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Parents, NVUSD Connect With Special Needs of 4 Students

By Karin Argoud-Morrisey

Maya Derr, like any typical 13-year-old teenager, loves hanging out with her friends, horseback riding, swimming and challenger baseball. But Maya has a lot more challenges to deal with than the average teen because she was born with cerebral palsy.

Cerebral palsy is usually caused by brain damage occurring at or before birth and marked by muscular impairment. It is often accompanied by poor coordination and sometimes involves speech and learning difficulties.

"Maya is a happy, smart child, but she is trapped in a body that doesn't function the way ours do," explained her mom, Ashley Derr. "So, she needs technological adaptations to be able to reach out and tell us how beautiful and smart she is."

But how to get those necessary adaptations was not so obvious.

Maya began her public education right here in Yountville. She attended Yountville Elementary School for first and second grade.

"Our goal was to keep her fully included. But, one of our biggest disappointments," shared Derr, "was having to take her out of Yountville Elementary."

But the Derrs knew, at the time, neither the school district nor the school had the resources to support a child with significant needs like Maya's.

"We realized she wouldn't be able to reach her potential here or be a communicator unless she received more specialized instruction. So, for three years she took the bus to the Bay Area because there was nothing available here," said Derr.

After a few years the Derrs decided to stop the commute. They decided their child should be a part of her community -- Maya's family's community -- and be educated with her peers.

"The only solution then, was to create a local program that would service her needs and other local children with special needs," Derr explained.

And so Derr and another mom, Mary Ferons, founded Napa Valley Kids Connect.

"For years, we lived just guessing her needs and wants," said Derr. "But not anymore. Now she finally has a voice to communicate with the rest of the world."

Napa Valley Kids Connect (NVKC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit partnership with the Napa Valley Unified School District dedicated to enriching the lives of children of the Napa Valley with motor and communication difficulties.

Kids Connect opened its doors to five children this fall at Alta Heights Elementary School. Its mission is to help this population function as independently as possible.

Kids Connect provides its students:

- A method of communication,
- Independence through mobility,
- Technology to make curriculum accessible,
- Appropriate educational assessments for each individual child, and
- On-going educational support.

Derr said the program is for physically-disabled children who don't have the physical capabilities to access language the way a typical child can.

"One of the biggest goals is to allow these children to be a part of a typical general education classroom, and that is done by giving them the technological tools they need to access their voice, the curriculum and the computer.

And what does Maya like best about going to her new school?

"Eli, Maggie and I are Alta Gators. I like going to school with my brother and sister," she answered.

The Derrs and their three children Maya, Elias, 8, and Maggie, 6, live on Mt. Veeder and own and farm Lampyridae Vineyards.

The partnership with Napa Valley Unified School District is providing one solution to the lack of funding, and good winemaking is providing the other.

"My husband John and I came up with the idea of producing a wine that would help fund this and decided to call it, 'The Communication Block Wine Project!' Because when you don't have communication," said Derr, "you have a communication block. We have a vision, and the vision is that our vineyards would give back to our community, to Maya's community."

Mustards and the Ranch Market Too in Yountville carry the Communication Block red wine. The wine also can be purchased from the vineyard's website -- www.lampyridaevineyards.com. It is priced at $50 per bottle. Donations to NVKC can be mailed to Box 2649, Yountville, 94599.

NVKC is the only parent-driven non-profit supporting a special education program in the NVUSD.

Maya Derr enjoys an afternoon at the Napa on Ice rink this winter with her mother, Ashley.

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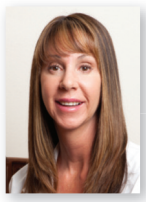

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