the photo of a sponsored child who is 0-5 years old. Proceeds go to help defray costs for parents who want to adopt the child.

Roberts' efforts have reached far beyond her home in Maryland. Couples from coast to coast, including several UA graduates, have experienced parenthood at the end of Reece's Rainbow.

As a college student, Roberts had volunteered to help at UA's Rise School, which serves young children with disabilities, many with Down syndrome. "I

The Meisler family includes, from left, Nancy, Anna, Mitchell and Allen; right, children make friends during summer camp.

volunteered at the Rise Program when I had no experience with kids with special needs, as a child myself," Roberts said. "To see where God has put me on a path, and tie it all back to the University, is great."

MITCHELL'S PLACE

When Mitchell Meisler was a baby, he was enamored with letters of the alphabet. But his mother, Nancy, who is a registered nurse, could tell something was wrong with his ability to speak.

Mitchell's father, Allen Meisler, a 1980 UA graduate with a bachelor's in finance, took Mitchell to Chicago for an evaluation and returned with a diagnosis of hyperlexia. "Hyperlexia fits under the autism umbrella," Nancy said. "Mitchell wasn't showing a lot of the signs of autism, except for a lack of language."

A handful of years later, when the Meislers were taking Mitchell to speech therapy and other appointments, they realized it was difficult to find the variety of services they needed to care for their child under one roof in the



Birmingham area where they lived. A psychologist who worked with Mitchell and had previously worked at a school in Rhode Island planted the seed of a possible solution. "He planted the idea that maybe I could start a facility," Allen said, and the result was Mitchell's Place, a center specializing in services for children, young adults and families affected by autism spectrum disorders.

As a real estate developer, Allen was able to execute the early stages of the planned facility rather easily. "We started construction in October 2004 and finished 10 months later," he said. "The design was a group effort. We discussed the spacing and design of rooms with an architect."

The couple consulted neurologists, educators and other members of an advisory council to determine the proper services for Mitchell's Place. Evaluation services available there include testing for autism spectrum disorders, testing for other developmental disabilities, IQ and achievement testing, speech and language evaluation and motor and sensory evaluation.

The facility contains a spacious conference room and six classrooms that help provide the necessary space and

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In the Teach Me program, children receive one-on-one therapy. Right, high-school and college volunteers assist with social outings during camp.

resources for a variety of educational programs. An early learning program is designed for children ranging from age 2 to 6. "Many of the children are resistant to change," Nancy said. "We were fortunate that Mitchell is an extremely flexible child. Typically, structure helps the children. That is a big part of the curriculum: helping them deal with change."

To help older school-age children, Mitchell's Place has an after-school social and academic enrichment program. A summer camp is also held annually. A couple of new programs available are outpatient services and a summer preschool social group.

Kids who are not autistic also participate in the programs, which serves a couple of purposes, said Nancy. Autistic kids are able to interact and learn how to adjust while non-autistic kids learn about kids with disabilities. All those tools allow Mitchell's Place to help chil-

The early learning program blends children with autism and those without, for social role modeling.



dren who fall into various categories of the autism spectrum.

"One of the reasons we started Mitchell's Place was there were programs for severely affected children, but higher-functioning children fell through the cracks," Nancy said. "Mitchell appeared to be high functioning at a young age. It may be very subtle to begin with. A lot of parents know when something is wrong."

To keep the lines of communication open among parents, Mitchell's Place hosts a get-together for them each Friday. To help offset the cost of services, the Meislers also do some private fundraising. "Our charges for services are about one-third of the actual cost," Allen said. "We are constantly doing fundraising. Spencer Bachus, our congressman, helped us get a federal grant."

To run the business side of Mitchell's Place, Allen relies on the wealth of

knowledge he gained at UA. "I run the business, and I let the professionals help the children," he said. "I can turn to friends today from the University—leaders in the business community that can help with fundraising."

In the meantime, Mitchell continues with his education. He is now 15 years old and in the tenth grade. The Meislers' daughter, Anna, is a student at UA. And their parents continue to help other children find their places in school and in social activities through Mitchell's Place.

"The most rewarding thing is when a parent comes up and says how much progress a child has made," Allen said. "You can't help but feel for other parents. You have been through the same thing."

In sharing experiences with the parents at Mitchell's Place, the Meislers celebrate their successes, and also appreciate their humor about living with an autistic child. For instance, Allen found out from one happy parent that a lack of silence can be golden, when they said, "My child would sit there and couldn't talk. Now he won't sit down or shut up." ■

Brian Hudgins is a freelancer based in Lafayette, La. For more information about these programs, see reecesrainbow.org and mitchells-place.com.