

SUNDAY

April 14, 2013

8 a.m. Noon 6 p.m.

44 62 69

Partly sunny, warmer today; t-storms tonight. DETAILS, PAGE C12



JOURNAL & COURIER

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Logan Melin, 6, enjoys a ride in a swing Monday during a therapy session with Megan Mackowiak at Little Star Center, 3922 Mezzanine Drive. Logan's parents moved from Monticello to Lafayette to get her autism treatment. JOHN TERHUNE/JOURNAL & COURIER

A voice for autism

Spectrum disorder shapes family's life, loss and love

By Jessica Contrera
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If Logan Melin could talk, she'd have a lot to say about her six years on Earth.

She might start with her life-long battle with autism. Then, the tragic death of her older sister. Then maybe, just like any other kid, she'd tell you her favorite place to play.

But at least for now, you can't hear Logan saying any of those things. Or anything at all. Logan, like many children on the autism spectrum, is completely nonverbal.

Her family moved to Lafayette from Monticello in 2011 to provide Logan with therapy. Now, a fundraiser they are organizing for her treatment center is quickly establishing them as the face of autism awareness in Greater Lafayette.

But it's only one chapter in a story about their journey with autism spectrum disorder — a story shaped by tragedy, uncertainty and hope.



Lauren Rylee Melin, 5, was killed in a bus crash in 2008. Her family is sponsoring a benefit next month in her memory. PHOTO PROVIDED

THE LAUREN RYLEE MELIN AUTISM BENEFIT

What: A concert to raise money for Little Star Center Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides behavioral therapy for children with autism spectrum disorders.

Who: Five acts, including The Miller Band, Superheat and Nine Pound Gun. Also, Brandon Bowman and Robbie and Molly.

Why: In memory of Lauren Melin, a 5-year-old girl with autism who was killed in a bus crash between Monticello and Logansport in 2008

When: May 25. Doors open at 4 p.m.

Where: Lahr House atrium, 117 N. Fifth St. in Lafayette

Tickets: \$15, available at Java Roaster, Pet Supplies Plus and International Sports Club in Lafayette. Must be 21 to enter. More information and tickets are available online at www.autismawarenessrocks.com.

Parents still have to fight for insurance

By Jessica Contrera
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What day did your child learn what a firefighter is? When did he know what a rake is used for? When did he first remember to hang up his coat?

For most parents, such events would simply blur into the mass of childhood memories.

Clay and Danielle Sheese document, chart and analyze such milestones. Welcome to the life of a parent whose child is on the autism spectrum.

Autism is a group of complex brain development disorders affecting 1 in 50 school-age children, according to recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's a jump from estimated 1 in 88, which the CDC reported just five years ago.

Every action of the Sheeses' 7-year-old son, Jacob, a learner at Little Star Center Inc. in Lafayette, is reported to Jacob's insurance company, Anthem.

That's because Jacob, like most kids at Little Star, has to have his own insurance. And even having that policy doesn't

Lawsuits hint at a suspect in arson at Cox's Pub

Still no arrests, no charges more than 2½ years later

By Sophia Voravong
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Two years and seven months after someone intentionally set fire to Cox's Pub, burning the popular karaoke destination on Lafayette's north end to the ground, no one has been arrested, criminally charged or even publicly identified.

But two civil lawsuits that are pending in Tippecanoe Superior Court 1 point to a possible motive.

The bar's owner, Eric Cox, is suing former employee Julie Burton, insurance agency Mayerstein-Burnell Co. Inc. — better known as MBAH Insurance in Lafayette — and MBAH agent Jeff Clute over claims of negligence and breach of contract.

The lawsuit alleges that Burton obtained an insurance policy through Illinois Casualty Co., with MBAH and Clute as the agent/producer, in August 2010 for Cox's Pub. The policy had a maximum payout of \$265,000.

Cox's Pub was destroyed on Sept. 8, 2010, in a fire that investigators suspect started in the basement of the property at Schuyler Avenue and U.S. 52 North. The building burned for hours, and the blaze was ruled arson.

Replacing the building was estimated to cost more than \$500,000.

"Burton was not an officer or owner of Cox, and MBAH and Clute knew, or in the exercise of reasonable care, should have known such," the lawsuit states.

Cox on Friday referred questions about the accusations to his attorney, Carmel-based Jeff Meunier.

Meunier told the Journal & Courier that he does not comment on pending litigation, but he confirmed that Cox has settled with Illinois Insurance Co. while the claims against Burton, MBAH and Clute remain pending.

Burton's attorney, Carl Sandy, could

See PUB FIRE, Page A6

Purdue preview

Akeem Hunt works on his running style during the Boilers' black-and-gold game. **Sports, B1**



Secular surroundings

Local pastors take theology outside the church for accessibility. **Etc., D1**

BUSINESS B9,10 OBITUARIES C2
FASHION D4 OPINIONS A10,11
LOTTERIES A2 TECHNOLOGY D8



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"It's tough, because you want your kids to have a normal life. But really, it didn't matter. They were beautiful, healthy, and we loved them no matter what."

ROB MELIN



Logan Melin, 6, smiles while playing a Wii video game at Little Star Center Inc. in Lafayette. April is national Autism Awareness Month. PHOTOS BY JOHN TERHUNE/JOURNAL & COURIER

AUTISM

Continued from Page A1

Diagnosis

Before Logan, there was Lauren.

Lauren's autism diagnosis came as a shock to Teresa and Rob Melin, who became parents in 2002.

At 2, Lauren was seeing a speech therapist through First Steps, a state-run program that helps infants who are missing developmental markers. When the therapist said she thought Lauren might be autistic, Teresa was confused.

