

A ROCKIN' NEW LIFE

SAWYER GOODSON, WHO IS AUTISTIC,
AND HIS BROTHER EVAN WERE BOTH SCHOOL
MISFITS-UNTIL THEY FORMED A BAND. FOR
THEM, AND THEIR PARENTS, THAT CHANGED
EVERYTHING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Just before noon on the field behind Chico Junior High School, Sawyer Goodson, 13, sits at his drum kit, oblivious to his three band mates and dozens of kids watching him. Idly tapping a drumstick against his cheek, Sawyer, who is autistic, counts rooftop air-conditioning ducts and scans the air for bees.

“Thawyer, you ready?” his brother, Evan, 11, shouts with his trademark lisp. Sawyer thrusts his drumsticks skyward, then slams them down as the band explodes into a rollicking version of the White Stripes’ Seven Nation Army. The crowd goes wild, a churning sea of backpacks and baggy jeans.

Classmates cheering their sons - it’s a sight Dan and Julie Goodson thought they’d never witness. Sawyer, diagnosed at 6 with Asperger’s syndrome, a mild form of autism, has an unnerving way of staring at people and, at other times, disrupting class with grunting sounds. Evan, along with a speech impediment that makes him sound as if he has marbles in his mouth, has other issues, including extreme sensitivity to certain noises and a tendency to cry during class. In the unyielding social pecking order of school kids, Sawyer and Evan Goodson were outcast ignored or, worse, taunted with names like “freak” and “weirdo.”

But not anymore. Ever since they formed their band, Jet Fuel Only, life for the Goodson family of Chico, Calif., began to change. “Before,” recalls Julie, 46 when I’d take them to school, I used to worry and worry. I’d worry they were being teased and there was nothing I could do to protect them. These days, though,

Sawyer's disconnected manner and Evan's idiosyncrasies pass for a type of cool- after all, rock musicians are supposed to be different. Now, when I drop them off, their friends run up to them and hug them. Julie says. "It just warms my heart."

Dan Goodson's heart was broken when, three years ago, he would stop by the school at lunch hour and see Sawyer sitting alone on the lawn. By fourth grade, says Goodson, he was the go to guy to get picked on. Goodson, a 44 year old air-transport pilot, had also been teased growing up. He used to wear thick glasses and he couldn't bear the thought of his sons suffering through their school years. All I wanted was for them to have friends, to give them a bit of self respect, he says.

The way to do that? Give them something to be good at, Goodson decided. Recalling an article he'd read on music's effect on the brain, he started searching out instruments for his sons. Every specialist I asked told me not to waste my time, he says, laughing. But I was desperate. While little research exists on the subject, some therapists say music can help autistic kids by focusing their obsessive tendencies in a social direction. They can develop an interest that can be shared with others, says Dr. Susan Schmidt-Lackner an autism specialist at UCLA. Evan quickly locked onto guitar. Sawyer couldn't bear feeling the strings against his fingertips but showed a facility for drums, copying a rhythm his father tapped out and wearing earmuffs and goggles to buffer himself from the still-new sounds and sensations.

The two played their first former elementary school in February 2005, performing covers of tunes by the Beatles, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple. That first concert changed our lives, recalls Evan a sixth-grader at Citrus Elementary School whose rock idol is AC/DC guitarist Angus Young. Kids started asking me to autograph their arms. Sawyer rocks back and fourth as his brother talks. I'm just happier when I play music, crazily happy, says Sawyer, in seventh grade at Chico Junior High. And the kids treat me differently now. Soon they were joined by bass player Emma Blankenship, 12, who has known them since Kindergarten, and

guitarist David Love, 12, who became a fan while watching footage of the concerts on their web site (www.jetfuelonlyband.com).

Once empty, the boys' social calendar is filling up with birthday parties and sleepovers. Around here, they are rock stars, says Sierra Gonzalez, 11, one of the boys' pre-band pal. Joseph Grundy, 11 used to avoid Evan after meeting him last year. I didn't really have much to do with them, he recalls. But after I Heard them play, I wanted to be their friend. Kids like rock. What else can I say?

The boys' biggest fan, however, is their 7-year old, severely autistic brother Cameron. Nonverbal and withdrawn much of the time, he has started to play air guitar when his brothers jam in the garage. I watch the interaction, says Julie, and I just can't believe what I'm seeing.