



# Behind the Magic



MARY CARIOLA CHILDREN'S CENTER • REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

2007 - 2008  
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*On the cover:  
Five-year-old Olivia is  
intrigued with the fiber optic  
strands in the Snoezelen  
Room. It is a place where  
children achieve the  
unexpected. Learn more,  
starting on page 3.*

*Photos by  
Lauren Termini*



**M**agic happens every day at Mary Cariola with the help of science, creativity, dedication and hard work. Staff members leave no stone unturned—no method untried—in their search for ways to help each child learn and move forward. This report looks behind the scenes at how the magic happens—as children with disabilities, for whom ordinary daily tasks can be major challenges, take tiny steps and big leaps.


Mary Cariola began with a classroom of six children in 1949. An extraordinary staff has always been the foundation of the agency's success. Today 468 full-time employees, representing many disciplines, work tirelessly to build better lives for children with complex disabilities.

Mary Cariola Children's Center is unusual because of the many services offered under one roof. Only a handful of similar agencies exist across the nation. Fifty school districts in our region send 425 children to our Day Program because they are unable to find an appropriate special classroom within the district or BOCES. More than 550 children from a 10-county region are served here each year in all programs.

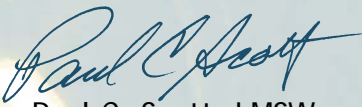
This report focuses on only a few of the many therapies we offer, and puts a face on our incredible staff and the beautiful children we work with every day.

Come explore the magic.



  
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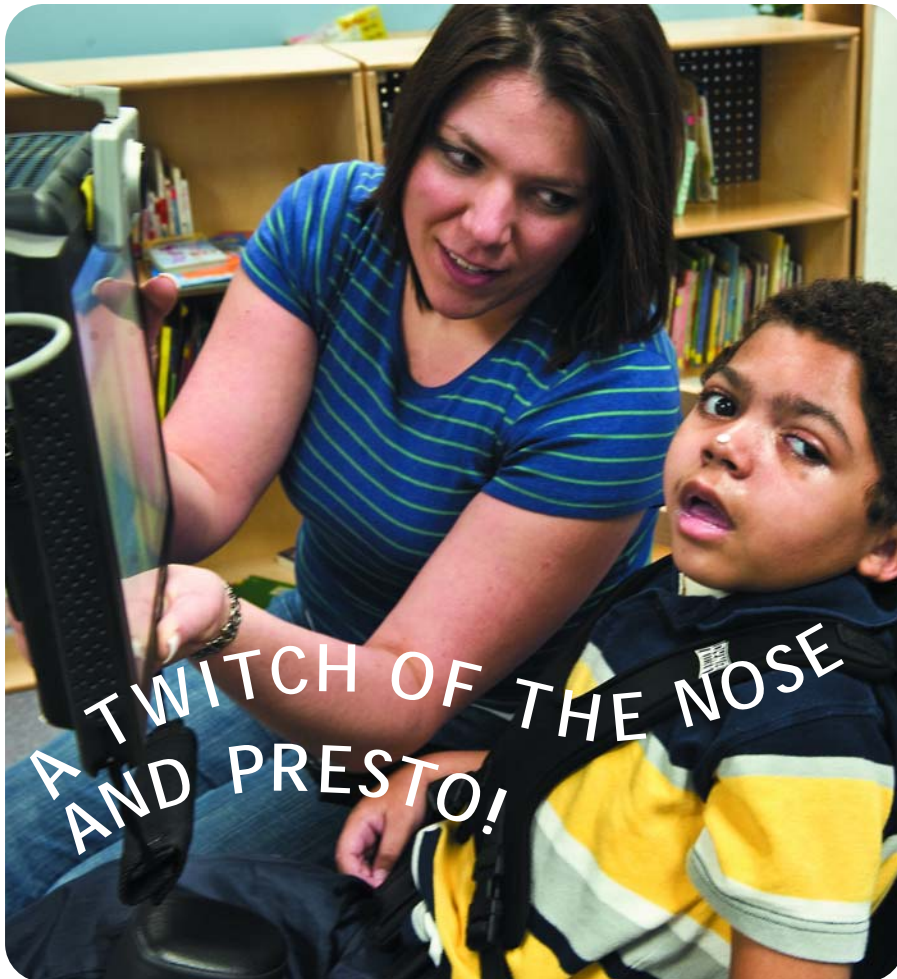
**W**e start with light," says Joan Smith, sitting in her office next to Classroom 8. Half of the 12 preschoolers in the afternoon class are legally blind. Joan, teacher of the visually impaired, is in the classroom regularly.

