



Casey Thayer, 22, was diagnosed with autism when she was 5. She cannot form sentences or words but communicates through her own form of sign language and humming. People with autism often have habits that help release their feelings of being overwhelmed or frustrated. For Casey, that habit is shredding. Casey, who recently moved from her parents' Birdseye home to an assisted living facility in Jasper, shredded a piece of plastic while walking along her family's driveway April 27.

# Humming A New Tune

*When Casey Thayer became too old to attend high school, it was time for another change. Her parents helped their autistic daughter move across the county to an assisted living facility in Jasper.*

Story by **Jonathan Streetman**  
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Casey Thayer walked into her new home and dropped her jacket and backpack on the living room floor. She'd been there once before on a tour with her parents. This time, she wasn't sure where to go now that she was alone. Every day before, Casey would have boarded the bus at Forest Park High School and returned to her Birdseye home nestled deep in the lush green of the countryside. But on May 1, the young woman who has severe autism and does not speak, moved into an assisted living home in Jasper. It's one of several ranch-style homes facing Jasper Middle School along Portersville Road. Caretaker Carrie Phipps asked Casey to pick up her belongings and tote them to her bedroom. Inside her new abode sat an empty

wooden dresser, a hutch with her TV and VCR and a bare queen-sized bed. Face down with twisted glasses and a backpack still in her clutches, she napped on the bed, her curly golden perm sufficing as a pillow. There she stayed until nearly 7 p.m. Casey's parents, Doug and Janice Thayer, arrived at the Jasper home about 8 that evening. Casey stood near the front door, humming to herself, waiting for her parents. It had been only 12 hours since Janice put Casey on the bus that morning with Doug right behind her, just like any other day. Only they knew the bus wouldn't carry Casey after school. There were tears in both parents' eyes as the bus headed toward Forest Park, where Casey has spent the last six years. Under Indiana law, a student ages out of special education at age 22. They knew once Casey was no longer

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Casey's mother, Janice, lit 22 candles on an ice cream cake for Casey's birthday April 27 at the Thayers' home in Birdseye. Because of state law, Casey has aged out of public schooling and her time at Forest Park High School ended in May.



# Casey

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occupied during school hours, their schedule would have to change.

Janice walked through the front door of her daughter's new home with a bag full of clothes.

"Are you needing these things?" Janice asked Casey, still humming like a small, high-pitched engine revving.

"Hi, sweetie," Doug said. "I missed you, too."

The week before Casey's move was hectic.

On Saturday, April 26, Janice took Casey to Forest Park's prom, a rite of passage for any high school girl. Bright lights and the loud music of a high school dance could provide too much stimulus for an autistic individual, but Janice said Casey loved every second.

Casey's brother Emerson, an incoming Forest Park senior, was there with a group of his friends. Casey was there with her mother.

"I honestly think she felt like Cinderella or Belle that day and if it takes me going with her to make that happen, that's what I'm going to do," Janice said.

The next night, the Thayers celebrated Casey's 22nd birthday at home with an ice cream cake. Casey sat on her favorite stool on the end of the bar as she blew out the candles.

Doug and Janice soaked in the moments with Casey that week, hanging out with her as she sat in the swing in their backyard. Casey loves to swing and often spends hours getting lost in the rhythmic motion, feeling the wind dance in and out of her curls. When she visits her Birdseye home on weekends, the swing is often her first destination.

Janice took Casey on long walks around their sprawling property, visiting with their ponies, Daisy, Sheila Tequila and Duchess. The family dogs, Coco, Midnight and Spot, sometimes joined for a while before wandering off.

That Thursday morning in May when Casey's parents put her on the school bus for the last time, Doug wondered aloud if Casey knew what they knew — things weren't ever going to be the same.

As Casey's new room began to fill with her belongings, so too did her anxiety. She hugged her parents nervously each time they came back from the truck with her jewelry box or more clothes or the deep red sheets Janice used to make Casey's bed.

Soon the sounds of an old "Pinocchio" VHS tape filled the room, providing a familiar soundtrack in an unfamiliar place. Casey sat atop her bed, legs crossed, as Doug and Janice hauled in more items. Janice sang along with Jiminy Cricket. The Thayers have watched a lot of Disney movies over the years, and still enjoy them all; "Pinocchio" remains a favorite.

Doug stood in the doorway, watching his wife organize Casey's new life as best she

could.

"She's going to have a hard time turning loose," Doug said as Janice described Casey's bedtime routine to her daughter's new caretaker.

