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Aaron Erdman, a student at Century College who has learning disabilities, found a computers program helped him develop his communication skills.

Finding a niche in computers

BY CC TIMES, Published October 27, 2010

In the words of his mother, Aaron Erdman has advanced "light years" since he first started taking classes at **Century College** (Minnesota).

Diagnosed with autism and later Asperger's Syndrome, Erdman has blossomed as a student in the information and telecommunication technology program at Century. Last summer, he completed a challenging internship at the University of Minnesota Supercomputing Institute and earned a glowing review from his supervisor.

A talented computer student, Erdman is on track to graduate from Century this spring. His main challenge has been developing social communication skills.

"He was always very, very smart—we knew that," said his mother, Mary Jo Erdman. "But it's been so neat to see Aaron grow in his social skills."

Erdman, 22, started in the Intermediate School District 916 program WELS (Work Experience Life Skills.) He began taking graphic design

and then computer support classes in the 916 Career and Tech Center, the high school program at Century, from 2007 to 2009. He then became a full-time Century student.

Dave Paehlke, who teaches computer classes for both 916 and Century, said Erdman has made great progress in his academics and social development.

"He's been doing things that network administrators do on the job—solving computer and networking problems," Paehlke said. "Computers are his life. He can take a computer apart and put it back together again, no problem."

Paehlke said when Erdman first came into his class, he had a hard time keeping eye contact with people as he spoke to them, and various things upset him. But he gradually became more comfortable working with his peers in small groups and helping staff members with their computer issues.

"It is part of our curriculum to work with customers verbally and in writing," said Paehlke, who had Erdman work as an intern in one of his classes. "You can't just sit behind a monitor."

Erdman said he has enjoyed all his classes at Century, earning As and one B. After he receives his associate in science degree, he plans to transfer to the University of Minnesota (U of M) next fall.

Art Erdman, Aaron's father and a mechanical engineering professor at U of M, said he is amazed by Aaron's progress and his growing computer knowledge.

"He is so deep into computers that sometimes I can't keep up with what he is talking about," he said.

Erdman said having Aaron work with teachers who genuinely care about him has made all the difference.

"I attribute his success to his teachers and his peers at Century College," Erdman said. "I am so proud that he has overcome his natural tendency to be shy and get upset. He has gained so much confidence. All students have gifts. We just have to build on them."

Aaron also has some advice to give to students with similar disabilities: don't give up.

"Things may be hard, but if you work at it, you can succeed," the younger Erdman said. "If you think it's overwhelming, just ask for help."

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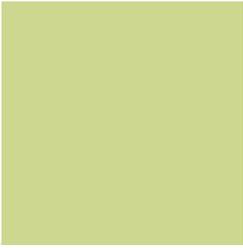
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