While there, she often has a light box, an object foreign to most. Mary Cariola has several of them, because 28 Cariola kids are visually impaired. The children are able to distinguish objects more readily when they are illuminated by the light box. Pompoms take on a new shimmer, rainbow drawings brighten.

"This is my main tool," said Joan, who has been with the agency for 26 years. "I use these to give the kids a strong visual target. For some, our goal is to have them sustain their gaze for three seconds. Kids make choices by gazing."

One of the most memorable gazes for Joan came from Ronnie, one of the preschoolers in Classroom 8. He is four years old, and Joan has worked closely with him since he was an infant. She was with him the day he recognized his parents for the first time, at age two.

"They walked across the room and he followed them with his eyes and started smiling"—a moment treasured by a teacher who helps light the world for her students.



**W**ith the twitch of his nose, nine-year-old Jonah can interact with the world around him.

"Because of their disabilities, some children never get the chance to say their first words. Technology has opened up a whole new world for students who don't have the ability to communicate," says Paris Leibenguth, supervisor of the Communication Department at Mary Cariola.

One of the most sophisticated systems uses infra-red technology. A small infra-red dot on Jonah's nose serves as a sensor to activate a computerized voice output system. It's versatile and can also be operated with a finger or by the touch of a switch with a knee or the head. Jonah aims the beam at an icon to answer yes or no questions and then hits another one to tell staff members he wants them to sing a favorite song, "The Three Little Monkeys."

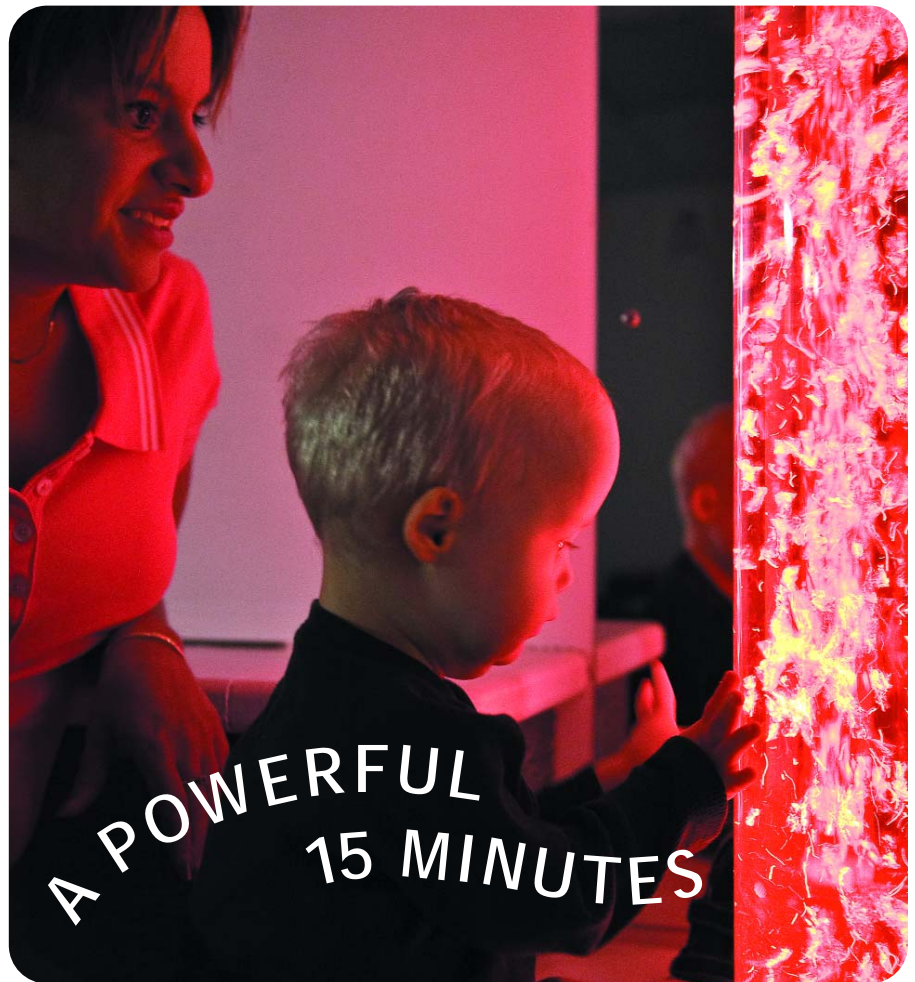
It is a major breakthrough for a non-verbal child who has considerable cognitive skills but limited mobility. The technology has enormous potential to broaden Jonah's communication and greatly enhance his life.

