

## Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

Lisa: I started working with Chris in the spring of 2001. I was substitute teaching in an elementary school, and I went into a classroom where he was. He was a little bit challenging at the time, because at the time he was eight years old and nonverbal. So for Christopher, because he couldn't tell you what he wanted, what he didn't want, what he liked, what he didn't like, he was extremely frustrated much of the time. And so when I met him, I was a little apprehensive, and interestingly enough, the aide that was working with him at the time, who was leaving to get her master's, said, "Lisa, you are the one to work with this child." And I looked at her and I said, "Why me?" So as it turned out, I substituted one day for Christopher and he looked into my eyes and smiled at me, and we've had a connection ever since.

Q: And what prompted you to bring Chris to the Garden to volunteer?

Lisa: Well, at this point, he's on a vocational track at school. He's a senior in high school, and we are trying to train him to independently be able to work within the community in some sort of job. He has several areas that he works in, but I felt like this would be, could be a good match, because it's outside. There is so much to do. So I figured that there might be a need. He's a very strong boy. He loves to help. He wants to please, so I just took a chance, and we filled out volunteer applications, and we talked to you.

Q: And what challenges did you find when you first started volunteering at the Garden?

Lisa: Christopher still is what I guess you would call semi-nonverbal, because he still has a very difficult time understanding people. So he needed an interpreter, and I was the interpreter. When we got here, the first thing we did was worked in the rose garden, and we were doing the mulching. He wasn't particularly fond of the roses, because they had thorns in them and we'd get in the middle of them and get caught on all sides. But we had a very good volunteer, or not volunteer. I guess he was an employee, Neil, who was very good to us, and he just took Chris under his wing, and always gave him lots of encouragement, and just jobs for us to do. And after that little stint ended, we started working on the plant sale, and that's where Christopher really got involved with other volunteers. And I will tell you that when we first started the looks on peoples' faces and the apprehension that was just in the air was, you know, you could cut it with a knife. I was a little uncomfortable because I was trying to keep him focused, and I was also trying to explain to other people that it was really okay, and that he was able to do whatever they asked him to do. I might just have to explain it. And the neat thing about it was, was at that first plant sale-- we've done several now. But at the first one, each day another person would sort of be friendly to him, and as the walls came down, and he was the one that, in my opinion, really did the whole thing. He's got a wonderful personality. He smiles a lot. He'll do anything you want.

Q: He modified his behavior more than some of us.

A: Right. And so he was willing to do anything, and he just melted the people. I mean, you know, and people just sort of began to embrace him. So it wasn't just an overnight thing, but now, being part of the team at the Garden, he has lots of friends. People are constantly giving him positive feedback, and all those people that I thought, "Boy, we'll never be able to work with them," are just great with him. I mean, so it's just been a wonderful experience, not only for him in that way to be accepted and to be a part of a team and the community, but I think that he's done as much as anybody to educate people about people with disabilities.

Q: Chris, what project was your favorite project?

Chris: Stick house.

Q: The stick house?

Chris: Yes.

A: And I would say that Chris feels a lot of ownership of that stick house, and whenever he brings people that we know to the Garden, that's the first place he likes to show them, and he acts like it's just his own place. When he gets there, that's his. So he's very proud of that stick house.

Chris: Yes.

Q: And Christopher, you've made such an example that we have another student that wants to come and do some of the same things. So it's exciting, Chris. It is exciting. Yes, yes.