

# Young Man with Asperger's Syndrome Shares His Story

By Johnathon Vermaelen

*On November 7, Family to Family Network recognized Johnathon Vermaelen as our "2009 Shining Star". This honor recognizes a youth or young adult who has "reached for the stars" and overcome great obstacles to achieve his or her goals and accomplishments. This is Johnathon's inspirational story in his own words...*



*Johnathon shared his story at the Reach for the Stars gala with his proud father Doug by his side.*

My name is Johnathon and I am 14 years old. I have Asperger's Syndrome, which is a form of Autism. Autism is a neurological disorder that affects the way a person interacts with others and his world. People with Asperger's have a different, not defective way of thinking. We like knowledge, truth, perfection, facts, numbers, and rules. We have trouble reading body language, hints, slang or unwritten rules. Although we have high intelligence, we struggle with other things that most people don't. Asperger's makes me who I am. I am really smart and can remember facts and events with a lot of detail.

I was born 8 weeks premature so I weighed only 3 pounds and 14 ounces. My parents adopted me when I was 2  $\frac{1}{2}$  weeks old - which was when I was released from the hospital. I cried a lot when I was a baby, and became sick at six weeks old. After that, I seemed to be sick all the time. My mom worried about me because she didn't think I was doing the things I should be doing for my age. When she

would ask the doctor, they would always blame it on me being born too early.

When I didn't start talking like I should, my mom worked and worked with me. I started to say one word at a time, but I didn't put sentences together. I liked to read books in the corner of the room and I really got upset if someone moved the toys I was playing with. This seemed odd to my parents, but everyone said that I would outgrow it.

When I was three, my mom put me in a therapy called Sensory Integration Therapy. After one month of this, I started to make some big progress. Then I started going to Speech Therapy also. At this point, I started speaking in sentences and was able to communicate much better. I went to these therapies from the age of 3 to the age of 6. There are some days when my mom and dad wonder why they paid so much to get me to start talking!

When I was 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  years old my mom started going to the Family to Family Network meetings to learn

how to help me. It was from a friend at Family to Family that she learned about Asperger's Syndrome and decided that I might have that. She was right! But that is not the only thing she learned from Family to Family. My mom learned that she needed to keep me included with typical kids my age so that I could learn from them. So my mom did not put me in a special class with just other kids with disabilities.

I went to Mother's Day Out, Pre-School and Kindergarten at a private school. I was in all the holiday programs that we put on, and went on all the field trips. When I was going to be in first grade, I wanted to go to the school where my sister went. So my mom went to the public school to help them understand how they could help me be successful. She had learned from Family to Family Network how to work with the school so I could be in a regular classroom but get some extra help that I needed.

I went to that school for first and second grade, but I didn't like it. It was a big school and the cafeteria, PE and music classes were really crowded and loud. I also didn't get as much help as I needed because I was so smart that the teachers would forget that I needed extra help. It was frustrating. I asked my mom if she would home school me. She didn't want to do that because she knew that I needed to be around other children and not be at home alone. So for third grade I went to a small private school. I liked it there. I stayed at that school until the end of fifth grade. At the end of fifth grade I knew that I would go to middle school next and I wanted to go to the school where my sister went - back to public school.

My mom was concerned that I wasn't ready to go back to public school because I hadn't learned some of the things they test in public school for the TAKS test. We made a deal that if I let her home school me for 6<sup>th</sup> grade and if I could catch up by the end of the year, I could go to Kleb Intermediate. I worked really hard that year to learn as much as I could. I liked being at home, but I missed being around other kids. That year while I was home schooled, I did go to a gymnastics class and an Art class. I love Art and am always drawing. When I grow up I want to take all my creative ideas and make animated movies for Pixar.

By the end of my 6<sup>th</sup> grade year, my mom gave me the TAKS test that was online, and I did great! So she went to talk to the people at Kleb about enrolling me in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. At this time, she had to ask her friends at Family to Family Network

*"Asperger's makes me who I am. I am really smart and can remember facts and events with a lot of detail."*



*Johnathon displayed his artwork and awards.  
Above: Teresa Vermaelen, Johnathon and  
Mary Jane Williams*

(Continued from page 11)

again about how to help me. She worked with the school so I could be in regular classes with a little extra help. At first I was nervous and got anxious at school because there were some really scary kids there. I got picked on in PE and in the halls. I had to learn how to stand up for myself or tell an adult what was going on. I also had to get used to having seven different teachers in seven different rooms. I worked really hard to make good grades, and the teachers liked me because I worked hard and was polite and had good manners. After the first semester, I was doing so well that my English and Science teachers asked my mom if they could move me to Pre-AP classes. We decided to try it for a 6 weeks and see how it went. It went great! I stayed there for the rest of the year.

I ended up having a great year at Kleb Intermediate last year. I was inducted into the National Junior Honor Society in May. I was proud of myself for that because that meant that I had good grades. Then when the TAKS scores came back, I found out that I scored a perfect score on the Math TAKS test. I was proud of that too! At the end of May there was an awards ceremony for the 7<sup>th</sup> graders, and I received a medal for being on the honor roll and I also received the 7<sup>th</sup> grade Math award.

This year is going well also. I am in a Theater Arts class this year, and I tried out for the Theater Arts team that goes to tournaments. I made the team and have already gone to one competition and won third prize with my oratory about having Asperger's Syndrome. I was supposed to be at a competition today, but I wanted to come tell you how much Family to Family Network helped my mom know how to help me. And I wanted to show you how well I'm doing because of it. Please help support Family to Family Network so they can help other children also.



*Johnathon credits the support of his family for his accomplishments. Above: his father Doug, mother Teresa, and sister Jessica.*

**"When I was 1½ years old my mom started going to the Family to Family Network meetings to learn how to help me. It was from a friend at Family to Family that she learned about Asperger's Syndrome and decided that I might have that. She was right! But that is not the only thing she learned from Family to Family..."**