

## Billy West

When CASA David Stanley first met Billy West, it was in the fall of 2013. Billy was living in a 10 by 60-foot 1960s trailer with four adults – two of whom slept on the floor- and a younger half-sister in Livingston. Billy's stepfather was a serious abuser, particularly of Billy. For their safety Child and Family Services removed Billy and his sister from the home and a Dependency and Neglect case was established. Early on, it became clear that there was no kinship placement available to Billy.

Thus, began a seven-year journey for Billy and David. A journey that has had its ups and downs but, in the end, Billy has a very promising future.

We all know the saying that "one person can make a difference in a child's life". At the beginning of Billy's new life away from his home it was David who was laser focused on making sure Billy had the best possible educational placements and the appropriate Child Protection Specialist. Anyone who knows David knows he can be very persuasive and is never afraid to butt a few heads when he needs to.

Billy was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, along with intellectual challenges and learning disabilities, which made foster placement difficult. Child and Family Services would be his guardian until he was 18 or graduated from high school. This was going to be a very long and unusual case for a CASA.

Once, when introducing David to a friend, Billy said, "David is my CASA. He works for me". Billy was right. David was working for him but in Billy's case David knew one person was not enough. David quickly expanded the concept of "if one person" to "a plethora

of people can really make a difference'. "Team Billy" was born and Bill Campbell came on board as a co-CASA.

After a year of placements in Billings, Jacqui Poe became his Child Protection Specialist, and as Team Leader was Billy's champion in working within the system. Jacqui got him the best placement possible. An AWARE group home in Bozeman, where he could participate in Bozeman's school district's excellent Individual Education Plans.

The only downside was living in group home can be a challenging place for any young man, especially for a someone with learning disabilities. Billy was the only long-term resident. He would make friends and watch them leave. It was rough at times. But as part of "Team Billy" his AWARE home managers, first Serene Cusack and then Julie Philips, helped introduce Billy to a world outside the group home. They enrolled him in special events like Eagle Mount and made sure he made it to all his beloved Special Olympics games. Both Serene and Julie would travel with Billy across Montana. They included Billy's own family whenever possible. His mother, grandmother, and sister cheered for Billy at many events. Serene and Julie encouraged Billy to bond with his biological family. And in turn the bond between Billy, Serene and Julie continues to this day.

Special Olympics has been a mainstay in Billy's life since his move to Bozeman. His coach, Joey Hancock, has worked with Billy in basketball, soccer, and skiing. Through Special Olympics Billy met his good friend Sam and Sam's family joined "Team Billy".

Billy loves school. At school his personality and drive are infectious. When he graduated from Chief Joseph Middle School he got a standing ovation from the students and teachers.

When Billy started at Bozeman High he continued building up his team. I didn't take long before Sierra Parsons his IEP case manager at Bozeman High and all his teachers were part of "Team Billy". Billy's goal was to graduate high school, the **first** in his family, and enroll in the Life Scholars program at Montana State University. More than anything he wanted to be a Bobcat. He took a part time job at the MSU alumni office. At HRDC Laci Mottice and Jeremy Alcocke joined "Team Billy" and helped him double down on learning the life skills that might help him get into the special MSU program.

By the summer of 2018 Billy felt he had it all. A part time job at MSU, expanded Special Olympics programs, friends and family. He was excited to entering his Junior year at Bozeman High. His whole life was centered in Bozeman.

One month before school was to start Jacque Poe got some devastating news. AWARE was closing his group home in Bozeman and Billy would be sent to either Missoula or Billings. It was a shock to everyone involved with Billy. There wasn't a single caregiver who felt that a move like that would be in his best interest.

Billy was lucky to have a strong team already in place but the team only had a few weeks to find a way to keep Billy in Bozeman. Jacqui Poe took charge and worked every contact she had in the Bozeman area that might be a foster placement for Billy. It wouldn't be easy. Billy was now 16 and with his special needs he would need a very special foster family. Time was running out.

Jacqui reached out to Les and Sharon McCartney. The McCartney's had fostered and then adopted a special needs child a few years younger than Billy. They agreed to meet Billy and organized a picnic at their home on a warm Saturday afternoon. Billy met Nathan and the two

boys had fun together. Billy was his charming self but taking him on as a foster was a lot of ask.

On August 18th, just two weeks before school was to start, Jacqui and the CASA's got an amazing email from Sharon and Les. "We decided that if Billy likes us and our house, that we would take him in, but it's entirely up to Billy whether he wants to come to us."

For Billy it was a dream come true. A loving foster family with a foster brother, two large friendly dogs, chickens, and fruit trees.

The McCartney's welcomed Billy not just to their home but to their whole family. There have been trips to Washington State to visit relatives, camping and fishing. They have graciously included Billy's biological family in birthday and holiday celebrations. The McCartney's church also embraced Billy. He spent the better part of last summer traveling around the state teaching summer bible classes.

When Jacqui Poe left the department, she handed Billy's case over to Bonnie Neuman. Bonnie jumped right in, joined "Team Billy", and has been instrumental in transitioning Billy out of state custody. She helped get his Medicaid wavier and worked through the tedious but necessary MONA process.

Billy is an expert on Superheroes. He knows the background of every Power Ranger and the full history of Batman, Ironman, and Spider Man. His co-CASA, Bill Campbell, will often spend a Saturday afternoon with Billy and Nathan watching a superhero movie on the big screen. When a new charter appears that baffles Bill Billy will whisper, "that's Iron Man's cousin".

When it comes to superheroes in our world they do exist. Les and Sharon McCartney, who welcomed Billy into their home, and kept "Team Billy" together are

real life superheroes. It is their love and dedication that has helped Billy thrive.

His CASA's David Stanley and Bill Campbell, along with his AWARE Targeted Case Manager and Family Outreach, will keep "Team Billy" going to support Billy and the McCartney's in the years to come.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, Billy was accepted by the MSU Life Scholars program and will be starting university this fall.

Billy will officially be a Bobcat!