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St. Mary's Rolls Out the Red Carpet

By Lou Fancher



David Chidester, Max Borland Photos provided

They walked the red carpet on November 1st at Saint Mary's Soda Center. There was a senator, a movie director, actors, screenwriters, producers—all smiling and posing for the cameras. There was even glitter here and there, but the brightest lights were in the eyes of the kids who participated in the 2009 Autism Inclusion Film Camp. The premiere was a screening and a celebration of the genius in generosity. Joey Travolta's summer camp, held at Saint Mary's for the past three years, is a unique collaboration between kids diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders, their friends and a professional film staff. This year's resulting short movie, titled *The Really, Really, Really Late Show*, was funny, touching, and undeniably human. Fashioned after a late night talk show, 18-year old host Zachary Miller, a student at Acalanes High School, led the way with a humorous monologue. A band, interviews, film clips, clever commercials and wonderful joke cam segments followed. A guest musical performance moved the film from laughs to lovable, reaching just the right degree of tenderness before a Top Ten list, wacky trivia, and silly human tricks brought the audience back to earth.

The rare environment created during the camp and captured by the video is a direct product of the camp's leader, Joey Travolta. An acclaimed director, Travolta has been swimming through the star-infested waters of Hollywood for decades. He remains remarkably free of the ego movie people wear like a second skin. He's too busy behind the camera to flaunt his impressive resume in front of it. "I'm there the whole time," he says of the camps. "I get to take two

things I love, working with kids and film making, and combine them. How great is that?"

It's incredibly great, if you ask the kids. "It was good," says Christian Magoon, 17, before breaking into a beautiful a capella rendition of *Once Upon a Dream*. "I was a happy kid to be there," says Spencer Trevarthan of Orinda. He gives Travolta a high rating, especially for his dancing, which was "excellent." John McLaurin, a parent deeply involved with this year's camp, agrees, saying, "He just has a knack for connecting with the kids."

Travolta started the teen film camps after the mother of a boy with autism contacted him. Her son had an idea for a movie, but needed help: Travolta donated his crew and his time. In doing so, he discovered a larger need. "They [kids on the autism spectrum] weren't included in regular camps, or there was always a problem," he says, explaining the origins of what is now a nationwide series of camps. "Film making is such a social opportunity," he continues, "I didn't choose autism; the disability kind of chose me." For kids who struggle to connect in spontaneous ways with their peers, the camp is a practicum and an oasis of comfort. "We can all work together to make something spectacular," says Miller, who hopes to pursue a film career after attending the Academy of Art in San Francisco.

While the camps were started only a few years ago, Travolta's egalitarian perspective on children formed during his years as a special education teacher. "One thing about kids with autism," he cautions, "is if they think you're not sincere, they'll turn you off." The camp works because he doesn't see the kids as "different," he just sees kids. The magic is in how he passes that vision to the kids, who then see themselves fitting in, easily making friends—some, for the first time in their lives.

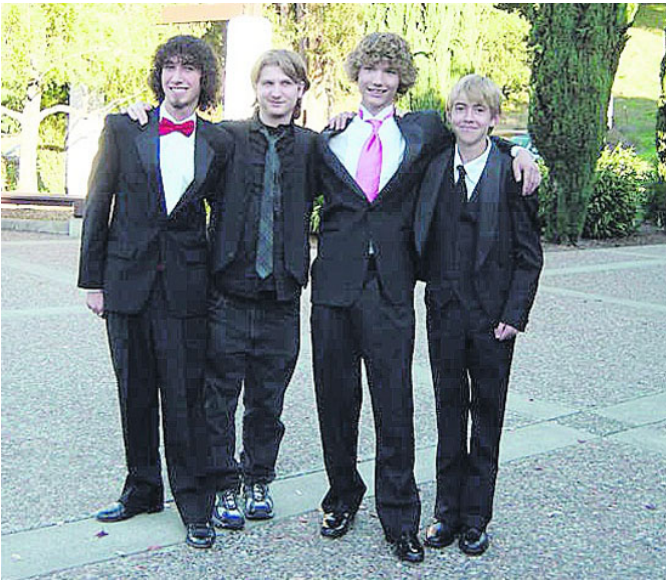
The Moraga camp is in its third year and the college gets nothing but praise from Travolta. "Saint Mary's has been unbelievable," he says, "it's such a quality school." Not only does the college supply classroom facilities for the camp, students in the education department have volunteered, gaining crucial experience with kids in the spectrum.

Lafayette's Futures Explored provided organization and staff support for this year's camp. A non-profit service organization offering adults with developmental disabilities assistance for living and working within the community, Futures Explored Executive Director Will Sanford sees the match as a natural fit. "We're seeing the numbers of young adults with different learning challenges increasing," he says, "and we need to be prepared."

The younger kids with ASD have typically received more early intervention and present well, so it's harder to see the needs. The camp is an important step in preparing young adults for the social demands they find challenging. Futures Explored and Travolta are now in discussion about adding an adult film camp in the Lamorinda area.

Most of the campers receive assistance from the Regional Center of the East Bay and Alta Regional Center to attend film camp. Although the state has recently slashed funding for children with autism, placing next year's camp in serious jeopardy, there is hope in the air. State Senator Mark DeSaulnier, appearing to deliver a resolution honoring Travolta and others, made an earnest promise to push for continued support.

Travolta and his crew are adamant about the value, not just for the kids, but for themselves. "I've made 16-17 films," Travolta says, "but these are the only ones where someone says to me, 'You've changed my life-' so we'll be back."



Zachary Miller, Nick Woodley, Sequoyah Sowle, Robbie Henderson

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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