Boy wonder

At 14, a CU prodigy can answer a world of questions, but not this one: Who is my father?

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Most numbers are playthings to Ryan Kramer.

He was once bored on an airplane and memorized pi out to 40 decimals. His iPod holds 5,000 songs. His hero, Lance Armstrong, competed against 25- and 30-year-old professional cycle racers when he was 14. His own IQ is 181. He started college at the University of Colorado four years early. His Calculus for Engineers class lasts 50 minutes. He explained the most intimate details of his life to 8 million "Oprah" viewers. His favorite formula is the definition of a derivative, [F(X+H)-F(X)]/h, because it is so helpful in everything from maximizing the volume of a FedEx box to determining the orbit of a satellite.

And then there is a number Ryan Kramer simply can't get his head around. His father is sperm donor #1058. As a 14-year-old college student who rides to school with his mom, Ryan knows too much about aeronautical engineering and not nearly enough about where he came from.

One weekend in the late 1980s, a Los Angeles engineering student emerged from a "collecting room" and placed a sperm sample on the counter of California Cryobank, taking $35 for his efforts. Months later, Ryan's mother, Wendy Kramer, sat in a Colorado clinic with her then-husband and told the secretary to choose a sperm donor that seemed to look the most like him. The engineering student's samples were shipped to Colorado for $500, and she used them to conceive Ryan over the Labor Day weekend of 1989.

Ryan is genius material. His father is a number typed onto a file label. Those facts provide the bookends to all the Kramers know and don't know. While his head is crammed full of analytical geometry and chemical stoichiometry, a portion of his brain is cordoned off in reserve for the mystery marked "Dad." When he was 7 years old, Ryan scribbled a note to the sperm bank:

"I hav been wating to get in toch with you to find my dad." He demanded anything they could tell him, *"like his phon numder."*

# # # # # #

He skipped four grades and senior prom for this?

On his first day of classes at CU in late August, Ryan shuffled in his scarlet Crocs up the poured-concrete stairway leading to the academic holding cell that is the Engineering Center. He took a seat in the raked seminar seating of Room 265 amid a sea of 135 faces not as young as his, but just as scared. Room 265 has a cinder-block timelessness: The best and the brightest always have suffered here, always will suffer here. Stubbed pieces of chalk languish in metal trays like dinosaur bones. The sole spot of color in the cavernous off-white space is the periodic table, on a side wall, shaded in yellow, green, blue and purple.

VIDEO

Denver Post reporter Michael Booth describes Ryan Kramer's intellectual gifts, and his first days on campus as a 14-year-old. Booth's comments are part of a segment by 9News reporter Cheryl Preheim. Saturday, November 27th, 2004, 5pm.

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"We don't take any late homework," announces instructor Mary Nelson, projecting forcefully to the upper corners of the room as if she were hosting a "scared straight" visit to a penitentiary. "It must be under the door in my office by 9:50 a.m. on the day of class.

"There are no makeups for tests. If you have a car accident, then we can talk.

"There's a huge wait list for this class. If you get a 17 or below on the placement test, statistically you have only a 1 in 10 chance of passing this course.

"Look for study help. If you don't make it in this class, you can still make it in engineering; you'll just have to go a different route.

"As far as the textbook goes, we never cover everything in a section, even though you are responsible for everything in the section."

By 9:17, Nelson has dispensed with the niceties and written the first equation on the board, Q = {x/x is a repeating or terminating decimal}. Nelson seeks a response to her first question, and out of 135 pairs of hands, only one goes up. The hand does not belong to Ryan.

A good portion of Ryan's being had waited years for this day, the first taste of a college-level course that could make him feel like a fool, or make him feel fully alive. Going over his registration a few weeks before the semester, he had ticked off the highlights: "Calculus for Engineers; Chemistry 1111 and lab; Introduction to Aerospace Engineering. Finally, all fun classes," he said without irony.

Another sizable portion of Ryan's sizable frame remained that of an annoying adolescent, incapable of getting out of bed on time for arguably the most important day of his young life. Thirty miles up the canyon in Nederland that morning, Wendy had repeatedly poked her head into Ryan's rumpled room and cheered him on. He hissed at her from under the covers, pulled up high over his shaggy head. When he finally got up, he was already fully clothed after a midnight bout with nerves.

Wendy, 46, was used to that kind of ambivalence from Ryan. In late June he had been invited to a live-in orientation at CU for incoming freshmen, hundreds of new faces tramping around campus in groups and taking spirit-building hikes in Rocky Mountain National Park. Ryan made it through the socialization skits, where team leaders in bright yellow Buffs shirts play-acted as drunks and aggressive dates. Ryan made it through class registration, wireless laptop on his knees for the link to the registrar and a cellphone against his ear to consult with Wendy on second choices. He was proud of keeping his age secret all day long - "I talked to 15 people, and no one questioned it - I'm still in the safe zone," he said.

