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**HERITAGE CENTERS AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM
HELPS A YOUNG MAN FIND HIS VOICE**

(BUFFALO, NY, March 23, 2007) – Jason Robbs is an 18-year-old young man who has Down Syndrome and has been non-verbal his whole life, until recently... A unique after school collaborative project, operated by Heritage Centers, seems to have helped ‘unlock’ Jason’s hidden potential, and his voice. Now he talks- all the time!

“It took 18 years for me to finally be able to have a conversation with my son,” says Donna Robbs, Jason’s mother. “Heritage Centers programming is absolutely fantastic. My son has been re-born and I am overjoyed...we have been given a wonderful gift. Now there is a constant flow of conversation and he sings! I couldn’t ask for anything more...but we are so excited to see what he can accomplish next.”

Heritage Centers after school program, (which individually designs and presents programming to youth who are developmentally disabled aged 9-21), has been in existence for many years- actually Jason has been a part of it for about four years.

But something different started to happen last year, after a grant was written to expand the program’s capacity and include creative community collaborations. Funded by NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) and the John R. Oishei Foundation, unique collaborations with Young Audiences of WNY, Moving Miracles and the Cornell Cooperative Extension have added such a unique flair to the already existing program, that many of the children are discovering hidden talents and abilities.

In Jason’s situation, what really seemed to affect him was a unique music program contracted through Young Audiences of WNY, presented by local teaching artist, Miriam Minkoff. Jason’s mom says “he was literally captivated by this program.” Divided into two semesters in 2006, the first semester involved making music and learning rhythms. But when semester two rolled around, the youth learned how to put poetry and words with the music and rhythms they were already making, and it appears that is when Jason started talking.

“We all have an innate ability to make connections to the world around us,” states Helga MacKinnon, Executive Director of Young Audiences of WNY. “Sometimes that ability is locked away. We have found that by working with teaching artists...that the ‘key’ can be found to bring the ‘artist-within’ to the surface. We are thrilled for Jason and his family and for our collaboration with Heritage Centers.”

Michael L. Gross, Executive Director of Heritage Centers, is just as excited. "We are delighted," he states. "Not only is this a fantastic illustration of an individual overcoming the odds, but it is a great example of the power –*and possibility*- of strong and creative community collaborations! We are so thankful for our generous supporters- NYS OCFS and the Oishei Foundation- this really is a true success story of what kind of amazing things can happen when a community works together pooling its resources when trying to make tangible differences in people's lives."

Amidst everyone else's excitement, Jason says he just wants to learn to snowboard.

Jason currently attends Buffalo Public School #42, The Occupational Training Center (OTC), where he is involved with both educational and occupational programming during the day and also receives both speech and music therapies.

Heritage Centers is a local non-profit that employs over 900 people and serves more than 3,000 individuals with disabilities (and their families) each year. Individualized services include, but are not limited to: early intervention, education, residential, vocational, service coordination, legal and advocacy programming.

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