



SEAN AND ROCKY

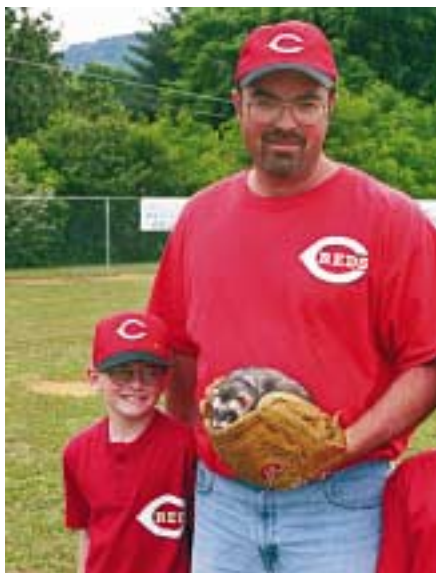
A Special Needs Boy and His Ferret Take on the World...

story and photographs by Rebecca Stout

As I pass by the living room, I see my son Sean and his ferret Rocky curled up on the couch. I overhear my nine-year-old boy quietly telling Rocky that we will be moving soon. We are indeed trying to get into our first home. I can't hear what else he says to Rocky. He talks softly to him, and it is a private moment. Rocky sits still with his little black eyes intent on Sean as if hanging onto every word. Rocky is used to *these talks*. These two friends have many. To others this may seem an innocent, normal, and even mundane moment. To me, however, it is nothing short of a miracle.



Sean brushing Rocky



Sean with his baseball coach



Rocky the ferret



Sean with his brother, Chet



Sean and Rocky

Sean has been diagnosed by doctors as having high functioning autism. He has the most common form of it; only 1 in 15 children diagnosed has the full spectrum of autistic traits as you may have seen portrayed in movies (such as *Rain Man* or *Mercury Rising*) or on television. Some label Sean's form of autism as atypical autism, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD NOS), semantic-pragmatic language disorder with delays, and even mistakenly Asperger's Disorder (one of many disorders similar and related to autism). These all lie within the autistic spectrum. But what someone calls it doesn't matter to me. It is what it is — a social and language disability that is neurological in nature now affecting as many as 1 in 500 children in this country.

For Sean to be able to speak so well, to formulate his thoughts and feelings, and to spontaneously tell someone (like Rocky) the sorts of things he's telling him with his disability is something we thought we'd never see in his lifetime. Many processes are at work here during this exchange between boy and ferret: cognitive, social, communicative, and sensory. He is thinking correctly in a time frame of when we are moving and working out his thoughts about the definition of moving. He is communicating his feelings about it. He may do it with some delayed language and he may be difficult to understand at times, but he is doing it. He is having good eye contact with Rocky. What's more, he is considering how Rocky "feels" about this move and has the consideration to prepare Rocky for the move. What's even more incredible is that this little boy is gently holding this animal. Rocky's fur does not bother him, his little wet cold nose does not bother him, the feeling of his claws on his skin does not faze him, and the smell of an animal does not bother him in the least. I am watching this boy soak in all of the things that are normally sensory assaults to a child with autism, as well as with many other special needs children that have sensory defensive traits.

Sean was diagnosed at 2-1/2 years of age. He had only a few words and did

not know his brother's name, nor call us by the correct names of "Daddy" and "Mommy." He spent many hours each day either crying or sitting in utter silence lining up his little matchbox cars, but not playing with them. This child was severely disabled for years. He was not able to set foot in a new grocery store without falling to pieces or go through the steps of changing clothes without having tantrums. He could not be near a stuffed animal (because the feeling "hurt his skin"). Sean's outbursts were (and still can be) very violent. We could not even have a magazine on a table without it being torn to shreds, let alone think of having a goldfish in a bowl in our home. When not aggressive, Sean was withdrawn into his own world. He would step on a baby playing on the floor nearby, completely oblivious that he had hurt someone. Music hurt his ears. Thus, we all were prisoners in this little boy's world. If we disrupted it, he'd cease learning and advancing.

My husband and I are animal lovers and always enjoyed the company of many pets in our home before Sean was born. When Sean was very young I had one plant that was safely out of his reach. One plant! It was the only sign of life in our home... and was a spot of hope for me.