Sleeping was the hard part. Ryan would be living at home indefinitely but had planned to stay in a dorm during orientation to better fit in. Late the first night, he bounced around his room waiting for the two roommates he hadn't met yet. The empty room got to him. Who was about to walk in the door? Jocks? Geeks? Freaks? He called Wendy and begged to come home, and she relented, telling him to get the 10:10 p.m. bus back up the canyon to Nederland.

He did two more things on his way home that night. One, he kept the lie alive. Walking across campus with his backpack to get to the bus home, he stumbled across one of those 15 acquaintances from earlier in the day.

"Where you going?" he asked Ryan.

"To my car," Ryan replied.

"That's cool."

Another peer-missile successfully deflected. Then Ryan got on his cellphone and asked if his mom would stay up to tuck him in.

"And I never do that anymore, because he's up much later than I am," Wendy said. "That's the kind of kid I have right now."

Post / Glenn Asakawa

Ryan and his mother, Wendy Kramer, are partners in his education and the search for his genetic father - pursuits that have become inseparable. Forsaking other relationships and her career aspirations, she has spent thousands on Ryan's tuition and an online registry that helps sperm-donor siblings find each other.

Ryan could say the same thing. That's the kind of mom I have right now.

Two months after the orientation, Wendy could not resist hovering as Ryan negotiated the CU campus for his first day of classes. She tried to take his cues, hanging back slightly as he worked his way toward the engineering building and up the stairs to the seminar room.

As the class started, she disappeared for a while, but she couldn't help herself. She needed to know: Would this work? Had she done the right thing, bulldozing a path for him to go to the schools he wanted, when he wanted? His real friends were a couple of blocks away, starting the ninth grade.

Her own investment, moreover, was far too deep to let her disappear in the first hour of college. She gave up boyfriends, career ambitions, friendships and family quietude for years to make Ryan her full-time job. She downplayed her own obvious intelligence in favor of the dreamy idea that Ryan's gifts came from regions unknown. She is dipping into the savings she put away for years as an accountant in order to pay for Ryan's CU tuition, since he can't draw from a college fund left by a great-grandmother until he's at least 18.

So Wendy came back and sat with her back against the cinder blocks outside the calculus classroom, far enough from the door so that Ryan wouldn't see her, close enough to hear the next day's assignments.

Ryan came out looking jaunty. He started pulling his laptop out of his backpack to see if the engineering building had a good wireless signal.

"Are you sure you shouldn't brush up for the placement exam tomorrow?" Wendy asked.

"She said not to study," Ryan replied, ignoring her glance.

"Are you sure?" Wendy asked. "Is that the calculus homework for tomorrow? Isn't that like a whole week's worth of homework in high school?" She can't stand his nonchalance. The instructor put sample problems on the chalkboard during class. Did he get them right?

"I didn't do them," Ryan said with a shrug. "I was doodling." Wendy's eyes grew huge. Ryan wandered over to a nearby bulletin board, sporting offers of tutorials on hanging tags whose phone numbers can be torn off.

"Don't bother," Wendy called after him. "I already got two of them."

# # # # # #

Wendy often uses automobile metaphors to describe life with Ryan.

Thinking back on the randomness of selecting the sperm sample that would become her son, she said, "I asked for regular unleaded. They gave me premium." When defending that Ryan had tried 11 schools by the time he was 13, she explained it wasn't her leading

Post / Glenn Asakawa

Ryan Kramer's climb up these stairs at CU-Boulder is an apt metaphor for his ascent into the world of learning, one marked by extraordinary progress but

the way. "With Ryan, I feel like he's the one in the front driving the car, and I'm barely hanging on to the bumper."

also by gray and foreboding areas. Part of Ryan's academic experience has consisted of not advertising his age, 14, so he can better fit in with his classmates - but that has often meant scant interaction and loneliness.

Post / Glenn Asakawa

Ryan adjusts his mountain bike while on a ride near his home in Nederland.

Ryan was enrolled in college algebra at CU by age 11. Instead of Sports Illustrated, he has been pulling Aviation Week out of the mailbox for a year now. Though he took the college-entrance SAT test at just 13 to complete his application to CU-Boulder, Ryan scored 1180, putting him right at the average of CU's incoming freshmen.

It's not just the test scores that always have turned the heads of people around him. He's got a boundless curiosity in the world as a playground. At home, he flits between virtuoso runs of Beethoven up and down the piano keyboard, to rock 'n' roll chords on his guitar, to impressive flirtations with a cello. Outdoors, his grandmother Jacki observes, he'll go all out for biking, then golf, then tennis. He doesn't want to read books unless they are about designing airplanes, but he enters newspaper essay contests and wins. He's a green-tinted political lefty who loves things that blow up. He also captures disruptive mice in his living room and hauls them 3 miles away for live release, a bow to the Buddhist philosophy he has adopted.

