

"I spent a lot of time by myself," says Joey Hersholt (outside his home in Los Angeles). "It was depressing."

AN AUTISTIC BOY'S JOURNEY

CAN JOEY MAKE A FRIEND?

Going to the movies, hanging out with pals —Joey Hersholt, 17, never knew the simple rituals teens take for granted. Then he entered a program at UCLA—and life began to change

Photographs by DAVID BUTOW



Joey (with PEERS classmates) "didn't understand social cues," says his teacher. But in class "he thrived."

Joey Hersholt is like a lot of boys his age—long hair, glued to his iPod, tends to mumble. In other ways he's unlike nearly every other 17-year-old at William Howard Taft High School in Los Angeles. There isn't a single pennant or poster or trophy in his bedroom. He went to exactly one party his first three years of high school. And for most of his life he didn't have the one thing almost everyone can count on—a friend. Even his parents could hardly get a word out of him. "I just wanted to be able to talk to him," says his mother, Diana, 47. "About anything."

Joey, a bright kid with piercing blue eyes, has a mild form of autism. Like many with the disorder, Joey found it nearly impossible to start conversations, tell a joke, make appropriate eye contact. "I couldn't fit in," he says. His low point came three years ago, when his parents switched him from a special-education class—where the kids had more severe disabilities—to Taft, a mainstream high school. He began struggling

with obsessive-compulsive disorder, washing his hands until they bled and pulling out his eyelashes. He told his parents he thought about killing himself. Therapy and an antidepressant helped him overcome his OCD, but "the problem was still socialization," says Diana, a graphic designer. "He never laughed or talked. It was devastating to see him so alone."

And so, this summer, his parents

nearly four months on the UCLA campus. But would the program be enough to finally pull him out of his shell?

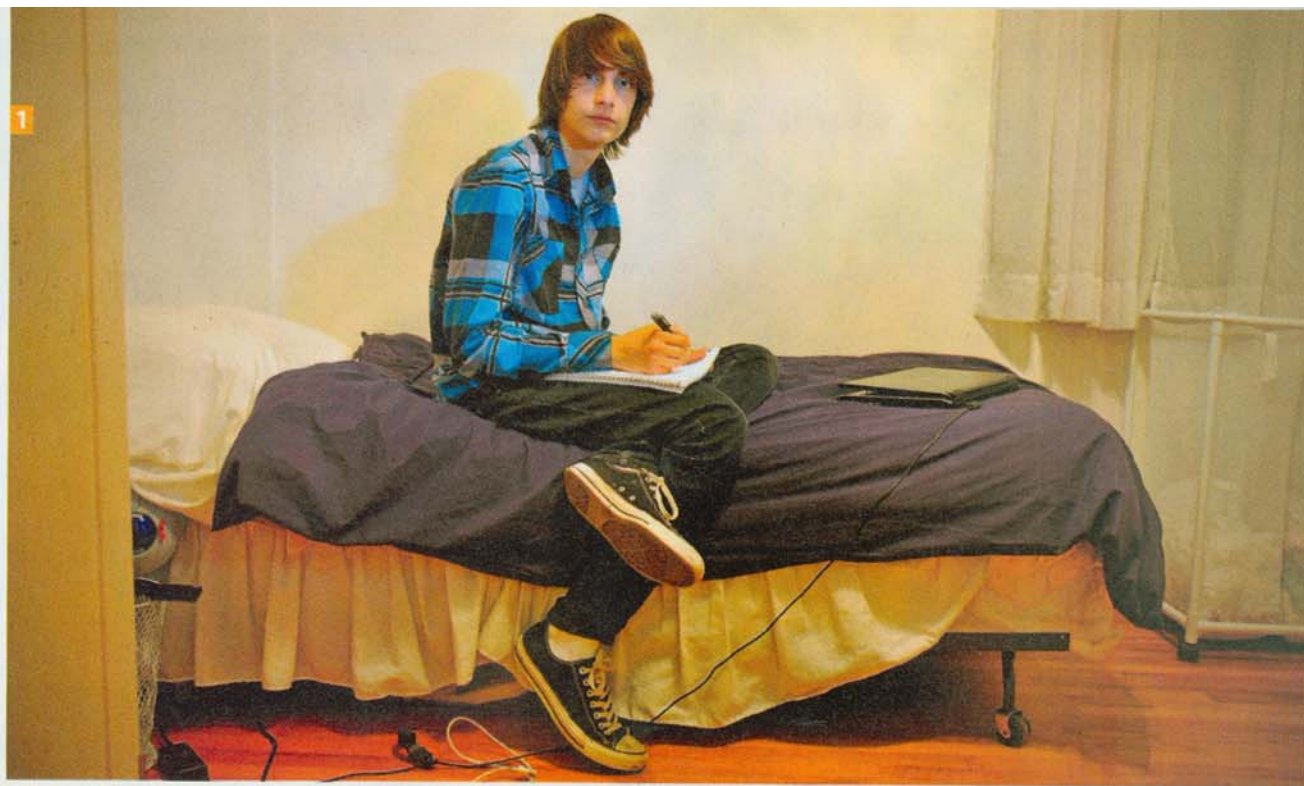
First Class: May 25 Joey arrives at a conference room, one of 11 teens on the autism spectrum in the class. Wearing an untucked plaid shirt and jeans, he sits expressionless. "We're going to practice things, make calls, talk about hobbies," Laugeson says, before asking, "What makes a