The supported living home has a rotating staff of caretakers, meaning someone is awake and available 24/7. It requires considerable explanation of Casey's tendencies. It's a learning experience for everyone, Casey most of all.

Waiver/supported living is different from a group home setting in that Casey almost always has one-on-one care if she needs it. In her home, there are just three residents. During the day, there are always two staffers. One worker stays every night.

There are five other assisted living homes run by CRF First Choice in Jasper, with a total of 20 residents.

Emily King, CRF First Choice area supervisor, said while Casey is one of the youngest residents in their care, she is not the only nonverbal autistic individual they oversee. CRF First Choice is a Bloomington-based company that provides services for individuals with disabilities.

"I think she's benefitting greatly from being here," King said. "It's different from being at home, in all the hustle and bustle. Living here, she still gets out in the community but it's more adapted to her needs."

CRF requires Community Habitat hours during which residents are given one-on-one time in public. That often means trips to a grocery store, city pool or park. King

said interaction with area residents is vital for both Casey and to those she comes in contact with.

"Since I started 10 years ago, I can see the change of how the community is interacting with everyone with special needs," King said. "It's not so much of a shock anymore."

When everything had been moved in, the Thayers lingered, unaware of what came next.

Doug leaned over his daughter, asking if she liked her new home. Are you going to be happy here? This is your place now, do you know that? Casey stared at the TV but began to play with Doug's beard, unable to resist one of her favorite stimulants even while ignoring her father.

"I think she's zoning us out," Janice said, concerned.

"There's no telling what's going on in those little curls," Doug replied.

There have always been challenges with Casey.

She was diagnosed with pervasive developmental delay when she was 2, but her parents had begun to suspect their daughter was autistic. Their diagnosis was confirmed by doctors when Casey was 5. In those early years, she would often act out. Her loud humming prompted the pastor of their church at the time to suggest Doug and Janice attend church separately so they could leave Casey at home. They found a new church, where they were wel-

come as a family.

She went through a phase where she'd rip her glasses apart. Doug kept a pile of spare parts he used almost daily. They taught her to shred pieces of paper instead.

Once when she was little, she covered nearly two rooms in the Thayers' former home in U.S. Postal Service stamps. They began getting her Disney sticker books instead.

She's always wandered off, and that still worries Doug and Janice. At their home, a perimeter fence installed with the help of



Casey attended her final high school prom with her mother at Forest Park on April 26. Although many people with autism are overwhelmed by loud noise and wild lights, Casey loved to dance and watch her classmates interact.



Casey and her father, Doug, made the sign language symbol for "I love you" before Casey boarded the school bus May 1. Casey did not come home after school that day, but was instead picked up by her new caretakers and taken to her new home.



Casey rode a horse named Chief at Freedom Reins Therapeutic Riding Program in Jasper on April 30. Casey attends the riding sessions each week.

a grant helped Casey learn her boundaries. When she forgot or simply disregarded them, a motion detector hidden in a bird feeder at the end of the driveway alerted the Thayers that she'd gone for a walk.

When Casey was in second grade, she banged her head against concrete walls at school. But daily notes from her teacher were mostly positive. That concerned the Thayers.

"My kid is banging her head against a concrete wall and that's a good day? It's like, what's wrong here?" Doug said.

As young parents, they took slights from other people hard.

It hurts when others don't understand your child. It hurts even more when you don't always understand her.

Eventually, Casey began to calm down with the help of a variety of behavioral therapies, including riding horses at Freedom Reins Therapeutic Riding in Jasper, and the Thayers developed their own sign language to open a channel for communication. Casey's first sign, moving four fingers in a circular motion on her left palm, was "cookie."

Friends began supporting the family however they could. They'd ask why they hadn't brought Casey to a sporting event or party when the Thayers had arranged care to spare them the potential hassle.

"We've cleared a lot of hurdles, but we banded into a lot of them first. (We were) carried over others by special people," Doug said with tears in his eyes.

As veteran parents, they've become indifferent to criticism. But harking back to those early days brings back the pain each challenge inflicted.

As Casey got older and closer to leaving Forest Park, the Thayers knew a difficult decision loomed. Doug considered taking early retirement from his teaching job at Orleans High School, but he'd have to buy out several years of his retirement funds. Janice couldn't afford to leave her job at Crawford County High School. They count on dual incomes.