This does not mean Ryan's mind stays in genius gear every minute of the day. He's a bounding adolescent, after all. There are days when his head seems too small for his husky shoulders, as he jumps onto the back of his mom's desk chair and threatens to topple her backward, or offers to back her car out of the garage, forgets the driver door is still open, and peels it backward off the frame like a sardine lid.

Post / Glenn Asakawa

Wendy helps Ryan study for an exam on chemistry, the subject of a four-hour lab where the crowded loneliness fueled his freshman freakout. "Chemistry sucked," he said after two weeks.

One day he'll kick at the tires of his world for moving too slowly, for not offering him learning commensurate with his skills. The next, a college instructor will wave a failing chemistry lab grade in his face, and he'll shrug. "Hey, I'm young." "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," said Ralph Waldo Emerson, who entered Harvard at age 14.

It was a first-grade teacher who, out of equal parts awe and frustration, first told Wendy she should get Ryan tested. Wendy took him to the Gifted Development Center in Denver for a battery of IQ tests.

"How are wood and coal similar?"

"At 15 cents a yard, how much will 7 feet of cloth cost?"

"Tap the yellow and red blocks in the following sequence."

When Wendy came back in for the results, center founder Linda Silverman handed her a box of Kleenex. She said, "Your son probably won't really be happy until he's in graduate school." He had scored 181 on the Stanford-Binet scale of intelligence; other tests that top out at lower scales consider 160 to be a "genius" level.

Silverman's center is a key player in a nationwide advocacy movement for exceptional children. Silverman's argument is that children with Ryan's abilities are "profoundly" gifted and often suffer the same kinds of "bigotry" from resentful classmates and educators that is now forbidden against other minority groups. Profoundly gifted means testing above 175 on the Stanford-Binet, Silverman said. Most school systems' gifted programs are geared toward students in the top 10 percent of the class, or those who might test with IQ scores ranging above 120 or so. (All schools use test scores as only one aspect of their gifted evaluations.)

The movement in the IQ scale is geometric rather than incremental, meaning a difference of 10 points can seem very wide. Silverman looked back over Ryan's test scores from eight years ago and used jarring examples. Imagine the opposite end of the IQ scale, she said. Ryan sits as far above an average IQ as a 16-year-old who still can't feed himself falls below the average IQ.

"It's as problematic to have a 20-year-old mind in a 9-year-old body as having a 9-year-old mind in a 20-year-old body," Silverman has written. "But it doesn't get much sympathy in our society."

Silverman's pursuit of the extra- extra-gifted has earned her some controversy. She claims to have tested 820 kids who scored IQs above 160, "more than any other place in the world."

Some educators are skeptical of Silverman's version of the Stanford-Binet compared to other IQ tests. It includes a form for high-end results whose answers have not been "normed" to the general population since 1972. Silverman believes it is the only test that can reflect the wide differences in exceptional children, since many tests stop their scales at about 160 IQ.

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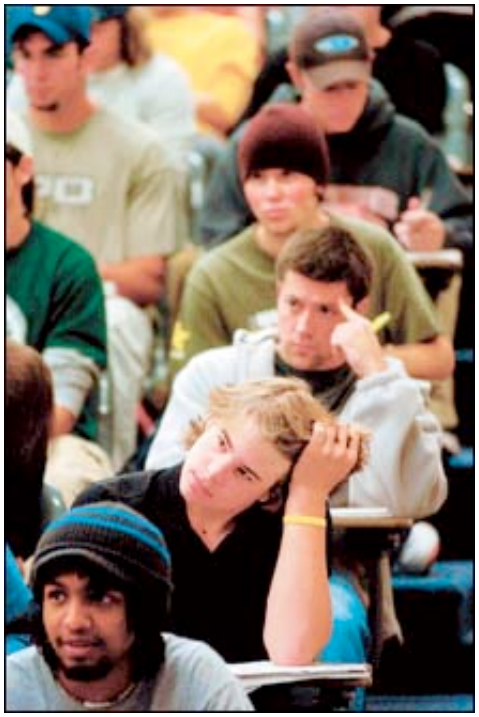
Clothing options at the ready, Wendy tries to wake up Ryan after a late night of studying so he can make his classes at CU.

James Borland of Columbia University's teachers college said high-end tests can be a silly distraction. "What does a higher score tell you?" he asked. "If they top out any test, that probably tells you all you need to know."

Publicity about high scores and inflated claims raised a note of caution as educators field parental requests for acceleration. Wendy Kramer asked for that kind of scrutiny. She encouraged local newspapers to write about Ryan's academic achievements and combined the publicity with plugs for the family's sperm-donor search. Short pieces about Ryan have appeared in both Denver papers, the Boulder Daily Camera, the Longmont Times-

Call and other publications.



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Ryan assumes the pose of many a harried student on his first day in calculus class but seemed happy for the challenge after the session ended.

Ryan's family is split on the high profile.

"I've always been afraid he's had too much to live up to," said Wendy's brother, Mitch, a veterinarian in the northwest Denver suburbs. "I'm of the mind-set that if you're going to be great at something, it's better to surprise people than to announce it and try to live up to it."