Sean had an early diagnosis and early intervention. He always seemed to advance at his own pace academically, as well as with his language. I think we were lucky that he was in the best school environment possible for him for much of his life. Most of all, he had the best medication for him specifically, and we had settled on little therapies at home that fit his needs at that time. Socially, however, he seemed to have plateaued. It is common for these children to have a developmental jump at age 5 - 5-1/2. We witnessed this window when it opened with Sean and seized every opportunity. One area I approached was bringing animal companionship back into our home. I was able to get some beta fish at this time. Although the first fish suffered some disasters, the next didn't. Sean had a fixation/obsession with frogs. The next step was getting large

Australian dumpy frogs for him. He let them alone and admired them. Eventually he was able to touch them and hold them briefly. Slowly we added animal family members from there.

Next I had to think about Sean's older brother, Chet. We got him some snakes for pets. We kept the snakes in our room, but Sean warmed up to them. Despite Sean's great advances, he would act out against dogs and cats. When a dog or cat was introduced to Sean, it had an eerie instinct to fear him (and rightly so). Both my boys and I suffer from asthma, so a rabbit, cat, or bird would not work out with our allergies. Meanwhile, Sean was not doing well with dogs, and dogs were not too fond of him. He still seemed to have an impulsive streak in him that concerned me. I saw questionable behavior even in how he treated bugs outside and how he acted in pet stores. The only exception seemed to be a very tolerant golden retriever at his grandmother's that he visited every year. I grasped desperately onto that ray of hope. Yet, we experienced no luck elsewhere.

At age 8 Sean had baffled us all. The stereotypical movements that are seen in autistics (such as finger flicking, hand flapping, rocking, etc) all but disappeared. His language, although odd at times and a little delayed, made remarkable leaps. However, he stayed somewhat obsessive and rigid in his routines and thought. Autism is not something you can cure. It is something that, when mild enough, can be managed quite well, and the child can emerge from it quite successfully. There I was with a child who seemed typical, but who animals still innately feared. Meanwhile I saw my husband Scott growing lonelier and lonelier for animal companionship. He is a hero to us. He has given up his life to supporting all of us — financially, emotionally, and spiritually. He longed for a way of life we used to have; he longed for what had always grabbed at our hearts — ferrets.

One day, I threw caution to the wind and brought home two ferret kits for Scott. Sean's eyes were huge as we brought the cage and the two "intruders" into his home. Then, a most

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Sean, Chet, and Rocky in their baseball caps

remarkable thing happened. Although he acted disturbed at first, Sean never got truly upset, nor hurt the animals. I must stress that Sean and the ferrets were under my careful eye literally every second of the day. When Sean came home after the first day he was away from the ferrets at school, he burst

through our door, plopped down in front of the cage, refusing to take off his book bag, and just stared at the kits. Every time I approached Sean, he said, "Shhh!" He sat there for 25 minutes until they woke up. This boy was so considerate of the ferrets that he wouldn't wake them up. When guests

were over, he was often so protective the first weeks, that they were not allowed to look at them.

I watched and carefully helped nurture the situation for months. Sean learned self-control, he learned that no matter what, the ferrets were to have water and food. He learned how to safely hold and play with them. We had to start with the most fundamental details that children without special needs already know. It was a long and intense road. We had to begin with a lot of talking and a lot of introductions. Sean had to learn not to stick his fingers in the cage. The kits had to learn to nip less as they got older. Sean had to learn that the feeling of inquisitive ferret mouths was OK. He had to get used to the very sight of the cage in his house — that alone was a big step. Not a day passed that Sean did not surprise us with the ferrets, and he learned quickly. His attention to detail was a great advantage in learning to care for and to handle the ferrets.

By that Valentine's Day, we had a surprise for Sean. For all his help with the ferrets, and for his good behavior, we went to a local ferret shelter for him to get his own ferret. He told the shelter mom right off that he wanted a "special" ferret because he was special. The shelter mom let Sean see all the ferrets, but eventually showed him a large and healthy young boy. Sean took to Rocky right away, and vice versa. They played in the shelter all afternoon and got to know each other. The match seemed perfect. Sean held Rocky and asked to make sure that this ferret was "special." The shelter mom told him he certainly was. Rocky had come to the shelter dying. It was a small miracle he lived at all. It seems Rocky had overcome many things and is a survivor like Sean.

