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Ready to walk: Autism doesn't slow Cookeville man

by Liz Engel Clark

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COOKEVILLE -- It's a simple task that many take for granted: Counting change at the checkout counter.

But it's a skill that Chaz Gothard is working hard to master, and has been gaining confidence in, thanks to help from a personal assistant assigned to him through Community Options Inc. Chaz is autistic and has Asperger's syndrome, a diagnosis his mother said was made when he was about 6 years old. Chaz, who is now 27, lives on his own, works part time at Goodwill as a custodian and Community Options provides support services for him for six hours a day, six days a week -- helping him with daily living activities such as shopping, cooking and paying

bills.

He's been gaining confidence with the help of the personal assistant and is more willing to step out of his comfort zone, something his mother attributes to Community Options, a national nonprofit that offers residential and employment support services to people with developmental disabilities.

"Chaz is just a remarkable young man. He's really come so much farther than I ever would have expected him to," Gothard said. "He could not manage by himself, totally, but with a little bit of support, he is really doing nicely on his own. And Community Options is that organization that provides him with that little bit of support."

Gothard found Community Options, which has had roots in the Cookeville community since 2004, with some assistance from the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and was attracted to the Cookeville branch of the nonprofit because of its smaller size. She said they have been able to accommodate his individual needs -- meetings are held every so often to determine Chaz's goals, and his personal assistant helps incorporate his interests into daily tasks. For example, his mother said he's been fascinated most recently with chemistry and antiques, so when shopping, Chaz is able to practice paying for items found during those trips out on the town.

"I think he is more self-confident now," Gothard said. "He is not afraid to try something new because he knows somebody's got his back."

Chaz and his mother are gearing up for a special fundraiser that will be held this

weekend. To help raise funds for Community Options, the organization will present a series of 5K races during Valentine's Day weekend in 24 cities in 10 states. In Cookeville on Saturday, Feb. 12, the Cupid's Chase will begin at 10 a.m. on the Tennessee Tech campus in front of Prescott Hall, located at 1 William L. Jones Drive. Day-of registration begins at 8:30 a.m. The cost to participate is \$20.

Chaz will be participating, Gothard said. He just hopes the weather isn't too cold, he said with a smile.

To register for the race, visit www.comop.org/cupidschase or www.active.com. All participants will receive a T-shirt, and medals will be awarded to top finishers in each age category.

Sponsors are still needed for the Cookeville event, organizers said, and businesses are being urged to extend a "Corporate Challenge" to their employees, which would involve using incentives, such as a paid day off or paid registration fee, to encourage more people to participate.

If anyone is interested in becoming a sponsor or would like more information regarding the race, contact Robin Gray at 372-0955.

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