Ryan rolls his eyes and lets out a huge sigh when he hears the opinion of his uncle, whom he nevertheless feels close to. "I hated high school," he sputters. "Boredom is worse than death."

Wendy saw it as her job to temper such melodrama from Ryan, while becoming the advocate for his condensed education. Principals such as Ute Creek Secondary's Bob Carmody have had countless conferences with Wendy over the years. Asked about Ryan coming to Ute Creek last fall at age 13, hoping to graduate in nine months, Carmody holds up his fingers in quotation marks. "We didn't treat him as 'special.' We weren't giving him extra margins to screw up." Skipping grades may be a social issue for Ryan, Carmody said, "but academically, he'll kick butt."

Then imagine CU's skepticism as Ryan sat in school offices last spring at age 13 and asked to be admitted to the rigorous aeronautics engineering program. CU has hosted a few such ambitions - there is another 14-year-old starting this fall in a different department who has studiously avoided any publicity.

"The thing we're cautious about is how much of this is from the student, and how much is from the parent," said Jim Sherman, an assistant dean in the engineering college. "The parent in (Ryan's) case has been very involved, more involved than in some cases. But we think it's parental pride," he said, not presumption. And parental pride in Ryan's case, he added, "I can certainly understand."

The grade-skipping push among gifted students got a boost in September with a comprehensive study of "acceleration" by University of Iowa researchers. Gathering results from years of follow-up surveys of grade-skipping students across the nation, the "overwhelming" conclusion is that most students reported both academic success and, more important, sheer happiness. The most common reaction was, "this worked great for me," said study co-author Nick Colangelo of the Belin-Blank International Center for Gifted Education.

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The freshman stays in constant contact with his mother during the school day using instant messaging over a wireless network.

Every educator agreed that the grade-skipping, especially the radical form perfected by the Kramers over the past six years, must be well-planned.

While CU offers Ryan a mentoring program and tutoring assistance, few major universities pay as close attention to early scholars as the University of Washington. The campus offers two programs, one an on-site academy where students skip their junior and senior years of high school and attend accelerated prep. In the other, 12- to 14-year-olds start a one-year transition program into college, heavily supervised, with an adviser and a peer group while still living at home.

Post / Glenn Asakawa

Ryan clowns around with a plastic cup while being tutored in calculus by Seth Foreman, a graduate student in physics.

Kathleen Noble, director of the University of Washington program, said she can't imagine a 14-year-old starting college with as little university support as Ryan will get. But she also has seen students sail through while those around them worry themselves sick.

"One nice thing you can say about them is that they often get through graduate school before they have kids. And that's a great way to do it."

# # # # # #

At age 6, Ryan sat in the bathtub and shouted to his mom that he wanted to learn about electronics.

"I opened the children's encyclopedia and started reading to him," Wendy said. "He shook his head. He said, 'I want to learn about circuit boards and things.' I remember shaking my head and thinking, 'My god, what do I do?"'

Much of what she did involved handicapping local school systems like a racetrack bookie. To detail the list of the schools Ryan attended in the past six years, Wendy needed all of an index card, and had to turn it lengthwise. A Boulder Montessori from age 7 to 9. Rocky Mountain School for the Gifted and Creative, where he met his best friend, Connor Keating, and fit in best with the other kids. Then a disastrous turn at Nederland Junior High School, when Ryan was a sixth-grader taking eighth-grade courses. Wendy knew he

was unhappy there, but Ryan didn't always tell her the worst parts right away.

"How are things going these days?" Wendy asked him at one point during the three short months he lasted there.

"Oh, they're not bullying me in the hallways anymore," Ryan said.

"Why not?"

"Because I found another way to get to class, through a back door," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Aren't you a ball of rage?"

"I know where they're going in life, and I know where I'm going," he replied. Impressed as she was by the response, Wendy didn't buy it. She can see how much things bother him by tracking Ryan's nervous energy, his knee jiggles and ghost-typing on tabletops.

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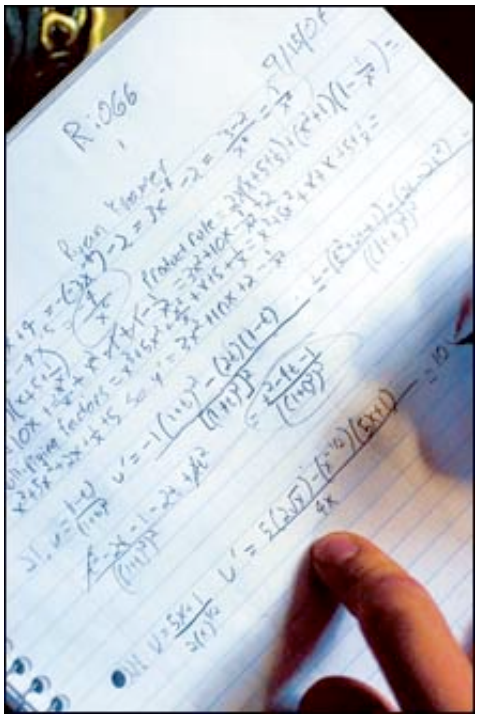
Wendy sits outside of Ryan's calculus class on his first day, far enough from the door so that he can't see her as she listens to the instructor. Her need to stay close stemmed in part from wondering if fostering his early college career had been a wise move.

