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# The Claremont Autism Center

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE  
THE CLAREMONT AUTISM CENTER

SUBMITTED TO  
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AND  
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BY  
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Working at the Claremont Autism Center for psychology credit was an opportunity I thought too good to be true. Prior to being acquainted with the Center, I didn't even know it existed, tucked away in a tiny collection of small Seaman Hall rooms. *Play with kids and we'll count it as part of your degree*, I heard. I think that's how most students view the Claremont Autism Center at first: a freebee to lighten the load.

In a sense, working at the Autism Center is easier than most classes. The homework is minimal; there are no straightforward lectures. Everything learned is in a far from traditional setting, and the four hours a week sneak by unlike any class setting I've ever experienced. And yet, the games and the laughs had in the Autism Center in no way translate into a less informative academic course. Rather, the Autism Center offers enlightenment like many classrooms cannot.

We learn life skills in many different ways at CMC. Most of mine have been learned through interacting with my peers outside of the classroom. At dinner, at parties, in the dorms, together we've grown to understand how to live with others. There is an overarching theme however, 18-22 years old. When integrated into a class of children with Autism, your paradigm shifts. Sometimes they don't understand you. Sometimes you don't understand them. Maybe they can't come up with the words to express what they're thinking, or how they're feeling. The experience is humbling. But what you learn through the process is how to mold yourself into a patient observer with tactful impulses. Each student works towards sculpting the skills these children need to function in an unconfined society. No class has been more rewarding.

My positive experiences with the Autism Center inspired me to make my senior thesis a documentary film about the Center's incredible opportunities made available for families and students. My knowledge of the Center, as well as my experience in MASJ (Media Arts for Social

Justice – a documentary course taught at Pitzer College by Professor Gina Lamb), both served as great tools as I began such a lofty, one semester project. My goal was to make an advocacy piece that spoke to the quality of the Center, its children, students, and research. I also hoped to bring attention to the major deficit in funding the Center is currently battling. If financial support does not increase there is a very real possibility that the Claremont McKenna Autism Center will be forced to close its doors.

Currently, the Center is open every week on Tuesday and Thursday from 2:00pm – 6:00pm. While working on my senior thesis I generally attended in two-hour segments, or long enough for the memory card in my Panasonic HD150 to be filled with children playing games and working for positive reinforcements. In the beginning, my thesis statement was generic: The Claremont Autism Center is good. Why? The road to discovering the intricacies within this presumption helped me sculpt a confident belief that what I am doing is not only beneficial to my own comprehension of Autism, but to the Center that will benefit from the dissemination of my thesis to CMC Alumni and other organizations. How many seniors get to work daily with both the source and product of their research?

After a constant accumulation of Autism Center footage, as well as interviews from the Center's staff, I moved into an editing room in Pitzer's Media Production Center. There I pieced together the footage to make my documentary a continuous narrative on the Center's most positive qualities. I focused on three children, Royce, Nate, and Peter. I tried to give a glimpse of their individual stories through interviews and footage of them in workspaces or playing games at the Center. With each child, I included a main practice of the Center that positively affects them or their family.

The last quarter of my documentary embodies the reason for which I began this project. Autism funding is being cut nationwide and on the state level. Not only is the center losing government funding, CMC has threatened to take away the measly five thousand dollars they contribute annually. It was the thought of these losses that sparked my ambition to create a film that would advocate for the continuation of such an important organization. Through a combination of staff and parent interviews the specific needs of the center are detailed (better technology, functioning toys), with a consensus on the detrimental lack of funding.

Ultimately, I learned a tremendous amount while creating my senior thesis. My mastery of the editing program Final Cut Pro will help me in my film career. As will the camera techniques and technical work I learned in filming. I feel more comfortable asking questions and learned to be relentless in getting the best from my interviewees. However, more than the technical skills I bettered, I appreciate the relationships I developed working so intimately with such a tight knit community. I came to the Center with an open mind and that has continued to benefit the way I relate with both the families and workers. I feel especially close to everyone involved.

This thesis means a lot more to me than a research paper would have. There have been few projects in my college career that have had conjured the sense of passion and purpose I feel now. My favorite aspect of this product is that I get to share it with those I've been working with. It feels like I am handing them a gift for a better future. I am certain what I've done will make a difference for The Claremont Autism Center. There is no better testimony than a parent speaking to the power of a program that has revolutionized the way they live with their child. Now those statements are in a cohesive film and ready for distribution.