Giving every child the chance to say they want something, or "I love you," is part of a day's work at Mary Cariola.

**T**he Snoezelen Room is a magical place where first words are spoken, colors are identified, and Mary Cariola students achieve the unexpected.

Students choose their activities from a variety of stimulating and relaxing sensations. With the touch of a button they can change the color in the big tube of floating bubbles, wrap themselves in multi-colored fiber optic strands or watch lights dance around the room from a mirrored ball. A big hammock swinging above a twinkling rug is another favorite. The Dutch combined the words “sniff” and “doze” to name this relaxation therapy.

“It is absolutely meant for the pleasure of a child,” explained Preschool Education Supervisor Laurie Goeggelman. “There are no demands placed on the student, which differs from other therapies. We’ve seen that children can function much better after a session in the Snoezelen Room. We have heard children speak for the first time and often that word is WOW,” Laurie said. “When other therapies don’t get the results we are looking for, Snoezelen has been the answer.”



**T**herapist Laurie Keough doesn’t teach music, she teaches non-musical skills through music—things like sharing, taking turns, sequencing, imitating sounds, and recognizing colors. This is the setting where many children first vocalize. “It is so rewarding to see kids go to a different plane” she says. “I hear what we’ve done in music being sung in the classrooms and hallways every day. I love what I do.” Parents love it, too.

“What struck us immediately at Mary Cariola was the music,” says parent Christa Knaak. Jordan is very much a musical kid. He’s motivated by music; his first words came from music. To change his temperament we use music. He was behind in all areas, but he is catching up. The staff has tapped into his strengths and that is huge.”

“The staff is amazing. They have come up with many things that I had not even heard of to be able to get Spenser to grow,” explains Spenser’s mother, Shawnette Dingle. “They noticed that music is a strength. I didn’t know that he was talented on the piano. He loves it. It is very calming to him and very soothing to our household.”

The generosity of donors who support the Mary Cariola Children's Center Annual Giving Campaign and donors who designate MCCC during the annual United Way Campaign are reflected in this report. On behalf of the Board of Directors, staff and students, thank you for your generosity and thoughtful expression of support with your gifts.

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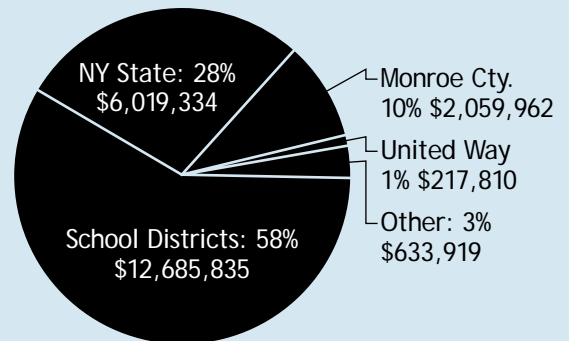
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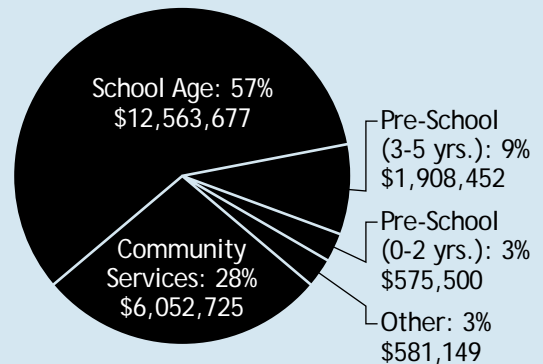
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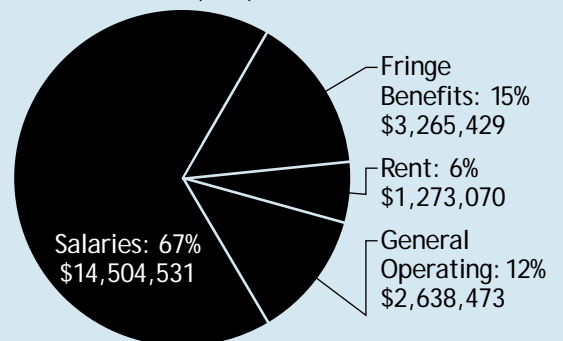
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## UNLOCKING THE MYSTERIES

We try to find what unlocks each child's potential . . . the mysteries they have." That's how supervisor Heather LeFrois describes the challenge facing her 18-member staff of occupational and physical therapists. "How can we best meet each individual child's needs? What will excite them, what will motivate them? The staff uses both traditional methods and the newest innovations."

