

# The world according to Stefan

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Stefan Kavan, who will graduate from New Prague High School this spring, is helping people understand what it's like to be autistic.

By Emily Johns, Star Tribune



Photo by Jeffrey Thompson

***Stefan Kavan, in the foreground, watches a video with classmates at New Prague High School. After he graduates from high school next spring, he wants to go to college to pursue a career in cartography. Stefan and his mother have a presentation about autism that they give to educators, social workers and others***

Stefan Kavan runs through the basement of New Prague High School, with his fingers plugging his ears. He's blocking out the chaotic noise of students and the school bell as he clings to the left side of the hallway on his way to choir. When he gets there, he stands at the very front of the room, right next to a beat-up piano.

At 18, Stefan is a typical high school student. He's a senior at New Prague, he sings in the choir, he's on the knowledge bowl team, and he won last year's school geography bee.

What sets Stefan apart is his autism. It's a developmental disability that can make social and communication skills a challenge for the one in 150 U.S. kids who have it. And for the past four years, Stefan has worked hard so his classmates and community know what that really means.

In middle school, he stood in front of 120 other eighth-graders and gave a PowerPoint presentation about what autism means to him. Since then, his mother has joined him.

The two of them are traveling the state telling educators, social workers and communities what autism is, and how to treat students who have it.

“I like my autism,” he said during their “Raising Trainman: A mother-son story of autism” presentation to New Prague residents last month. “I have a good memory. I have perfect pitch. I like music, jumping on the [trampoline], biking, four-wheeling, and traveling. My favorite hobby is rail-fanning (someone who loves trains),” he said.

For Barb Kavan, the presentation provides a chance to put her son’s matter-of-fact demeanor into the perspective of a mother who has watched her son mature differently than his peers.

“With each milestone of a typical peer,” she said, “there is a little grieving process we go through. Like when he first went to school, and instead of a big school bus there was a little bus that picked him up. I’m still waiting for him to be asked to a birthday party, or go to prom,” which she points out is something Stefan would never be interested in.

“Laughter is the best medicine,” she said, remembering one of her favorite Stefan stories.

“One time last year,” she starts. “April 2006,” Stefan interrupts. “Stefan had watering eyes and was rubbing his eyes one day. I asked him what was wrong, and he said, ‘I am having an inappropriate immune system response to an otherwise harmless substance.’ I immediately asked him to say it again so I could write it down. Who else would say that for an allergic reaction?”

### *A first-responder*

Stefan’s first class of the day is a first-responder class, where he sits in the front row next to teacher Tim Thorp.

On one October morning, the class learned about breathing problems, and how to put nasal and oral tubes into people having trouble breathing.

Stefan interjects with lots of questions, such as “Do they take asthma patients to the trauma center at HCMC?” His hand is also the first to shoot up when Mr. Thorp asks a question.

Mr. Thorp tells the class a story about running on a treadmill one night at Snap Fitness, when he was the only person in the room.

“What if I had a heart attack?” he asks the class. Stefan looks at him, and states the obvious.

“You’d probably die.”

### *An earthquake*

Stefan was adopted from Romania in 1991, and diagnosed with autism in 1995. He has lived with his family in Le Center for 16 years, and knows his high school years are ending.

At home a few weeks ago, Barb, who is the special education coordinator at Raven Stream Elementary in New Prague, saw Stefan flop onto his bed. “I have less than one year at this residence,” he told her, upset.

“Stefan, we’re not going to kick you out,” she told him. “You just have to have a purpose to get up every day. A lot of seniors are going through this right now, they don’t all have the answers.”

When he graduates, Stefan says he wants to work for a little while, then go to college to be a cartographer.

Over his 16 years with the family, Barb said she has seen amazing progress. He went from not speaking at all, to being able to articulate what he wants, when he feels uncomfortable, and who he is.

There are also fewer meltdowns, which Stefan said can “put you at the mercy of the courts,” as an adult.

This spring, his mother saw a breakthrough when she told him that her cousin Phil, who is now doing well, had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Stefan, who doesn’t usually express much emotion, came up with his own way to show his distress.

“If Phil died, it would be like a magnitude 10-point-0 earthquake with the epicenter felt in Albert Lea,” he said. “It could be felt all over the world.”

Emily Johns • 612-673-7460

Emily Johns • [ejohns@startribune.com](mailto:ejohns@startribune.com)

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