



Edmonton Examiner.com—February 16, 2011

## He's one of the boys

*Kindergarten student fitting in with his classmates despite disabilities*



KEVIN MAIMANN Examiner Staff

Carson Masse, left, shares a laugh with friend Hannah Miller in their kindergarten class at north-side Beacon Heights school last week. Masse, who suffers from severe disabilities, has been integrated into mainstream schooling through the Getting Ready for Inclusion Today program.

## One of the boys

GRIT program helps disabled student interact with classmates. See Examiner Extra.



Kevin Maimann  
In Your Community

Carson Masse is a little bit different from his kindergarten classmates.

Born with a chromosomal disorder, Carson is unable to speak, is tube fed, and suffers from global developmental delay.

He is still one of the boys.

Through the tireless work of his family, school staff, and the provincially-funded GRIT (Getting Ready for Inclusion Today) program, Carson doesn't miss a beat at Beacon Heights school.

"Carson's expressions are not typical, but there's no question he's excited on the way to school when his legs stiffen in his seat,"

says his mom, Shyla Masse. It just fills him with excitement."



**I didn't know if he would live long enough to get here."**

— Shyla Masse

GRIT has worked with Carson for two years, using a team consisting of an occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech and language pathologist, and teacher Maggie Gibson.

Through specialized equipment like sensory items, chew toys, supportive seating and voice output communication devices, GRIT and Beacon Heights have integrated Carson into the mainstream at school. The benefits have been immense. Shyla says her son has been more engaging, is eating better, and has made huge gains in his eye contact since starting kindergarten last fall.

### ON HIS OWN TWO FEET

Incredibly, he has also left his wheelchair and learned to walk—something Shyla never dreamed possible.

"We went from wheeling him in at the beginning of this year. Now he walks into the school each day," she says. "We go see the fish first and then we walk all the way down the end of the hall and meet in the boot room with all of his peers."

Carson's transition has been eased by his friend Hannah Miller, who he met in preschool and now attends the same kindergarten class. Teacher Shannon

Kulchisky and developmental specialist Lisa Shorten have tailored classroom instruction to always include Carson, and to foster positive attitudes among the other students.

Carson's classmates have taken a shine to him, inviting him to play dates on the weekend and never missing a chance to lend him a hand in class.

To Beacon Heights principal John Holmes, this is the greatest triumph.

"Traditionally, when I look at elementary students, and I have two seven-year-olds myself—developmentally, generally, there's quite an egocentrism at this age. Everything is about me and my little sphere, and the impact is one me," he says.

"And what I see with these kids . . . They are so much more developmentally mature."

Parents of the other students have been thrilled with the learning experience their kids have been afforded by interacting with Carson. It's something Shyla takes to heart.

"That feels really good from a parent's perspective," She says. "He hasn't been left out of one birthday invitation yet this year." Beacon Heights is one of 15 Edmonton schools implementing this inclusion pilot program as part of Alberta Education's Setting the Direction initiative.

To continue its move toward inclusion for disabled students, the north-side school is building ramps and elevators, and outfitting its washrooms.

### 'I WAS AFRAID TO DREAM'

The experience has been life changing for Shyla.

Before she got involved with GRIT, the loving mother not only feared her son might wind up institutionalized, she feared he might not live to see his first day of kindergarten.

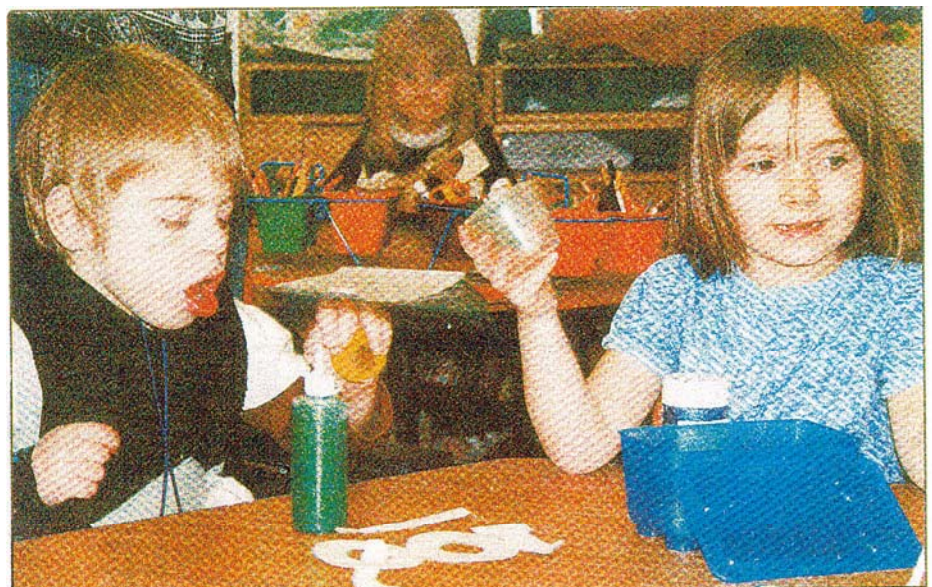
Now she envisions a day when he graduates, with his classmates, his friends. "I didn't know if he would live long enough to get here," she says. "I was afraid to dream. Now I see my son with a cap and gown.

"And going clubbing with his buddies after, too."

GRIT is holding its Hope and Harmony fundraiser Feb. 26 at Royal Alberta Museum in order to raise money for specialized equipment for children aged two to five with developmental disabilities.

The fundraiser will feature classical music, desserts, and a silent auction of professionally-framed children's artwork. Tickets are available by calling 780-454-9910 or emailing [gritprog@gritprogram.com](mailto:gritprog@gritprogram.com)

**For more information, visit [gritprogram.com](http://gritprogram.com)**



KEVIN MAIMANN Examiner Staff

Carson Masse, left, has fun with friend Hannah Miller in their kindergarten class at north-side Beacon Heights school last week. Masse, who suffers from severe disabilities, has been integrated into mainstream schooling through the Getting Ready for Inclusion Today program.