

Autistic computer programmer wins blue ribbon at fair

By Ian S. Port
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There was no phone call or e-mail. Rancho Santa Fe seventh-grader Charlie Poole was walking through the San Diego County Fair when he saw it: A large, bright, blue ribbon.

"He felt phenomenal," Charlie's mother, Shawn Pool, explained. "He just had a huge grin, ear to ear."

The first-place award was given to Poole for a computer game he entered into the Fair's "Kid's Best" competition — a user-adjustable version of the revered classic Pong that plays comical sounds as a ball bounces around the screen.

But Charlie was different from other child winners in this year's fair. He has autism.

And autistic children face more difficulties getting even a basic level of education. Charlie, for instance, was home-schooled before becoming accustomed to student life at Solana Santa Fe Elementary.

Which makes his programming acumen all the more special. For those skills he has instructor Vic Wintriss to thank, a retired pilot and engineer who last year started a Carmel Valley school to teach younger students the fun of computer programming.

Wintriss has taught Poole for about eight months, working — as he does with many students — on game projects designed to keep young minds interested in banging away at the keyboard.

On a recent afternoon at Wintriss' school on High Bluff drive, the lesson du jour was on programming variables. But first there was the requisite post-weekend catch-up.

"Beverly Hills," Charlie chimed, singing a popular rock tune, and the name of the place where he recently enjoyed a couple of days. "That's where I want to be." (Another passion of Charlie's is singing, and he lets it be known.)

With his focus returning to the 20-inch screen before him, Charlie whipped the mouse around to bring up his game again. The computer played foghorn sounds when he missed a ball bounce deliberately, and rattled a more pleasing tone with each bounce at the screen's edge.

Charlie's mother, Shawn, said working with Wintriss has given Charlie a whole new dimension of experience.

"The computer isn't foreign to him, but he was never a programmer," she said. "[Wintriss] had real belief that children with autism could benefit hugely from this for all kinds of reasons."

Wintriss said he thought that autistic children, who often have difficulties navigating the complexities of the social world, could ben-



Charlie Poole won a first-place award for a computer game he entered into the San Diego County Fair's "Kid's Best" competition.

efit from highly logical, repetitive work that requires little face-to-face interaction. But he says that, like the rest of the school, his foray into teaching children with autism was a trial.

"I thought well, since I'm experimenting, I might as well try that, too," Wintriss said.

Now, with one of his students the recipient of a first-place award for a computer project by a challenged youth, Wintriss has a sign that some of his methods are paying off.

And Shawn says she has increased hope that Charlie, whom she believes will be able to live on his own one day, will be able to master productive skills that can make him independent. Seeing a blue ribbon that day at the fair was another hard-earned milestone for both her and her son.

"If you're a person like Charlie, and the world is very often complicated and you don't have a lot of successes out there, when you do have a success, it's big," Shawn said. "It's a celebration, it feels great."

For more information on Wintriss' school visit www.wintrisstech.org or email him at vic@wintrisstech.org.