The harsh winter this year that blanketed southern Indiana in ice was one long nightmare for Doug and Janice. They con-

tinually worried if Casey's caretaker would be able to make it to their house in time to let her in after school. Often they received a call from the caretaker letting them know Casey would be home alone if one of them didn't drop everything and scurry back. They began to worry their employers were growing tired of them leaving at odd hours or missing patches of work.

Medicaid pays for much of the costs of Casey's care, but the Thayers count on the insurance provided by their employers for the rest. Losing one or both jobs was not an option.

Sometime this past February, the Thayers knew something would have to change.

Moving Casey into a care facility was something they had discussed. A few years back, they toured the home in which Casey currently lives, but the timing didn't seem right. After discussions with Casey's behavioral clinician and examining CRF's homes in Jasper, they ignited the conversation again.

Doug and Janice asked King all kinds of questions about activities, safety, money, diet and staff experience. They wanted to know if their daughter would be happy.

"They really just wanted to make sure she wouldn't be sitting in the living room all day," King said.

When they learned a bedroom would open in May, the Thayers made the tough decision: When Casey finished school, she'd leave home.

Casey is most confident when she's on the back of an old horse named Chief. For the past eight years, she's been attending therapeutic riding at Freedom Reins.

When they arrive, Casey exits the Thayer's Prius and dons her red, white and blue helmet.

She has a routine she's followed for years. The helmet goes on first. Then, she walks through the office door, skipping an access point through open barn doors nearby. In the office, she flips through magazines and if there is any loose-leaf paper, she shreds it. Entering into the barn,

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Casey looked at her new home in Jasper from the passenger seat of Janice's car June 14. Casey now resides with two other residents under 24-hour care but Janice often picks her up on weekends for the day to attend church services or visit family.



Doug embraced Janice as Casey's school bus pulled away from their driveway May 1. That day she was picked up from school by her new caretakers and taken to her new home. "I wonder if she realizes it is the last time," Doug said.



# Casey

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she moves straight for the stables. After a quick inspection, she sits down in one of the white plastic lawn chairs, patiently waiting for her lesson.

That routine has changed. On a Wednesday evening in the middle of June, she arrived in her caretaker's minivan. Doug and Janice, often accompanied by Casey's sister Hailey, an incoming sophomore, showed up soon after.

Janice walked into Freedom Reins' barn and hugged Casey from behind just before the lesson was to begin. Casey hummed, a piece of her routine back in order.

When she rode, Casey sat up straight and proud. With the help of a guide, she steered Chief around obstacles. Casey knew she was doing well and it showed. Her humming could often be heard from across the cavernous barn.

But before she ever sat on Chief's back or walked up the wooden ramp built to assist her climb aboard the horse, Casey admired a poster on the wall. Each rider at Freedom Reins gets to create their own poster. Casey's poster is right at the foot of the ramp. On it are photographs of Casey sledding with her siblings, posing with her Special Olympics bowling team, riding family pony Sheila Tequila and swimming at Holiday World & Splashin' Safari. There are pictures of the family dogs, past birthdays and wedding receptions. Smack in the middle is a picture of Casey with a fake mustache. There are little notes — "Casey likes: color red, horses, hugs, videos, books" and "Encourage: laughter, independence, effort."

It's a poster full of happy times, memories that idled in Doug and Janice's minds for months leading up to the move and still weeks after.

At the end of the session, Doug grabbed a Dad's Root Beer from the trunk of his car and handed it to Casey. The family chatted with the caretaker while Casey gave the fizzy drink her undivided attention. Soon, though, her family had to leave. They were

headed to the 4-H Fairgrounds, where Hailey had dog obedience class with Coco.

The Thayers hugged their daughter, signed "I love you" and piled back into the Prius.

Casey got into the middle seat of the minivan and waited to head back to her own home.

The Thayers' home is different now. It's the absence of noise they notice the most. Casey's humming. "The Three Caballeros" playing in Spanish from the basement with the volume cranked as high as possible. The motion detector at the end of the driveway. The cacophony of tones that once meant Casey was here — all silent.

Although they've brought Casey home a number of weekends since her move, the vibe has shifted.

There's a jar of peanut butter left unprotected, not hidden underneath Janice's bed so Casey couldn't eat the whole thing at once. Hailey's bedroom door is unlocked now that she doesn't have to worry about Casey wandering in and ripping apart her beaded necklaces. Coco sits in the chair Janice got Doug for Father's Day several years ago. It's the chair Casey used to occupy.

Doug cooks whatever sounds good for dinner instead of adhering to Casey's strict, gluten-free diet.