Wendy's maternal default mode, switched on many times over his schooling career, is fury at the faceless pack of students - and some teachers, she is quick to add - who assume intelligence has to follow a normal chronology. "He's threatening to them," Wendy said, while Ryan watched her with a neutral look on his face. He's used to being talked about as if he were elsewhere. "They seem to want to teach him, 'You're not all that."'



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Ryan works on calculus problems. A few weeks before the semester, he listed the highlights of his schedule: "Calculus for Engineers; Chemistry 1111 and lab; Introduction to Aerospace Engineering. Finally, all fun classes," he said without irony.

But Wendy has a realistic mode as well, and when she switches over, Ryan eagerly speaks up to help list his faults.

"Containing his energy has always been his and my No. 1 challenge," she said, watching Ryan fidget in a north Boulder Starbucks chair while waiting to meet up with Connor. "It's his best attribute, and it can be his worst enemy. The symptoms for attention deficit disorder mirror those for highly gifted kids, and he's close. Sometimes I'll look in the rearview mirror and say, 'Hey ADD-boy, stop it."'

Ryan remembers a fourth-grade teacher with particular ire for forcing simple division on him when he was studying pre-algebra. He allows, however, that he may have been an equally terrible student. The teacher sent a note home one day: "Ryan needs to know he can't stand in the middle of the classroom and sing opera."

Mixed with the older students who have surrounded him for years, Ryan tends to talk too much and overplay the class clown. As Ryan finished his senior year in high school, at Longmont's Ute Creek charter academy, he was a 13-year-old in braces amid 18-year-olds buffing their own pickup trucks.

"He's changing more rapidly than other kids his age," said Ute Creek principal Carmody. "I think he'll be able to adjust, but he's not quite there yet."

Carmody's office became a refuge for Ryan, a childhood rest stop before the looming milestones of high school graduation and matriculation at CU. After nearly four decades overseeing teenagers ranging from the tremulous to the tremendous, Carmody is imperturbable. He has big, tired eyes and a knack for waiting to let even the most distractible students finish their own sentences, when other adults would finish for them.

Ute Creek was chartered by parents and educators out of the St. Vrain Valley School District four years ago as a college prep center, later expanding to support vocations as well.

Ute Creek is shoehorned into a former technology warehouse in a light-industrial section of Longmont, across from a motorcycle store. Charter schools mean "the teachers help plunge the toilets," Carmody said. But Ute Creek also means freeing Ryan from running the traditional high school gantlets he hates: the long tunnels of clanging lockers, the lunchroom cliques, the hallway fights.

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Ryan celebrates his May graduation from Ute Creek High in Longmont. He sometimes broke away from his family and best friend Connor Keating because Channel 9 was doing a story on him - part of the publicity that fuels his awkward social position.

A small school, paradoxically, gave him more room to use his big frame, smacking around volleyballs with classmates in the limited play area. He could compare iPod lists with the skateboarders.

Still, Ryan found his conflicts.

He felt restless in the physics class at Ute Creek, believing once again it was going too slow. He was meeting each Tuesday with the chairman of the CU Aerospace Engineering Department, a man who helped design the F-16 fighter jet; almost any high school physics teacher would suffer by comparison.

So Carmody, who teaches math and science at other Ute Creek levels, began tutoring Ryan privately in physics, in his office.

Post / Glenn Asakawa

At 11, Ryan was taking college algebra. Beyond academia, his boundless energy finds release in biking, golf and tennis. He's a Buddhist perched on the left wing but loves things that blow up.

Carmody started the session with a gentle hand on Ryan's shoulder as he took a seat next to him. Ryan was still during the meetings, free for the moment of the usual knee jiggles and finger-tapping.

Sometimes they discussed equations from "Physics: An Incremental Development," a common home- schooling text: P1V1/T1=P2V2/T2 where P is Pressure, V is volume and T is temperature.

"He's way ahead of me intellectually," Carmody said, and Ryan sitting next to him didn't bother to demur or roll his eyes. "But I've been seeing and using these textbooks for 37 years. I don't know if it's knowledge or not - it's repetition, repetition, repetition."

Carmody also used the sessions to gently tease Ryan into thinking about the challenge he and Wendy have chosen for the fall. On this particular day in late May, Ryan provoked Carmody by announcing, "I don't know if there's anything I'll miss about high school."

College, Carmody warned, means "no teacher is asking, 'Ryan, are you done with that assignment? Ryan, are you OK?' No one cares. It's your responsibility."

