

## A mother's joy

### *Lynn Stipe finds satisfaction from homeschooling her autistic son*

By Michael Knox  
mknox@independenttribune.com  
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Lynn Stipe and her son, Conner, 11, swing on a hammock on their porch in Concord. Conner, who is autistic, is homeschooled by Lynn. Greg Kahn (gkahn@independenttribune.com)

CONCORD - It's a cool breezy day outside the Stipe home as Lynn Stipe and her 11-year-old son, Conner, swing in the hammock, spending a lazy day together.

Outside on the deck near the swimming pool, Conner sometimes races his dog, Silky, who streaks back and forth along her fenced-in pen. Lynn Stipe, 35, laughs at her son's antics.

The two laugh together and they laugh often.

Conner is autistic and Lynn homeschools her son, teaching him the basics of learning. The two have just returned from a two-month stay in Maryland, where doctors tested Conner's symptoms.

While in Maryland, doctors changed Conner's medication and Lynn now finds herself learning to be more patient with her son.

He's gone from being more mellow and calm to being hyper and can become hyperfocused on words sometimes. He can repeat the same word for 10 minutes straight.

Prone to getting in trouble because of his anxiety and social skills, Lynn and her husband, Ron, decided to take Conner out of public school and have Lynn teach Conner. They've been homeschooling Conner for about a year and a half.

"It takes a lot of time and it takes a lot of energy, but to see him laugh and enjoy learning, that's what makes it worthwhile," Lynn said. "And I just enjoy spending time with him. He's a sweet, kind, caring little boy. He's got a big heart."

Conner's autistic symptoms include a high level of anxiety as well as obsessive compulsive disorder and Asperger's disease. Asperger's disease is one of several conditions that involve communication difficulties and poor social interaction.

Conner should be in the sixth grade but is testing on a fifth-grade level and partially sixth-grade level.

"School was really stressful for him," Lynn said. "When we chose this routine, it made the anxieties go down."

But Conner is still prone to anxiety. Something that would seem simple to many, such as changing the time on a video game, can be so frustrating that it sends the boy nearly into tears.

Conner's mother is a constant voice of calmness, making sure she doesn't raise her voice. She just asks softly what's wrong and works with her son to make sure his emotions don't spike anymore than they have.

"I'm learning just as much from Conner as he learns from me," Lynn said. "He teaches things that make me a better parent. He teaches me to be more patient. He loves you and he loves you fully. His innocence is something I admire about him."

Lynn and Conner work together an average of three to five hours a day about five days a week. Conner has a 180-day school calendar, but unlike public school, Conner's got a better chance of making up school days.

"If we miss a day during the week we can make it up on the weekend, which is nice," Lynn said.

Plus, Conner's mother offers him a sense of security that he did not have in the public school system.

"I just didn't get to be with my mom as much," Conner said. "Because I really want to be with my mom and dad."

Lynn focuses on science, with her husband, Ron, focusing on math. Still, it's Lynn who spends the bulk of her time with Conner, while Ron works two jobs, running his own home bakery business as well as working for Wachovia.

The couple have two other sons as well, 5-year-old Thomas and 9-year-old Landon. Both have symptoms of autism, but Lynn has kept them in the public school system because it is meeting their needs.

"School didn't have exactly what Conner needed," she said. "His anxieties were so bad he needed a different type situation."

A situation that includes Lynn and Conner spending many hours together. On this day, it's a lazy day. Conner is actually ahead of his school schedule because of his work in Maryland.

But the two have a bit of learning, with Conner playing a teaching game on his computer called "Brain Pop."

Conner works his way through one lesson that teaches about temperature and laughs during the animated sequence.

He scores five out of five on the quiz and the two move on to other lessons.

Before long, learning is over, and Conner and his mother spend the day together, playing a game similar to catch as well as a Dino Roar board game that lets Conner get some of his excess energy out by screeching when he lands on "Dino Roar."

Lynn manages to work in a lesson, though, with the two retiring to the hammock outside to read to one another, making their way through the book, "Midnight on the Moon (Magic Tree House Series No. 8)."

While teaching Conner, Lynn is also the vice president of the Autism Society of N.C. - Cabarrus County Chapter. She said about 1 out of every 150 children are born with autism. Membership for the support group is more than 100, she said.

She said her work with Conner is one of her joys because she eventually hopes for him to go to college. Conner may be homeschooled, but he has plenty of social interaction with other children on field trips with public school outings as well as going to the YMCA.

"Our goal is for him to be as independent as possible," Lynn said.

Lynn said she is working with Conner to teach him that independence, with his family there to support him.

"Once you have a good foundation, you can go anywhere," Lynn said. "And family is always a good foundation."

- Contact Michael Knox: 704-789-9144.