It's not that the Thayers have so much more free time. In fact, without Casey there to keep them on a strict schedule, Doug and Janice find they're scrambling more than before.

"There was this illusion that we'd have more time," Janice said. "That's not been the case at all."

And of course, they miss their daughter. Casey's new bedroom has begun to look more like home.

A few weeks after her move-in, a family portrait hung on the wall above her pillow. Her closet was neatly organized, her clothes scheduled and laid out by the days of the week. A responsibility chart was next to the TV.

Each time she visits home, more items come back to Jasper.

Ceramic angels, once displayed above her TV, adorn her bookshelf full of VHS

classics. Janice says Casey has always loved angels and, while she has always had a tendency to destroy her sister's things and other items that should be left alone, the fragile cherubs have remained intact.

On her night stand is the Polly Pocket doll Janice bought her a few weeks after the move, neatly stored inside its original box, accessories and all. Casey can spend hours playing with the tiny doll, fussing over its clothes, determined to turn her into a princess.

Casey is beginning to fit in with her fellow residents. When she first moved, Casey ate by herself on a stool at the end of the bar, her favorite place back home. She soon began pitching in with chores — she's not fond of sweeping the kitchen floor — and eating at the dining room table with the two fellow residents.

Casey has had trouble sleeping some nights, at times staying up until the sun rises, giggling as she watches movies. Doug was worried that might happen, but there's comfort in knowing a caretaker is always awake. Everyone knows the adjustment period is going to last a while. A typical transition could take a year before things start to feel normal. For a nonverbal individual like Casey, it might take longer.

Back in her Birdseye bedroom, even though plaques of Disney princesses are still draped over the closet, there's no more midnight giggling. Janice flips on the light switch, still decorated with some of Casey's favorite fictional maidens, to reveal the bare pink walls and deep red carpet — Casey's choices when they built the home.

On a piano remains her diploma, graduation photo and a Kleenex box she made when she was young.

Janice used to play the piano until Casey was about 6 months old. That's when she got too busy. Janice thinks she might take it up again soon.

Casey's bowling ball sits behind the door. The door has become Hailey's shoe rack.

A bed sits in the corner with the blanket her bus driver gave her one year for Christmas. The Thayers moved Casey's bed to Jasper so that when she walked into an unfamiliar place, she could at least lay her head someplace familiar. The bed in her old room,



along with the chest and dresser against the wall, came from a relative's home.

Not that it matters. When Casey visits her old home, as she does most weekends, she hardly spends time in her room. She's in the living room with her siblings, playing in the barn with a litter of new kittens or in her favorite swing.

She can't stay forever. Sunday night

always comes and Janice takes her daughter back home.

Casey's first tears came a few weeks after the move on one of those Sunday-evening trips across the county. She cried at the door until Janice finally said good night.

She's starting to find comfort in her new life. She shreds up junk mail and helps

crush aluminum cans. There are still questions about her diet, which Phipps, who has worked in the home for seven years, said she discusses with Janice every time she visits. Communication remains an issue, but staff is learning sign language. There's hope that Casey becomes more social with other residents but that may come with time. There's no rush.



After arriving at her new home for the first time May 1, Casey went to her room and sprawled on her bed.



Above: Once Casey discovered the bench in the backyard of her Jasper home could swing, she stayed there quietly by herself until dinner June 22.

Left: Janice and Doug visited Casey's new home to bring some of her belongings May 1.

"I think she's doing great," King said. "I've seen transitions go horrible. In fact, there's been times it just hasn't worked out. But for her it's going great. A lot better than even her (behavioral clinician) thought it would."

Phipps said Casey's smooth shift has amazed her.

"I really think she's happy. When she came in last night (after visiting her Birdseye home), she went right to her room and just did her own thing," Phipps said. "She really has been the easiest transition that we've had here in this house. ... We love her. We all want to see her happy."

Casey recently found a swing in the backyard where she can sit and rock back and forth for hours. It's a bench swing,

much gentler than the playground-style contraption she has in Birdseye, but it seems to do.

For the Thayers, the rush is still constant. Trips to the 4-H fairgrounds, work, evenings out with friends and trips to see Casey. They're as busy as ever.

Soon they'll all head back to school and their new normal will take over.

Casey will exist, at least a little, in the periphery.

She'll continue to find her own routine in a ranch house on Jasper's north side. It's no farmhouse in the woods, but it's a safe place for Casey to swing.

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