From our earliest days in infancy, what we hear, see, touch, taste, and smell can either be very calming, stimulating or upsetting. Research has shown that the concept of calming an infant by swaddling has a strong impact, especially for children with sensory challenges. Physical and occupational therapists use a variation of this principle. Putting a special compression vest on a child creates a feeling of calm and internal organization because of the consistent pressure around the torso. Vests with weights give consistent deep pressure to the shoulders, like the feeling we get from an arm around our shoulder. This helps foster a sense of organization and groundedness.

Swinging is another activity that can play an important role in improving children's alertness. "Finding what works is exciting," Heather says. "It's like putting a puzzle together."

Like all 17-year-olds, Devin likes being independent. Therapy dog Katie gives him a strong sense of independence, and much more.

"It's a special friendship," says Dawn Sweetman, one of Devin's teacher aides. "It builds his confidence because it's something that he can do by himself and control."

Three days a week, Devin takes the dog for a walk. That may sound ordinary, but walks with Katie help Devin in extraordinary ways.

Katie's leash encourages Devin to use his hand and develop his grip. He is able to grip the leash tightly, strengthening his forearm. When he brushes Katie, he uses muscles he otherwise would not. Devin becomes more vocal when Katie is around. Always social, Devin has more hallway conversations when he's with Katie, since other kids and staff often stop to chat.

Dog-lovers know that one of the wonderful, simple pleasures in life is walking the dog. But many don't know what a walk can do for a teenager like Devin.



## IT'S MORE THAN A WALK

**T**hese cubbies hold the answer to what's coming next. Nine-year-old "Louis" was anxious and frustrated during the school day, repeatedly asking, "What's next?" Because he is legally blind, Louis could not see the picture cues that inform classmates of the daily schedule. A team tackled the problem and came up with a new system, created by the Mary Cariola's special Adaptive Workshop.

They built 28 little cubbies with doors. Each cubby holds an object cue representing different parts of the school day. Louis immediately recognizes the oversized letter "J" for "job," and knows it is time to get milk. He has mastered the system with its movable handle to indicate which cubby is next. The workshop's creation, not available in any catalog, is a success. To know what's coming next brings a feeling of independence to a child who sees with his hands.

Headphones are another therapeutic technique that cut down on distractions and help Louis focus on the person who is working with him.

**D**an Bock molds wood, plastic and metal into equipment and devices that help child or a classroom succeed. He and co-worker Jim Dentinger create everything from the simple to the complex. Their work is in every classroom and hallway.





Seven-year-old Luis and his five pals in Room 15 can't wait for physical education class. Despite reminders from staff that it is not a contest, they are eager to see who can do it better and faster!

"The boys put so much effort and energy into the activities that by the time PE is over, they are calmer and seem to be more focused for the next task in the classroom," according to their teacher, Elizabeth Bauman. "They all look forward to it and that's all they talk about the entire day when it's on their schedule."

At Mary Cariola, physical education classes are adjusted to fit the needs of children who may have mobility or balance issues, be legally blind, have short attention spans or other challenges. Adaptations may include increasing the ball size, having a larger net for the ball to go through, or decreasing distance between bases. "Students love to play games with each other," says PE teacher Tammy Henderson. "It's all about moving, having fun and learning. Being able to work with others in a group setting is a big accomplishment."

Ben has a fixation with glass and used to break windows and punch walls. But things are changing, thanks to the consistent and creative staff of Mary Cariola.