Ryan admitted a lot of people have been telling him self-discipline will be the hardest part. Wendy monitors his life very closely, but she can't force him to pay attention through a four-hour chemistry lab.

"I had to clean out my closet at home last weekend," Ryan said. "I found out I hate organizing things - because once I organize it, I don't know where anything is anymore. I definitely need to work on that." Carmody nodded and snickered: point proved, point taken. Class dismissed.

As the 67 Ute Creek seniors gathered at Raintree Plaza for graduation May 27, Ryan palled around with the friend who decided to honor Ryan's biggest transition yet by wearing a toga made of a checkered tablecloth.

Other seniors prepared for the ceremony by shrink-wrapping each others' SUVs in the parking lot and spray-painting the windshields. Ryan and his buddy Connor discussed Connor's purple toga and the raft they built on Nederland's Barker Reservoir earlier in the spring.

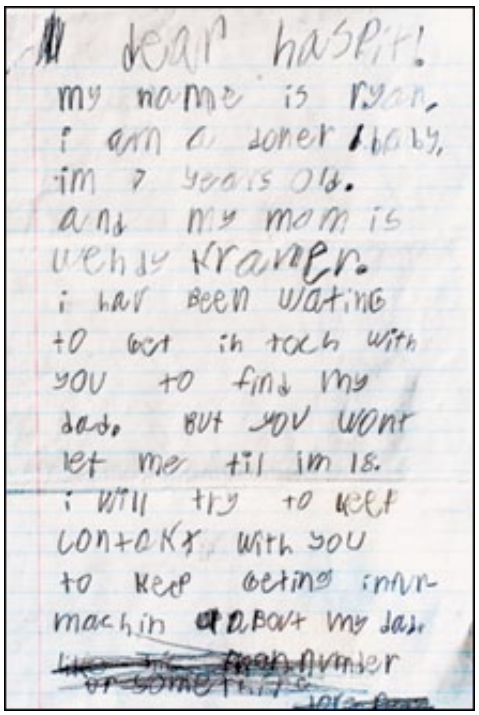
Connor, though himself a gifted student, is the primary pause button for Ryan's brain. The raft was a Tom-and-Huck inspiration.

They chopped up deadfall pine with camp hatchets and lashed the skinny poles together. When they floated it, off the isolated southern shore of the reservoir, they quickly found themselves ankle-deep in the frigid spring runoff. So they next tried what any goof-offs and budding engineering students would do: finding an SUV tire tube and strapping it to the bottom of the poles. It was just enough buoyancy to float precisely three-quarters of their combined body weight, and they declared themselves geniuses.

During Ute Creek graduation night in the ballroom of the hotel, Ryan occasionally had to break away from Connor, his uncle Mitch, and his mom and grandmother. He was wearing a TV mic during the entire ceremony for a story by KUSA-Channel 9. Ryan and Wendy often have discussed Ryan's awkward social position on TV, publicity that of course makes his social position even more awkward.

"Hunter." "Kansgen." "Kesler." "Kramer" got an acceptable yell from the crowd, as Ryan's brace-bracketed teeth flash 2 feet high on the ballroom screen.

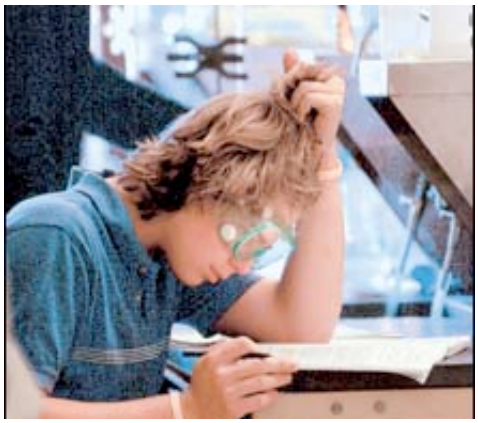
He grabbed his diploma from Carmody, then struck a Groucho Marx crouch and waddled back to his seat with jazz hands. Only his mom and grandmother laughed, and that was fine with him. Back in his third-row seat as the awards drone on, he flipped over the diploma and stared hard. Five days after his 14th birthday, at his sixth school in six years, ranked fourth by grade-point average out of 82 seniors, he finally had left high school behind.



Dear haSPit!
my name is ryan.
i am a loner boy,
im 7 years old.
and my mom is
wendy kramer.
i har been wating
to get in tach with
you to find my
dad. But you wont
let me til im 18.
i will try to keep
contact with you
to keep geting infor-
mach,in about my dad.
like the [illegible]
or something

Post / Glenn Asakawa

A copy of the note 7-year-old Ryan scribbled to the sperm bank asking for his father's identity.



Ryan was not on the A list for Ute Creek graduation parties, but he got a couple of hugs from giddy seniors out in the lobby. He and Wendy started a loud shout fest, as the 9News camera zoomed in, lights blazing.

