

HOMETOWN HERO:

# Joan Vosbury

**“Mrs. Vosbury helped us crack open a door I thought we might never get through. For that, my gratitude is boundless.”**

Like every good obsession, this one began with something unusual: fingernails. One of the characteristics of this hometown hero is that she usually sports brightly painted acrylic nails. It sounds like Leah was first drawn to their color, and somewhere along the line, she figured out that she liked to be scratched by those nails.

But then something happened. Leah developed a strong attachment, not just to the fingernails, but to the person. And I began to hear about Mrs. Vosbury, then the speech assistant at Millersville. Leah's Vosbury fixation grew. Sometimes, when the classroom team needed a reinforcer, Leah was allowed to choose a visit with Mrs. Vosbury. Lauren Riley, the speech pathologist at Millersville, reported having to send Mrs. Vosbury on errands just to get some work done during speech sessions. Vosbury-mania reached its zenith on the playground last spring when Leah spotted Mrs. Vosbury working at her desk and tried to climb through the classroom window to reach her. Rumor has it Mrs. Vosbury was a little disappointed when Leah did not repeat her attempt the next day. (Leah must really have needed time on the swings that day.)

I'm not sure I can adequately express my astonishment along with my gratitude. Since autism entered our lives, Leah had never chosen a friend. She has had teachers and home therapists she has clearly enjoyed being with, and who have been exceptionally good to her. But in her relationship with Mrs. Vosbury, she showed me something new -- that she has the capacity to want a relationship with someone outside our family. For a child whose IEP once included tolerating the presence of others at the same table at school, this is huge. It would not have happened if Mrs. Vosbury had not responded to Leah's obsession with enthusiasm and love. This year Mrs. Vosbury is working with a couple of students in general-ed classrooms, and I have no doubt Leah has missed her during speech. But from what I hear, Mrs. Vosbury still makes the time to say hello. Social relationships are still very difficult for Leah, but I truly believe that Mrs. Vosbury helped us crack open a door I thought we might never get through. For that, my gratitude is boundless. Thank you.