We were strict from the beginning that Sean was to have things to do for and with Rocky in his daily routine. Just as important as brushing his own teeth was brushing Rocky's fur. This helped them get intimate time and it helped Sean with touching fur and with smelling someone different, as well as teaching him a self-help skill. Later, as Sean was comfortable, we added chores as he mastered each one. Today Sean

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may not be able to stand to have his hair brushed — nor know how — but he knows the names of his ferret's foods, how to wash the cage trays, how to change the water in the bottles, how to clean up ferret poop, how to give Ferretone, how to scruff and safely discipline a ferret, and how to take a ferret to the vet, as well as many other things. I dare say, he knows more than some adult ferret owners.

When we got the first ferrets, Sean would mimic and parrot his father and how he handled and spoke to the ferrets. He would sit by Scott and repeat what he said and did word for word and detail for detail. Then he would imitate his father's actions toward the ferrets. He used rote memory for situations to know when to say what. But then he made a very important advancement in his development. He began to spontaneously speak to the ferrets with his own words and for his own reasons. Over the months, he began to develop a style of touching them and relating to them all his own. Progress was slow and uphill. It was something I'll never forget. And it's something that still grows to this day.

Rocky is extremely laid back, cuddly, and very bonded to humans. He has a very gentle way about him, even in his movements. I don't know if this is his personality or if this was conditioned in him from the start with Sean. It has been suggested to me that Rocky learned to move slower and be gentler with Sean in getting a better response from him. Animals are known to pick up things such as special needs in humans.

I see effects from the relationship extending and generalizing to Sean's life in many ways. Two years ago, we could not get Sean to join the special needs baseball league. He just wasn't quite ready. He loved baseball and loved to watch his older brother play in regular league. Sean often helped work the scoreboard with me as I announced games. He knows the rules and thrives on them. Finally, last year he really wanted to play. He tried the special league, but he didn't fit in. He had to have the rules exact, and the special league didn't have rules he could accept. With great reservation, we tried

the regular league. There was no doubt that Sean could play well. There was great doubt that he would be able to hold up to the social situation, let alone tolerate the touching, the noise, and all the sensory assaults involved. When he first showed up at the field, he was too scared to go over to the other children at all. I put Rocky in his arms and I saw his face and little body instantly relax and go less rigid. We walked up to the boys, who greeted Sean with big grins and "Wows." Sean didn't say a word. He just shook his head yes or no to questions, and hugged Rocky tight. Pretty soon, Sean was in the dugout alone and playing ball — but not without Rocky in the stands for him. Fate had it that ferrets are lucky. Sean's team went all the way in the tournament and won the championship that year. The entire thing was the most positive experience in Sean's life next to the ferrets. And it may not have been possible without ferrets for all we know.

Sean has a positive prognosis. He learns more and more about ferrets and takes on more and more responsibility. He sits every day with his Rocky in his arms stroking him and talking to him about everything under the sun. He talks about how to go to the potty, to what "died" is... and Heaven. I am met with every question you could imagine. Some I can answer, "Mommy, what sick does Rocky's shots stop?" Some he answers, "Mommy, what are ferrets made of? God?" And some I can't answer, "Why does Rocky have to die?"

What my family has seen and experienced is nothing rare. I believe it's possible for many special needs children. Ferrets were wonderful for me when I was a child; they helped my morale through chronic illness. Ferrets have had a positive effect on my oldest son Chet. Chet is a natural around animals. He has had experience with pets, and he volunteers at our local zoo. But nothing compares to his bond with his ferret. Chet has some sensory issues and has CAPD (Central Audio Processing Disorder, which is much like a hearing impairment), and a ferret just *feels* best to him.

I have been visiting my children's schools for years with insects, fish,

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Every morning at 7:35am, Sean very carefully takes Rocky out of his hammy in his cage. He wraps him in his ferret afghan, and walks back to his chair by the window. He cradles Rocky like a baby in his arms on his back, and then delicately rubs him under his chin. Rocky settles back and doesn't go back to sleep as he would most other times. He keeps his eyes half open, and for good reason.

