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# Reflections . . .

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## The Gospel According to Chris

By Judy Horton

My husband Jerry and I began Down Home Ranch almost 17 years ago. The baby of our family, Kelly, had been born with Down syndrome seven years before, and we'd immediately started looking for the perfect place for her to live when she got out of high school. We didn't find it, so we built it.

It took a very long time to get going, and we weren't able to welcome our first residents until November of 2001. After that things continued to develop slowly because of 9/11 and the downturn of the economy. In fact, things were iffy enough that Jerry and I decided to staff the first residence house—Gabriel—because frankly we didn't have enough money to hire anybody else to do it.

We stayed in Gabriel House for over four years. Toward the end of our tenure Chris joined us in the house.

We'd known Chris since he was a toddler. Like our Kelly, he has Down syndrome. He'd come to camp for years and had a reputation as a real character. He is funny, challenging, endearing, and exasperating. He doesn't hear well, plus sometimes he doesn't really want to hear well. He'll lock onto an objective like a heat-seeking missile and you can spend the rest of the day trying to change his mind. You'll seldom win.

Chris did not have much church experience when he came to us. We only had our family and the guys living with us on the Ranch, and we all went to the local Catholic church together. Chris loves a show—any kind of show—and he was fascinated by the rituals of the Mass. His eyes were riveted on the various players in the cast—the priest, the deacon, the acolytes, the chalice bearers. He loved the pageantry, flags, banners, and incense.

One Monday I was sitting with Chris and Miles, a longtime resident volunteer, and Chris started trying to tell us something. We couldn't make it out, and then Chris picked up a cracker from his plate. He said some words and lifted it up. He then picked up his glass of milk with two hands and did the same.

Tears welled up in my eyes. "He's doing the Mass," I said to Miles. Chris then put down the glass and made the sign of the Cross (or his version thereof) over Miles and me and I recognized the words "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

With the permission of Chris' family, I bought a Bible study for people with mental handicaps and taught him about baptism. He wanted to be baptized, so we made arrangements with the priest. Chris' confession consisted of Father George asking him, "Chris, do you want to be a good boy?" To which Chris replied, "Awesome," which was good enough for Father George.

Chris has continued attending church. At home he loves to dress up as Jesus and act out the entire Easter story. At Christmas he plays the part of Joseph with great fidelity and attention to detail. On Sundays he's careful to get a dollar out of his wallet to take with him for the collection plate. A more faithful Catholic there has never been.

Today Chris' housemother Denise forwarded me an email. One of our new staff members that Chris really likes, Casey, received an email from him that she couldn't decipher. She didn't respond to that one so he sent her another with the same message: church booby deasd boolk life sunday.

In frustration Casey forwarded the message to Denise for translation. Denise (who knows Chris very well) replied: Church, body, bread, blood, life, Sunday.

In other words, the Gospel according to Chris.