“Before, it was awkward. Now I can enter a conversation” —JOEY

enrolled Joey in a cutting-edge class, one of a handful across the country. The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS), run by UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, addresses a hallmark feature of autism: an inability to "anticipate how people think and feel in social situations," says Elizabeth Laugeson, 38, a clinical psychologist and cofounder of the program. Joey attended once-a-week sessions for

friend?" Joey slowly raises his hand: "Someone you care about?" She marks a point by his name on a board. For the first time, Joey smiles.

Phone Call: June 4 At home Joey is nervous about his homework: a phone call with Marc, 16, from his class. The conversation starts slowly but picks up when they discover they both like to write. "Maybe I can see your writing," says Joey. "I'll show you things I wrote." He smiles throughout the call. "I could be friends with



1. "He wants to do normal things now," his mom, Diana, says of Joey (in his bedroom). "He's making plans." 2. Joey bowling with a new friend. "My weekends are better," he says. "And my bowling game is good."



“Alone is okay for a couple of hours. But not all the time” —JOEY

Marc,” he tells his mom. Says Diana: “I think this is a breakthrough.”

Sixth Class: June 30 Today’s lesson: how to ease into conversation. Joey and a classmate, Nick, 16, practice finding something in common. Joey shows off his iPod, Nick pulls out his Yu-Gi-Oh! cards. “I have 2,000 of them,” Nick says. “I had them, but my mom threw them out,” says Joey. They go back and forth for five minutes—a real talk.

Ninth Class: July 28 How to tease like a teen: here, it’s a learned skill. Joey has been practicing and reels off rejoinders—whatever; so what?; your point is? Then he rolls his eyes and nails it with a sarcastic, “And?” “That one’s yours,” says Laugeson.

Mall Trip: Aug. 14 Joey has been asked to organize an outing. He is anxious but texts several kids he knows from high school. One by one, they agree to join him for a trip to see the film *Inception*. “It was fun,” says Joey, clearly pleased he pulled it off. He later signs up for a bowling league with Nick, who is becom-

ing a real buddy. “I had him over to the house,” says Joey. “We played Ping Pong.”

Graduation: Sept. 15 The teens mark their final class with a party. Joey “has blossomed,” says Laugeson. Others made strides, too, though not all came as far as Joey. He keeps working on his new social skills at Taft, going to a Halloween party (“I was an anime character”) and shocking his parents by auditioning for a school play (he didn’t get the part but is planning on taking an acting class). “Joey has turned a corner,” says Diana. “He smiles all the time now.” And his bedroom shelf is no longer bare—on it sits a bowling trophy.

Joey still has bad days, to be sure,

and there are still times when he withdraws into silence. But unlike a few months ago—when he’d lock himself in his room and watch YouTube for hours—he now has people he can talk to. There is Nick, his pal from PEERS, and another teen with mild autism who is in his bowling league. And then there is the girl he recently met at school. “Her name is Kiku,” he says. “We had lunch. She asked me for my phone number and I said okay.” And while he’s not sure who he’s going to ask yet, Joey is even hoping to go to his school prom. “I feel less different now,” he says. “I have a lot of things to talk about with my friends.”

Lorenzo Benet and Alex Tresniowski