Wendy had two words to say, a bold statement she would laugh at come September.

"I'm done," she said.

# # # # # #

Ryan knows how tall his donor was, 6 feet; what color his eyes were, blue; his date of birth, in 1967; and the birth dates of the donor's parents.

The donor wrote on a short form that he was Caucasian and had an aptitude for mathematics. Regarding Donor #1058, that is the known world.

If Wendy Kramer were seeking a donor today, his known world would be a far more

Post / Glenn Asakawa

Ryan compiles data from a chemistry experiment during his four-hour weekly lab, a requirement for all engineering students. Because of his initial struggles, Wendy nearly pulled him out of the class. He continued with the course after calling her and pleading, "Don't do it! You're ruining my life!"

detailed place.

The going rate for a standard screened unit of sperm, along with basic medical and educational information about the donor and his parents, is about $270. Overnight shipment is $150.

That's just a starting point. The hopeful mother today may pick and choose from a menu of instant relationships, for a fee. At many banks, an "enhanced profile" of the donor, including a personal essay and social factors ranging from a family history of dimples to favorite movies, is $50 extra.

An adult photograph of the donor is $40.

A photo of the donor in childhood is another $40.

Women can write down questions and hear the answers given by the donor, live over the phone, for $65.

If this distance selection seems overwhelming to the mother, some banks offer "photo matching" for up to $100: Send in a photo of a spouse, a family member or the man of your dreams, and the staff of the sperm bank will choose a sample most likely to resemble it someday.

The latest offering, which has even some sperm-bank owners cringing over bad taste, is a practice called "staff impressions." Some of the oldest, most respected banks in the nation offer a written beauty-contest evaluation of the potential donor, reading like this: Donor X37B "is very attractive. He has big, brown doe eyes and long eyelashes that most women would kill for. He loves to cook, and sometimes brought us treats to eat!"

"It's like selling toilet paper," scoffed Betsy Cairo, founder of the CryoGam sperm bank in Loveland. "What makes one brand different from another? Quilted? Non-quilted? 'Is the donor good-looking?' I don't know - what's good-looking to you?"

Just when these sperm-bank menus start to look most ridiculous, though, the randomness of everyday procreative reality crashes back in. Who, after all, is setting rules in the "regular" world of human reproduction? Last time anyone checked, sexually mature partners could choose to join the march toward progeny for any reason they fancied, from dimples to diplomas, wealth to wittiness, boredom to bliss. And they do so with the best or worst of "enhancements," whether alcohol-induced or matrimonially blessed. Choosing a father for a child based on a gauzy 10-minute videotape - with the genetic tools scheduled to arrive 12 hours later inside a metal thermos - is at once relentlessly rational and hopelessly romantic.

Wendy Kramer's choice in 1989 easily fit both categories, and spanned the distance between. She had been married to Boone Thompson for some time, but when it came down to seeking a surrogate father by mail order, she sped forward in just a few weeks of passionate argument.

Post / Glenn Asakawa

Ryan shows his diploma to adopted dad Boone Thompson and Thompson's girlfriend, Carol Hurst. He and Wendy split before Ryan turned 2. "I wouldn't say I was a father figure," he said. "I'd just call it ... family."

By 1989, their fourth year in an uneven marriage, Wendy the accountant and Boone the cowboy were hoping like many couples that a child would give them a home team to root for together. But they couldn't conceive, joining the ranks of an estimated 3.5 million infertile couples across the United States. Boone tried one operation to change it, but the expense and the medical conclusions were daunting.

"That was mid-August," Wendy said. "Two weeks later, I was in the fertility clinic. And by Labor Day, I was pregnant with Ryan."

Wendy's family was supportive. They have encountered too many glitches in "normal" families, including their own, to protest much over trying an artificial means to the same end. Wendy's mother, Jacki Kramer, left Wendy's troubled genius of a father, Hank, when Wendy was 10. Between her own husband's social problems and the ups and downs of Boone, Jacki said, "I was afraid of the genes. I was worried a child from that wouldn't have a chance in hell." Jacki simply looked forward to having, at long last, a grandchild.

# # # # # #

Boone also said he was fine with seeking a donor.

Conceptions Reproductive Associates, the infertility clinic that evaluated Wendy and linked her to the California sperm bank, requires counseling for couples to make sure they both want a baby.

Wendy and Boone sat down in front of a secretary at a computer when it came to matching time, and she said, "I have brown hair and green eyes, but he's only 5 feet 7 inches tall." Boone was getting agitated. Wendy pointed at Boone and said to the secretary, here's what the donor should look like, make it close. And they left.

The marital spats didn't end with Ryan's birth on May 22, 1990. Ryan wasn't the problem, but he wasn't the solution, either. Wendy wanted focus out of Boone; Boone wanted to ride horses, hang out at the rodeo, race dragsters and drink. They parted ways when Ryan was 18 months, and though Boone had partial custody for a few months, Wendy made it clear to Ryan from then on that Boone was not the father figure he would need.

