

Miriam Academy Gears Up For Fall Launch

Ground-breaking high school to serve students with learning disabilities

by Linda Briggs-Harty

Eighth grader Sam Cordes epitomizes the kind of student served by the Miriam School in Webster Groves, which is geared to those with complex learning disabilities.

Above average intellectually, Cordes read Stephen Hawking's book "A Brief History of Time" at age 8 and finds psychology, particularly the subconscious, the stuff of daily obsession.

He has red hair that people like to touch, and he looks at life creatively. For instance, on a family trip to Ireland a few years back, he coined the green land "God's Quilt" because of the fields bordered by stone fences.

Cordes, diagnosed with a form of autism, just learned he can further his education at the place where he said he's met friends and grown academically.

This fall, Miriam will open a ground-breaking high school, with Cordes and nine others comprising the first graduating class. The school, to be known as Miriam Academy, will offer typical secondary curriculum, with supports like speech/language and occupational therapy, along with academic labs to boost learning.

The focus will be project-based, with an aim toward college prep and/or career readiness, said Miriam Executive Director Andy Thorp.

That means the learning spaces may be bigger than average for initiatives like the gardening program now offered at the grade school. Students there work out of a state-of-the-art kitchen to plan, implement and harvest fruits and vegetables from nearby growing beds. They learn math and other skills in the process, Thorp said.

Accreditation will be sought for the high school from the Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS). The curriculum will comply with standards set by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

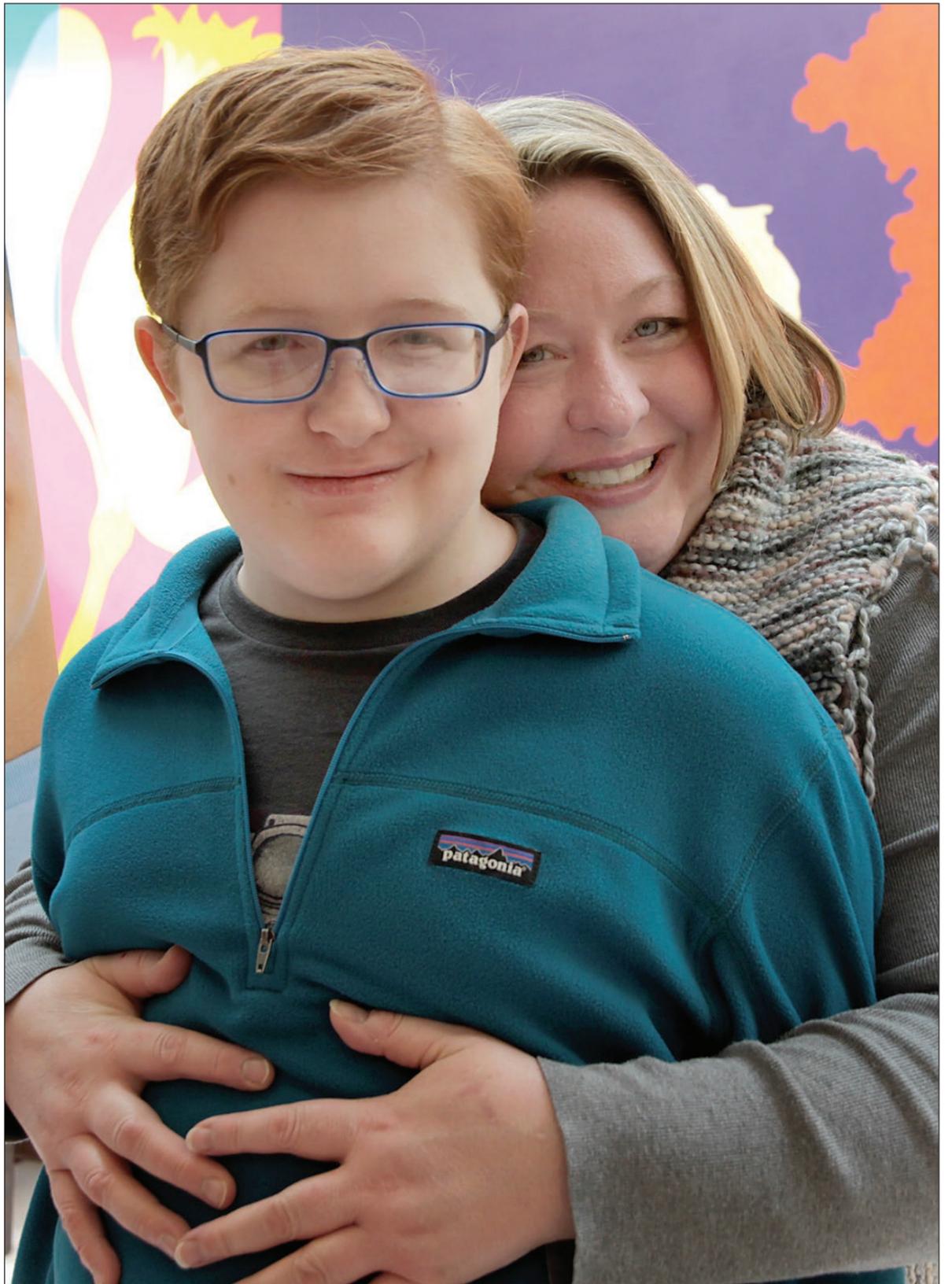
"It's the natural next step for Miriam," said Thorp. "I can't think of an organization more qualified to benefit high schoolers with unique learning needs."

For over 60 years, Miriam has deemed itself the "Learning Disability Experts," teaching non-traditional grade schoolers in a nurturing setting at the campus at 501 Bacon Ave. in northwest Webster Groves. A learning center for disabled students throughout the community opened in 2007.

The new high school will be located off campus at a site still to be determined. Thorp said a 10-to-1 student-teacher ratio is the goal, with a total of about 50 students enrolled by 2020. Tuition runs the same as the grade school – around \$28,000 annually – with need-based scholarships available.

Thorp said the idea of a high school for those with learning disabilities (not behavior problems) came up at every turn, especially during strategic planning over the years.

Last fall, Miriam completed extensive market research, surveying current parents and those of graduates, along with industry professionals to glean interest in such a



Sam Cordes, pictured here with his mom, Amy Cordes, will be one of the first students to attend the new Miriam Academy high school.

photo by Diana Linsley

project.

"The results showed overwhelming support," Thorp said.

Later, a town hall meeting that outlined plans drew over 100 people.

"I haven't seen such great excitement for a change since I started at Miriam 10 years ago," Thorp said.

Eighth grader Sam Cordes' mom, Amy Cordes, is among those who are excited about the new high school. A strong advocate of Miriam's comprehensive approach, Amy Cordes said she's spreading the word about the academy to family, friends and acquaintances via Facebook, among other methods.

She said she realizes it will be its own baby, with its own traditions and activities.

"The high school may not have a football team, for instance, but a chess club may be possible," she said.

Thorp stressed the intent to work with

community partners for internships and other student opportunities.

The timing of the new high school couldn't be better for Amy Cordes and her family, including son Sam, big sister Emma and dad Kyle, she said.

"We were ready to move out of state to ensure the gap be filled between Sam's keen intelligence and his learning disabilities," she said.

Sam Cordes joins a few other classmates in the proposed first class at Miriam Academy.

In that setting, he and his fellow students will know a seamless start to the phase that rattles many a teen, Amy Cordes said.

"Our entire community is invested in seeing the high school succeed," Thorp said.

Miriam is currently seeking qualified staff for the high school and is accepting student applications. Check out www.MiriamAcademy.org for more information.