Sean keeps looking up at the window every few seconds ... waiting. Meanwhile his little fingers delicately trace Rocky's lips, mouth, and face. He bends over and kisses him on top of his head. Rocky can't help but drift off for a few seconds. Sean begins quietly talking to Rocky, telling him how pretty he is, how special he is, and little boy secrets. If you listen very carefully, you will hear Sean tell Rocky how God made him just for him, and that they will be forever friends. Rocky opens his eyes as Sean kisses him again, but this time on his chocolate outlined nose that God made for Sean to kiss.

"Here it is Rocky," he says excitedly but still softly. Sean's face takes on a rosy glow as he smiles. Rocky looks up at the light on Sean's face and at the urgency of his voice. Light begins to glitter in Sean's blue eyes more and more. Rocky is oblivious to what is happening outside the window, but begins curiously sniffing the air trying to pick up what has his little boy so enthralled. His eyes perk up, his head rises a bit, and he keeps searching the little boy's face and seems to feel the excitement.

"What kind is it today, Sean?" I ask.

"Oh, Mommy today is a good day. Quick, hurry, come look!"

I walk over and look out the window with them and I can't help but smile. "Mommy, today is a special day I think. See? It's pink ... it's so pink ... it's white pink and blue pink and special pink. Wow."

At this point the sunrise seems to fade next to the sight next to me. I look down at my special little boy with his special little ferret and say, "That sure is special."

amphibians, and reptiles of all sorts. I was amazed by the lack of prejudicial thought among children, especially special needs children. They wanted contact in every way. I eventually began bringing ferrets because of what I saw with Sean. I fell upon a phenomenon or tool that I think can be of great value with our special needs children. Ferrets are much less assuming than some other commonly used therapy animals. When cared for properly, ferrets smell less than a dog does. Ferrets don't slobber, pant, bark, jump, or push like a dog. You don't have to worry about scratching with ferrets, or about a child scaring a ferret as you would with a cat. Ferrets are far less apt to bite a child than a dog or cat. If they do bite, their bite is most often much less damaging than that of a dog or cat. Ferrets don't carry *Strep* like dogs do or toxoplasmosis like cats do. Ferrets can carry and catch the human flu, and they may be able to transmit it while they are ill (though it is far more likely that a person will transmit the flu to a ferret). That is the only known disease that ferrets may be able to transmit to

humans (rabies included — there is not a single case documented, and there is an approved vaccine). Ferrets are small and, therefore, children find them less intimidating than dogs or cats. A milder tempered ferret, a good ambassador, or an older ferret that is not hyper is also less active for the child to handle. Ferrets have a gentle yet insistent way of asking for attention, which is good for these children.

I often use the ferrets to help demonstrate a self-help care skill for the children. For example, we brush the ferret's teeth and focus on getting the children to brush their own teeth. It is often very difficult to brush the teeth of a special needs child with sensory issues (such as autism, sensory integration disorders, or even cerebral palsy). Other times I might tell a story that we read together for a social lesson. One time we read about a little boy having trouble sharing because he did not know how, or because he felt like it was invading his privacy. I showed the children that ferrets are extremely polite to one another, sharing and rarely taking each other's things. At the end of

the visit, I ensure that each child has alone time with the ferret. The child may just want to gaze at the ferret all to himself. A higher functioning child may want to hold, hug, and kiss the ferret for a while. I encourage them all to talk or sing to the ferret.

I see a world of opportunity here for pet therapy utilizing ferrets. I see ferrets as a potential good pet for some children with special needs as opposed to other popular pets. I know I have tapped into something that many other ferret owners already know. I'm hoping that my story of Sean and Rocky helps spread this word. I know for fact that, although he was already improving, Sean would not have improved as globally as he has without this experience of owning ferrets. Anyone that has seen this child and this ferret together knows that there is a bond between them that will live on forever.

