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## Autistic Modesto youngster a success story

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Effie Linares and his three best friends--Zachary Fernandez, Reno Rodriguez and Nathan Chapman--pose for a picture during lunch at Modesto's Lakewood Elementary School on Wednesday, August 27, 2008. Linares, who was featured in a BBC program on autism in 2002, is doing well as a mainstreamed fifth grade student. Ted Benson/The Modesto Bee - Modesto Bee - Ted Benson

Six years ago, a crew from the British Broadcasting Corp. came to Modesto and turned its cameras on Effie Linares, a 5-year-old with autism.

The crew had crossed the Atlantic to do a report on autism, coming to Modesto on the recommendation of O. Ovar Lovaas, a retired child psychologist. He had done breakthrough work on autism at UCLA, and one of his protégés, Mila Amerine-Dickens, had founded the Central Valley Autism Project here in 1991.

Effie's parents, Lydia and Efren Linares, enrolled their son in the local program when he was 3. Lovaas enjoyed great successes through intensive tutoring and supervising in the home and at school. The process enables many autistic children to be placed into regular classrooms where they can learn math and language skills, previously assumed to be beyond their reach.

Effie Linares is one of those success stories. Mainstreamed since kindergarten, the 11-year-old is a fifth-grader at Lakewood Elementary School in Modesto.

Gone are the days when he'd go ballistic if anyone touched his Disney videos.

"He was very rigid," Lydia Linares said. "It's what the people from CVAP worked on since he was 3 years old. They've pretty much eliminated that."

While some autistic children are withdrawn, Effie defies the stereotype, his mother said.

"Fortunately, he shows affection," she said. "He desires to be social."

There is no one reason for his progress, Lydia Linares said. A combination of efforts have been effective.

First, his level of autism is such that the program can work. Many autistic children have severe behavioral issues and cannot function in regular classes. Some exhibit "savant" characteristics that enable them to absorb information in one or two specific areas of interest.

"The first autistic kid I taught read dictionaries," said Mike Doornewaard, who teaches third grade at Lakewood and had Effie in his class two years ago. "The other kids loved it. Every time they needed to spell a word, they'd just ask him."

Effie's autism surfaces in a different way, Doornewaard said.

"He'd daydream and sort of get lost in his own little world, is how they explained it to me," Doornewaard said. "The task was to keep him on focus."

But savants often are susceptible to emotional outbursts that Effie hasn't had in years.

Because his behavior is not an issue, his parents, teachers, and the program workers get a much clearer picture of his intellectual strengths and weaknesses.

"He is not the norm, the standard bearer (among autistic kids)," Lakewood Principal Doug Fraser said. "Yes, he's had huge challenges to overcome. There's been a great relationship with CVAP and the Valley Mountain Regional Center (which serves the developmentally disabled). The parental involvement is huge. You look what they've done with Effie at home and school, and it's been outstanding."

Effie's dad, Efren, works the swing shift at International Paper in Modesto so that he could spend two hours each day volunteering as a yard duty supervisor at Lakewood. His presence provides a calming influence for Effie. One hour is dedicated to being with Effie, the other with his other son, third-grader Aaron.

"I'd like to have a normal life, going to work in the morning and going home to dinner with the family," Efren Linares said. "But then, I wouldn't be able to be here."

He and his wife balance the attention given to Effie by spending their weekends with Aaron. Effie goes to visit his grandparents, Fidel and Lydia Martinez, in Modesto.

"They love having him," said Lydia Linares, a Realtor who helps out at the school whenever possible.

While the program originally provided 40 hours of home and classroom supervision each week, it's tapered off as Effie has grown older and progressed. The CVAP supervisors merely "shadow" Effie to help him focus his attention on the teacher and the lessons.

"They help him follow along, not losing track," Fraser said. "Over the years, Effie has learned to follow the rules and regulations. He's an exceptionally well-behaved student."

He's played sports at church, is learning sign language through Lakewood's Sign Club and sings in the school choir.

"I have a great voice," he volunteers.

Each day, he has lunch with friends Zachary Fernandez, Nathan Chapman and Reno Rodriguez. Again, a departure from the norm since many autistic kids often struggle to develop strong personal friendships.

Yes, the other students will recognize Effie is different, sometimes by the things he says or the way he says them. But one of the reasons Lakewood Elementary often is atop the charts when it comes to academic achievement is that it has huge parental participation and support. Fraser places a strong emphasis on respect for others.

"I remember early years where kids did not understand and did not realize what he was dealing with," Fraser said. "The kids came around, and about four years ago they became protective of him."

He'll need their support even more when he goes on to middle school and then high school, Lydia Linares said.

"We need to tell people to talk to their kids about having compassion and to show compassion for children with special needs," she said. "It all starts at home."

Yes, Effie has come far since the BBC crew came to Modesto in 2002. His parents, though, never got to see the BBC's show, which didn't air in the United States. From transcripts available over the network's Web site, it appears the footage they shot of Effie survived the edition process.

But that's OK, Lydia Linares said. The help he's getting in Modesto -- not the airtime across the pond -- is what really counts.

"So many people here have made his life better," she said.

**Jeff Jardine's column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays in Local News. He can be reached at [jjardine@modbee.com](mailto:jjardine@modbee.com) or 578-2383.**

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