

Ronald: To life!

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

Ronald Autry has always been called Ronald, never Ron or Ronnie, during the years that we have known him. We have spent time with his family in Vermont and visited them in Des Moines; we have spent hours doing jigsaw puzzles with Ronald, who is a master of puzzles. We are the fumblers who lose pieces, which he ardently seeks until he finds. As he grew up, we often observed his parents' mix of frustration and hope.

Until I was involved with Emory University faculty in a project on "The Child in Religion, Law and Society," I would have called the now 24-year-old Ronald an autistic child. No more. Colleagues at Emory have pledged to look at the whole child first, and only then to deal with the problems each child has. To these professionals, the child is not an autistic child, but an individual mystery, rich in potential.

Ronald has been surrounded by firm and loving parents. His mother, Sally Pederson, has been lieutenant governor of Iowa, while his father, Jim Autry, after serving in top management at Meredith Corporation (publisher of *Better Homes and Gardens*), has written poetic musings and advice for managers—including my favorite: *For Love and Profit* (Morrow).

The story of Ronald's achievements and of the enormous effort—social, cultural and most of all political—that a committed group of supporters made to help him is told in a recent article in the *Des Moines Register*. Ronald graduated from National-Lewis University in Evanston, Illinois, where devoted experts have the patience and skill to help people with autism. At National-Lewis, Ronald learned to take El trains, love Greek mythology and tend to all details of his personal life. He now drives a Scion XP, whatever that is, and has taken 45 hours of flying lessons, with 80 take-offs and landings in a Cessna 172. He has his own apartment, a job and a girlfriend.

Ronald also serves as a case study whose career might inspire others. Why, asked his parents, shouldn't such education be made available to families who cannot afford all that it took to get Ronald on his feet? Why can't state-supported higher education play a bigger part in helping young people with developmental disorders

make their way? Have citizens moved far enough from the time when children with autism were institutionalized and given up as people without a future?

Jim and Sally knew enough about faith and poetry and politics to combine hope with “fixing” and promoting. Recently the University of Iowa ventured a program called REACH, “Realizing Educational and Career Hopes.” It needed start-up money, especially for scholarship funds, and Jim and Sally found \$1.4 million for its beginnings.

Asked what REACH will offer, director Dennis C. Harper says simply, “A chance at life. Expectations make all the difference in the world.” Children across the nation need such a chance.

Years ago Ronald’s parents and I talked about how children like Ronald have difficulties with anomalies, paradoxes and ambiguities. They are church-goers, and that year Ronald was having trouble with the idea of Christ’s resurrection. Death is death and life is life to a child with autism. That is how things work. Hearing stories of the Ronalds of the world, we understand that what once was considered death-dealing need not be so. Here’s to life! And here’s to Ronald. I for one am ready to fly with him in that Cessna.