

## Kyle's Place of Belonging

Growing up, Kyle was known for his bright smile and gentle nature. Diagnosed with Prader–Willi Syndrome, a rare genetic condition affecting muscle tone, metabolism, and behavior, he faced challenges that required constant understanding and support. In elementary school at Monte Vista, he was surrounded by familiar faces, caring teachers, and two beloved staff members, Aldo and Jerry, who became early mentors. Every Friday, if he had a good week, Kyle helped them rake leaves and tidy the playground. “He’d be out there with this big rake, just beaming,” Mari, Kyle’s mom, recalled. “That was his reward for doing his homework, being useful, being part of something.”

Everything shifted when Kyle entered middle school. The move to a larger campus was overwhelming, the close-knit environment gone, replaced by crowded hallways and unfamiliar faces. Like many students with developmental disabilities, Kyle struggled to find his place. He went from knowing everyone to feeling like a small fish in a huge pond.

Then one day in 2003, someone from La Colina Jr. High handed Mari a flyer for Katie’s FUNd, a new social recreational group at Alpha Resource Center for teens with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Curious, they gave it a try. Kyle’s first event was Starry Night, an annual prom-like celebration. “They had a red carpet and flashing lights, pretending there were photographers,” Mari said. “Kyle walked up that carpet with the biggest grin. He just clicked; he was home.” From then on, Friday nights at Alpha were sacred. Kyle rarely missed an event, and the family planned around them. “We’d rearrange vacations, even Christmas,” Mari laughed. “It was his thing. Alpha had become his community.”

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For many families, finding the right community takes years. When Kyle and Mari found Alpha, it became more than a program—it became a home filled with purpose, friendship, and opportunity.

After graduating from a post-high school transition program at Santa Barbara City College, Kyle was ready for the next step. Like many young adults with disabilities leaving the school system, he wondered: What now? He wanted to work, contribute, and be part of something, just as he had in elementary school. So he began exploring employment.

His first job was at Alpha Thrift Store, where he worked for about a year. Wanting something new, he joined a work crew at the Santa Barbara Harbor. The job was demanding, cleaning public restrooms and shower areas used by hundreds daily. “It was a lot of hard work,” Kyle recalled. “They’d go in with hoses and clean everything top to bottom. It was physically exhausting.” He gave it his best, but the environment proved overwhelming. “It just wasn’t the right fit,” Mari said. “He needed something where he could feel successful, supported, and safe.” These early experiences helped Kyle and his family understand where he thrived most: structured environments, helping others, and positive encouragement.





In 2015, Kyle enrolled in Alpha’s CatOaks Day Program, and everything began to shift. The program gave him routine, purpose, and community outings, including volunteering at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. He and his group spent mornings raking leaves, clearing walkways, and keeping the grounds safe. “We made sure people wouldn’t trip on the little sticker balls,” Kyle said proudly.

His growth at Alpha was also personal. Like many individuals with Prader–Willi Syndrome, Kyle sometimes struggled with frustration and emotional regulation. Changes in routine or unexpected challenges could upset him. Alpha staff stepped in with experience, consistency, and care. “The staff have worked so patiently with Kyle,” Mari shared. “When he gets upset, they help him calm down, talk it through, and get back on track. They don’t give up on him.”

Through years of guidance and structure, Kyle has learned to manage tough moments. He’s more confident, self-aware, and independent. “He’s come so far,” Mari said. “Alpha knows how to bring out the best in him.”

Today, Kyle is back where he feels most at home, working part-time at Alpha’s thrift stores. Every Monday he starts at the Milpas location, vacuuming and dusting before moving to the donation center to clean and organize. Then he heads to the Kellogg store to sort clothing and household items. “He’s up early, showered, ready to go before anyone else,” Mari said. “Sometimes his job coach has to remind him it’s time to go home.” Amy Pallotti, longtime Alpha staff, describes him as dependable and proud of his work. “Kyle notices the little things that matter. He’s reliable, thoughtful, and takes great pride in doing a job well. You can see how much Alpha means to him.”

For Kyle, Alpha is more than a program—it’s part of who he is. It’s where he’s made friends, found joy in volunteering, and discovered the pride of a hard day’s work. “Alpha has been a constant,” Mari said. “From the time he was 13 until now, they’ve always been there. The staff know him, understand him, and celebrate him.” That stability has been transformative for their whole family. Kyle’s two sisters, both special education administrators, know the importance of trusted community beyond family. “Alpha gave Kyle independence and belonging,” Mari said. “It’s where he feels accepted, respected, and safe.”

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Stories like Kyle’s show what Alpha Resource Center’s mission looks like in action, empowering individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities by supporting families, creating opportunities, and fostering belonging. Through programs such as Katie’s FUNd, the CatOaks Day Program, and Employment Services, Alpha provides not only support and skill-building but friendship, joy, and purpose. When asked what he loves most about Alpha, Kyle smiled and said, “Being with my friends!”

**We all want to belong. And every day, Alpha Resource Center helps make stories like Kyle’s a reality.**

