

## Old Town athlete, honor student shares story of overcoming 'bleak diagnosis' of autism



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Connor Archer, a sophomore at Old Town High School, competes in the 1,600-meter run during a track and field meet in Hampden Friday. Archer is a high-functioning autistic student who competes on the school's cross country and indoor and outdoor track teams. [Buy Photo](#)

By Ernie Clark, BDN Staff

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**OLD TOWN, Maine** — Connor Archer knew exactly what he wanted to address when it came time for his presentation to a health class at Old Town High School earlier this year.

Archer introduced the class to autism through anecdotes and information, complete with a slide show.

The sophomore ended his report with what to many might have seemed a stunning admission — that the report was autobiographical.

“Connor was the first one to present his project,” said Allie Ketch, a freshman who was in the class that day. “After he told the story, he told us it was him. A lot of people were crying, and I think I did, too.”

So overwhelming was the response to Archer's presentation that he was asked to make the same presentation to a second health class — and then conducted another seminar on the topic attended by more than 50 other students and faculty members from the school.

“There were a lot of tears, but they were tears of joy that he'd share such a personal story,” said Old Town sophomore Julia Van Steenberghe.

But for Archer, the decision to tell his story wasn't necessarily about self-revelation.

“I'm happy I did it,” he said. “I wanted to educate the community about the amount of work and people it takes to help a child with a disability, but that it can make a difference.”

The presentation was just one more example of how the son of Mike and Jessica Archer is defying the stereotypes associated with the neurological disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors. Mike is the athletic director at Orono High School and Jessica teaches science and math at Orono Middle School.

Archer takes numerous honors-level courses, competes on the OTHS cross country team and as a distance runner on the school's indoor and outdoor track and field squads, plays trumpet in three school bands and has long since surpassed his community service requirement for graduation.

“I didn't know a lot of details before, and then you find out the details and see that what he went through is pretty amazing,” said Old Town sophomore Derek Haas.

“To me Connor is just Connor, but you see how proud he is, how happy he is and that makes you feel good.”

And he's just getting started.

Archer's next project for both giving thanks and self-advocacy will come Sunday when he hosts a fundraising event titled “Courageous Steps” at Victory Field complex on the Old Town High School campus. A one-mile fun walk/run is scheduled for 12:30 p.m. followed by a competitive one-mile run at 1:30. Race-day registration begins at 11 a.m.

Also planned are a variety of children's games and activities (face painting, arts and crafts), a dunk tank, raffles and snacks from noon to 4 p.m. Rain date is May 25.

Proceeds will be donated to two programs that have been instrumental in Archer's personal development, the Green House Nursery School in Milford and the Old Town Elementary School special education department.

“It is a lot of work, but it's coming from the heart,” said Archer, who solicited numerous sponsorships and prizes for the event from throughout the community and continues to accept donations by making checks payable to Old Town High School-Courageous Steps (memo).

“It's a way for me to help people who helped me.”

**‘A pretty bleak diagnosis’**

When Archer was diagnosed with autism at age 3, his odds of having such a productive high school experience weren't great.

He couldn't talk. He couldn't understand other people talking. He couldn't write. And physical tasks as basic as sitting upright in a chair or holding a pencil had to be built up for Archer in the smallest of steps.

“When Connor was diagnosed, autism was a black mark, a pretty bleak diagnosis, the ‘A’ word,” said Lynn Faerber, director of the Green House Nursery School that he attended for 2½ years. “For him to come through that era when we were all just learning about autism the way he did is remarkable, and it's a credit to him and his family.”

The family's persistence began with getting Archer into the Green House school.

“At first they said they couldn't take him because they were full,” said Jessica Archer. “And I said, ‘I'm not leaving until you'll say you'll take him in.’”

It was the first of many efforts she undertook to secure the breadth of assistance the second-oldest of her four children required, including speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy and psychological and community-based services.

“I had to be really persistent,” said Jessica. “I didn't always make friends along the way, but I did it for Connor.”

In addition to the many teachers, therapists and other specialists who supported him, one of Connor Archer's early mentors was Faerber's late husband, Bob. A former police officer at the University of Maine, he took Archer to public events for several years, as well as providing other community-based support that sought to further incorporate the youngster into the world around him.

“It was important for Connor to begin to understand how to develop social skills in the community without mom and dad there,” Lynn Faerber said. “It really got to the point where they were very good friends more than Bob being a mentor.”

Jessica Archer also was determined to provide opportunities for her son to interact with other children, so she reached out to his teachers for the names of pupils they thought would be good choices to ask to a birthday party.

From that grew what she calls the “Core Five,” five girls — Van Steenberghe, Emma Cyr, Peyton Boucher, Zoe Swett and Paisley Lane — who were among the invitees to that initial birthday party and became fixtures at subsequent Halloween parties, Christmas parties and other social events.

“Connor knows that I reached out to all of these girls and he now understands how critical they were to helping him learn how to be a friend,” said Jessica. “For years (really all of elementary school) the ‘core five’ were his safety net and his support system. Through their compassion, patience and acceptance, they taught him how to become a friend and it is because of that foundation that he was able to reach out and make friends with many others.”

While Connor's circle of friends has widened considerably over the years, those early acquaintances remain special.

"It wasn't that I was told [of Connor's autism]," said Van Steenberghe. "I just knew but it didn't matter. Connor was Connor and he's always been a friend to me."

And for Jessica Archer it wasn't just about getting help from others. The middle school science and math teacher went back to school herself, earning a master's degree in special education and a certificate of advanced study in special education and literacy in order to provide her son even more one-on-one assistance long after the school day ended.

"I wanted to learn how to teach him," she said, "but he's taught me so much more and made me the teacher I am today."

## **The self-advocate**

**Now Connor Archer is teaching others that while autism remains a formidable challenge for millions of kids around the globe, it's a challenge to be faced not with passivity, but with confidence.**

"Connor is a big piece of breaking through what people misunderstand about autism, that kids can be involved and they're not always on the outside," said Faerber. "This is a kid in the middle of everything, and not only is he in the middle of everything, but he's teaching the other kids in a way only Connor could do it."

"Connor shares stories from the arena of kids for whom typical things aren't always typical, and to his credit he's got the guts to do it. He's just a remarkable kid."

Archer will continue to live with the challenges of autism, but he also lives with a fairly unique perspective for a 16-year-old, that of fully appreciating who has helped him grow and acknowledging the responsibility to return that support, whether it's by organizing a yard sale, building a garden, assisting with the school website or just offering a smile to a newcomer on the cross country team.

Courageous Steps is just one more way of paying those who have helped him back, and of paying his support of others with autism forward.

"Because they have helped me, it's coming from the heart," said Archer. "I want to help make sure other kids have the same chance."