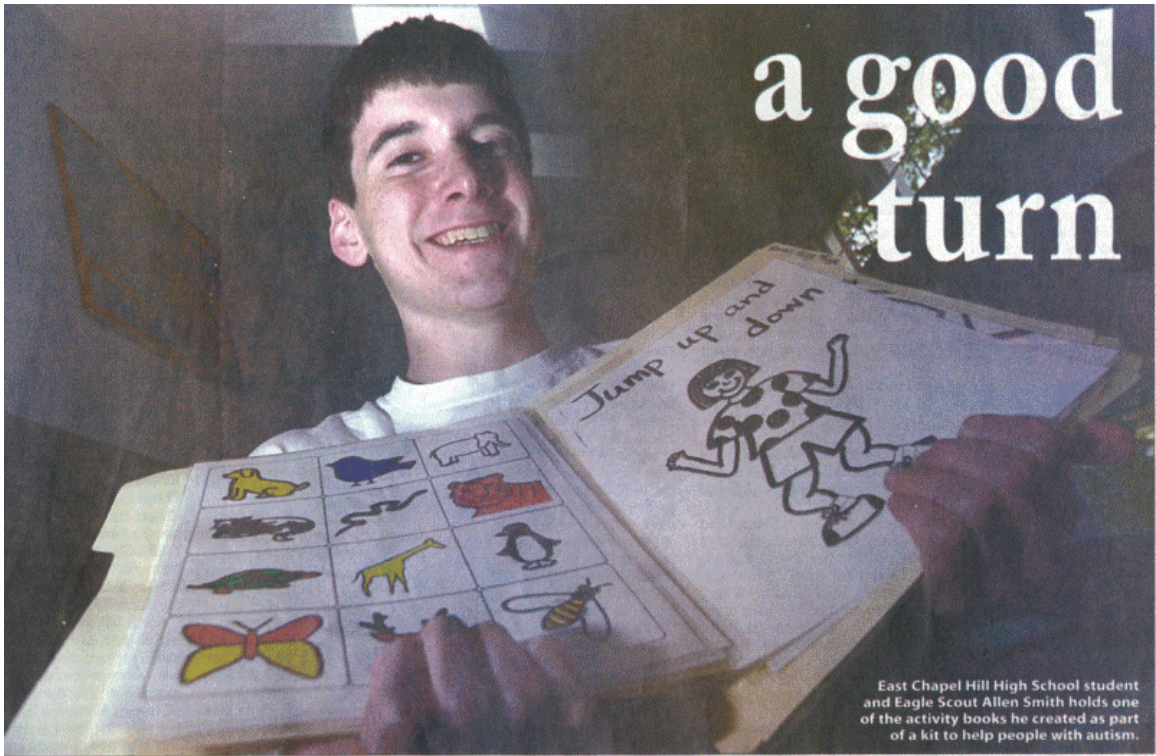


OUR TOWN

PEOPLE & PLACES

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a good turn

East Chapel Hill High School student and Eagle Scout Allen Smith holds one of the activity books he created as part of a kit to help people with autism.

Staff photos by Jon Gardner

Boy Scout earns Eagle Scout badge with unusual project: a kit that helps children with autism learn basic skills.

BY JONNELLE DAVIS
Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL - Allen Smith spent the better part of his weekends this past winter cutting shapes out of cardboard, drawing figures, and cutting and pasting numbers and letters of the alphabet. That chore not only earned him his Eagle Scout badge on Sunday, it also will help some autistic children learn basic skills.



The kit consists of numerous activities and comprehension tasks that fit neatly into a plastic tub.

Smith, a senior at East Chapel Hill High School, constructed several home teaching kits containing materials for learning activities for autistic children as his community service project to earn his Eagle Scout badge, the highest achievement for a Boy Scout.

Autism is a neurological disorder that affects about one in every 500 children and results in delayed language, social and other developmental skills. Governor Mike Easley and the Autism Society of North Carolina have proclaimed April Autism Awareness Month.

The project wasn't what Smith first had in mind to earn his badge. In fact, he had been working for almost a year on a plan to build a footbridge on a nature trail in Durham. When that project fell through, he got the idea to make the kits from his scout advisor, whose daughter is autistic. Smith, who knew a few people with autism, did some reading to prepare him on the disorder for the project.

"It looked like it would be a lot more helpful", said Smith, a member of Troop 820. "I didn't really know a whole lot about autism when I started. You learn a lot about autism through making the kits, too".

Smith spent 500 hours in his garage at home between December and February with some other troop members who volunteered to help him. The Scouts made 10 kits for beginning learners and 30 intermediate kits.

Most of the items in the kits were made with materials easily found around the house, but their function for children with autism is much more complex. The kits include hands-on projects that help autistic children develop fine motor and cognitive skills.

One activity called "Simon Says" includes drawings that demonstrate a specific action, such as "clap hands", and the words written above the picture, so the child can identify the action through the image and by reading and learning the words.

Other activities include matching words with the appropriate pictures and identifying shapes and other objects.

"They're basic tasks, (but) the kits themselves took a while to build", Smith said. "The whole first couple of weeks I gathered materials. I mass-produced each activity".

Smith raised the money to buy the materials he could not gather on his own. Smith got help identifying the activities and how to make them from the Chapel Hill TEACCH center, which provides services for children and adults with autism.

Ann Palmer, the center's parent support coordinator, said Smith's project filled a need. The center initiated the idea of the home learning kits in September 1998 to give parents a way to work on skills with their children at home while they were on the waiting list to receive TEACCH services.

Families can receive the kits on loan from the center and use them as long as they wish. Thus far, 65 families have used the kits.

Parent volunteers and staff members at the center made the first few kits themselves, but Palmer said they had recently recognized the need for an advanced-level kit for children who were beyond the beginning skills. She said this is the first time the Chapel Hill center has had someone from the outside community offer to make the kits.

"We had decided early on that we needed another kit," Palmer said. "It's a huge job. It was a lifesaver for us."

Many of the activities in the kits include pictures and drawings, which Palmer says is important because most autistic children learn better visually. Palmer said the kits allow parents to work at home with their children every day in a structured environment, which also helps the children in the learning process.

"They learn differently in they don't understand as much the spoken word", Palmer said. "We encourage the parents to work with them in a certain place each time. We're teaching them something that may be hard for them but in a structured environment".

Mary Hopson used a kit for about three months with her son James, after he was diagnosed with autism at age 2.

Hopson said using the kits really helped James, and it helped her and her husband feel like they had some sort of control over the disorder. The kits, she said, made it easy for her to help James with the skills he needed.

"You really wanted to (use them) because he responded so well", said Hopson. "When he got into preschool, he was very comfortable with the work. The structure keeps them focused, and the home teaching kit is showing you how to give structured tasks for them to complete".

Before returning the kit to the center, Hopson made some duplicates of some of the materials so she could continue working with James on her own.

Alisa Huff also used a beginning kit for about six months with her son Richie. "I think it was actually very helpful", Huff said. "It was another teaching method. I think it was a big help that they had something like that".

In addition to making the kits, Smith has helped parents make their own. He wrote instructions on how to construct each activity in the kits so that they may be posted on the TEACCH Web site.

Smith said completing the project has capped off his seven years as a Boy Scout. He said making the kits was more rewarding than building a bridge would have been.

"I can't see more than 10 people walking across (the bridge)." Smith said. "(The kits) will have a much better impact on the community."

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