Rebecca Stout has had ferrets off and on since she was nine years old. She and her husband Scott and sons Chet and Sean live in Chattanooga, TN. See the web site: <http://www.geocities.com/wolfyslue> e-mail Rebecca at wolfyslue@aol.com

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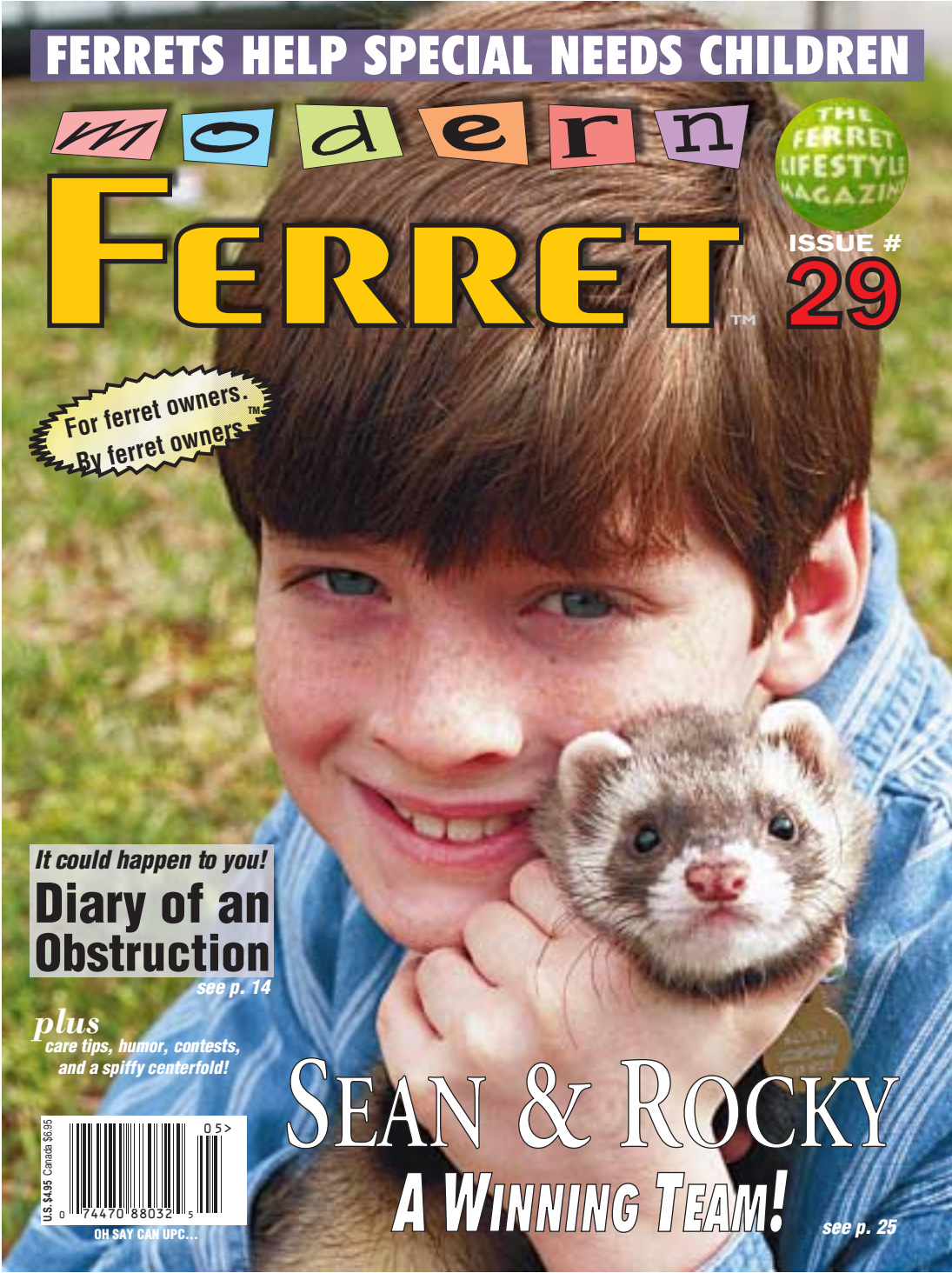
Books

- Thinking in Pictures* by Temple Grandin
- Emergence: Labeled Autistic* by Temple Grandin
- Beyond the Wall* by Stephen Shore

Organizations

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