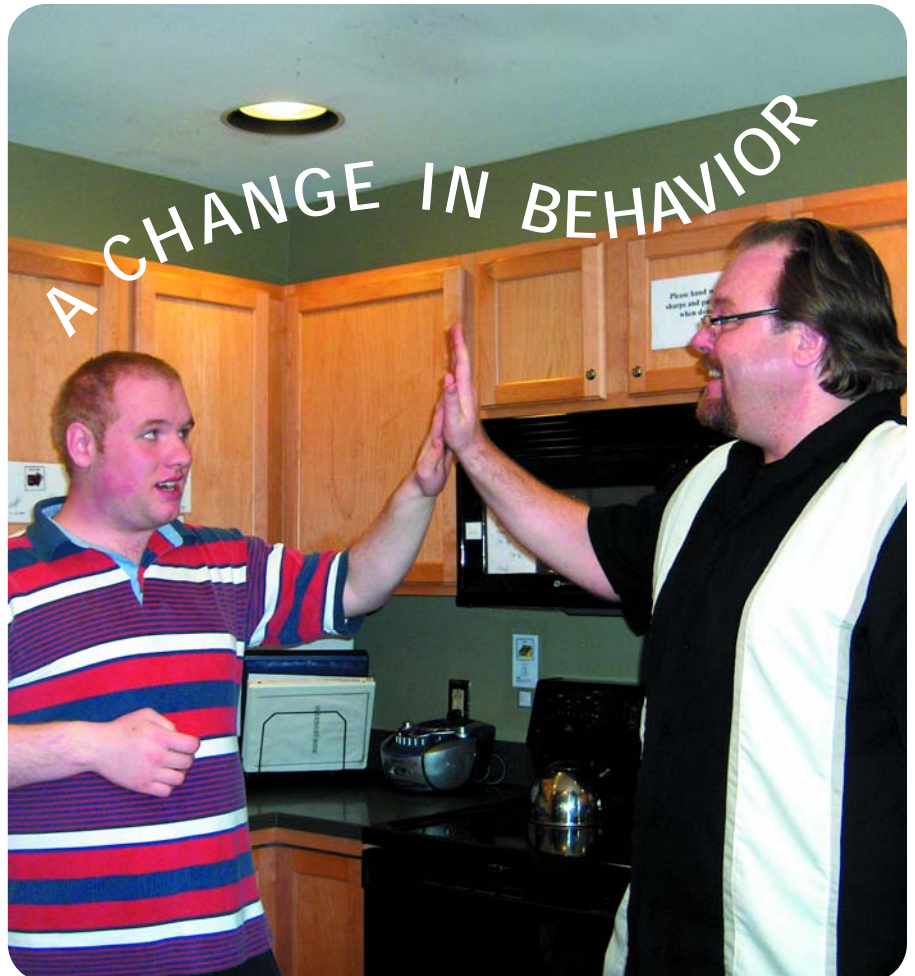
Nineteen-year-old Ben moved into Mary Cariola's Bailey Road residence in 2005. There he formed a bond with Behavior Modification Therapist Wade Coleman.

Admittedly, the journey has seen its rough periods, especially since Ben is sensitive to his environment, particularly noise. Living with five other teenagers and young adults can get loud.

"The Mary Cariola team has helped Ben develop skills to be comfortable in his own skin and communicate appropriately, and that is remarkably rewarding. When it comes to behavior, responses have to be consistent or you don't see results," explained Coleman.

The team approach uses massage, music, and calming DVDs. There is a consistent schedule and Ben uses signing and pointing at pictures and objects to show what he wants.

Ben's mom has been impressed by her son's progress. "The behavior therapist and nurse have been great. They even went out of town with us to see a special doctor because they know they are going to be a key component to whatever avenues we take to help Ben."



**VISION** Mary Cariola Children's Center is recognized statewide for excellent collaborative and innovative programs designed to expand the learning opportunities and enrich the lives of children with developmental delays. Dedicated and caring staff, families, and volunteers, reflecting the diversity of our community, will ensure that the best of individualized services are available to all children with multiple or complex needs and those at risk of developing disabilities.

**MISSION** Mary Cariola Children's Center provides the highest quality individualized services for children with developmental delays and especially for those with complex or multiple disabilities. The Center is dedicated to excellence in family-centered educational, residential, therapeutic and community support services and to developing program initiatives for emerging populations of children with special needs.

*Right: It took a few weeks for five-year-old Jordan to warm up to Katie, one of three therapy dogs at Mary Cariola. Now they are fast friends.*



1000 Elmwood Avenue, Suite 100  
Rochester NY 14620-3093  
[www.marycariola.org](http://www.marycariola.org)

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