"I didn't even know anything about autism," she said. "The only thing I could connect it to was the movie 'Rain Man.' That's all I knew."

But soon, they discovered all Lauren's quirks were actually symptoms associated with the autism spectrum. She was extremely prone to sensory overload. She couldn't stand anything tall, such as basketball hoops. She loved to climb on dangerous objects. She hated wearing clothes.

After days of research, Teresa started finding help for Lauren. The Melins even tried alternative therapies, costing upward of \$2,000 and bringing no improvement in their daughter's behaviors.

When Logan was born in 2007, it didn't take long to realize that she too was on the spectrum. Although autism in siblings is common, girls are four to five times less likely to be on the spectrum than boys.

Logan's condition was diagnosed as more extreme than Lauren's.

"It's tough, because you want your kids to have a normal life," Rob said. "But really, it didn't matter. They were beautiful, healthy, and we loved them no matter what."

Tragedy

When Lauren reached kindergarten age in 2008, no school in Monticello could provide for her needs. Twin Lakes School Corp. officials told the Melins that their only option



Logan Melin uses an iPad to communicate with her parents and others because she is nonverbal. She clicks on symbols that indicate what she wants, and the iPad reads them aloud, such as "I want book."

was to send Lauren by bus to Fairview Elementary School in Logansport, which had classrooms that accommodated children with special needs.

"They acted like I was the only parent in the area with an autistic kid," Teresa said. "There was nothing for her in Monticello, but we were really uncomfortable sending her on a bus every day."

Just a month into the school year, on Sept. 27, 2008, Lauren was killed in a crash on her way home from school.

A dump truck, swerving to avoid a motor scooter, clipped the rear of Lauren's school bus, knocking it on its side in the middle of a traffic lane. A second dump truck crashed into the roof of the bus, sending it into a ditch.

The sole survivor on the bus was the driver. Lauren and the three other special-needs children on board were killed on impact.

When Teresa and Rob arrived on the scene, police did not let them close enough to see the bus or the victims.

"I just kept thinking, she won't be able to tell them anything," Teresa said. "They need to know she has autism."

Unfortunately, they didn't need to know.

"Ma'am," an officer told her, "there's nothing left that we can do."

Recovery

Teresa and Rob Melin know they will never get over the loss of their 5-year-old daughter.

As Rob puts it, "A man is not built for that kind of tragedy."

But how could they fall apart, with another young autistic child to care for? So eventually, grief turned into passion, and passion turned into work.

Teresa threw herself into caring for Logan and a third daughter, Blake, who does not have autism. Rob started working extra shifts as an electrician to pay for Logan's therapy. They donated all the money given to them after Lauren's death to her preschool in Monticello and the kindergarten in Logansport to improve services for disabled children. Then they organized a fundraiser that raised \$5,000 for the Indiana Resource Center for Autism.

When it came time for Logan to attend kindergarten, sending her to Logansport was not even considered.

"I will never, ever put my child on a bus again," Teresa said.

The couple decided to leave Monticello, where they had lived most of their lives. They bought a house in Lafayette and an additional insurance plan to

cover intensive treatment for Logan at Little Star Center Inc., a nonprofit autism treatment center that provides Applied Behavior Analysis therapy.

The idea behind the system is to motivate children to learn, communicate and reduce unwanted behaviors through positive reinforcement. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls ABA a "notable treatment" that's become widely accepted among health care professionals.

"Every child's program is based 100 percent on their individual needs," said Mary Rosswurm, executive director at the Lafayette and Carmel centers. "ABA works because it is data-driven. Every single thing the child does, we take data on, and it helps us learn how the child needs to be taught."

Within weeks, the Melins saw improvement in Logan's behavior.

When she makes steps in learning new skills, Logan is rewarded with favorite toys, including a trampoline and a swing. Her blue eyes often are fixed to the pages of a magazine — not to read but to watch her hands play with the pages. Therapists also are helping Logan learn not to take off or chew on her clothes.

Her most remarkable achievement, after potty-training, was learning to use an iPad to communicate. She clicks on symbols that indicate what she wants, and the iPad reads them aloud. "I want book." "I want popcorn." "I want a hug."

Teresa and Rob also are learning what it's like to have a child without autism. Blake now is 3 years old.

And in a way, their attention to their first child hasn't wavered. They continue to memorialize Lauren by trying to give other kids with autism the kind of help she never had. The proceeds from the second benefit event in her memory, which will take place in Lafayette on May 25, will be donated to Little Star Center.

"I know there are so many families whose kids need what they offer," Teresa said. "Anything I can do to help them help kids like mine, I'll do."

ABOUT AUTISM

Autism is a group of complex disorders of brain development. It is considered a spectrum disorder, meaning that children with autism live with varying degrees of difficulties in communication, behavior and social interaction.

Ten years ago, it was estimated that 1 in 150 children had an autism spectrum disorder. Today, that ratio is closer to 1 in 50 children, according to the most recent survey data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Autism is four to five times more common in boys than girls, but is considered to be increasing in both genders.

It still is unclear what causes autism, but explanations typically involve a mix of genetic and environmental factors. Although there is no "cure" for autism, symptoms can be improved with medication and behavioral treatments.

According to Autism Speaks, the world's largest autism advocacy organization, early intensive behavioral intervention can vastly improve learning, communication and social skills of children with autism.

Autism service centers in Greater Lafayette

- » Little Star Center Inc., 765-447-3800
- » Cornerstone Autism Center, 765-838-3547
- » First Steps (kids younger than 3), 765-420-1404
- » The Wabash Center, 765-423-5531