"When Ryan was 2 years old, he said to me, 'So, did my dad die, or what?"' Wendy recalled. Ryan already had memorized his phone number, his address and Grandma Jacki's phone number. Wendy began to realize the sperm donor had given Ryan both unexpected intelligence and the curiosity to find out where it came from.

Conception through assisted insemination was a furtive practice well into the '70s, though the medical community knew it was effective some 90 years earlier. Some states declared insemination by outside donor to be adultery, and the resulting children illegitimate; doctors added to the unseemly reputation by using their own sperm to impregnate willing patients.

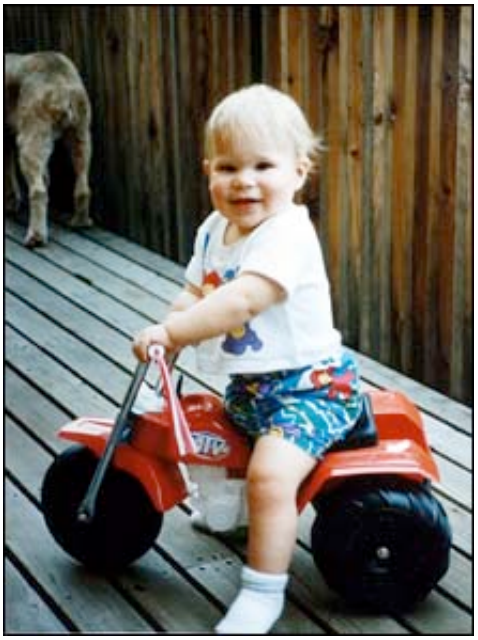
Insemination using third parties also suffered from the genetic-superiority claims of some of its most vocal proponents. Millionaire inventor Robert Graham started a "genius" sperm bank in California in the late 1970s, seeking deposits from Nobel Prize winners and promoting eugenics - a movement devoted to genetic manipulation as a way to aid human progress.

The states pushed sperm banking toward legitimacy through the '70s, with uniform parenting acts confirming that the social father of a child had legal rights beyond any genetic donor.

Artificial insemination with donor sperm is nearly unregulated, with the Food and Drug Administration stepping in just this year to seek a definition of truly "anonymous" sperm donors in an effort to clarify medical screening practices. Because there is so little regulation, doctors can only guesstimate that between 30,000 and 70,000 babies each year are born through artificial insemination.

A generation of publicly accepted donor babies is now maturing. They found themselves an acceptable class moniker: They are "offspring," a term that somehow evokes both ancestral tradition and modern notions of minority empowerment.

The right they seek is information about themselves, and Ryan made one of the early public offensives with that letter at age 7.



A very young Ryan

When Ryan pleaded with California Cryobank to come through with some "infurmachin," he challenged one of the few standards the banking industry had agreed upon in the absence of government regulation.

Sperm banks argue adamantly that they must offer complete anonymity to their donors in exchange for the samples. Cryogam's Cairo explains it this way: The young male donor is a college student making $40 to $75 a week for six months of donations. Donors see their role as equivalent to donating blood for a good cause, and the last thing they want, 20 years down the road, is for a donor baby to knock on their door seeking roots, answers or, frankly, money.

In the mid-1980s, as banking went mainstream, screening for AIDS was a far greater concern than privacy. For those families who did ask about the donor, some banks offered a tenuous solution: When the donor babies turned 18, they could contact the bank. The bank would contact the donor, who could then decide whether to come forward.

Just as Ryan has been continually frustrated by schoolrooms that don't move fast enough for his wide-ranging brain, he found the "only-at-age-18" restriction an arbitrary roadblock. He was growing up without a father of any kind, social or genetic, and he had questions. Perhaps the greatest gift he has ever received from Wendy is the ability, even in awkward adolescence, to be curious without seeming self-conscious. He took that wide-eyed search to nationwide television audiences.

"For as long as I remember, there's always been that curiosity," he told Diane Sawyer on "Good Morning America" two years ago. He always has said there are parts of his personality he can't explain to himself by looking solely to Wendy. It's like staring at one-half of a torn photograph over and over again.

Was his donor a mountain biker? Why does mathematics come so naturally to him? His mom loves to read, and he barely tolerates it, saying "the only good paragraph is the one that comes with a formula at the end of it." The other half of the photograph is out there waiting for him, and these patronizing adults know where but won't tell him.

Ryan goofs around on the CU-Boulder campus.

Both California Cryobank and Conceptions Reproductive declined offering Ryan or Wendy any more information than what they have in their thin, anonymous donor packet. "The basic preservation of the integrity of this program is that the donor remains anonymous," said Dr. Mike Swanson of Conceptions Reproductive. "That has to remain, for so many reasons: legal, ethical, financial."

Wendy and Ryan were shut down by the clinic and bank, but by accident they gleaned one piece of information that would boost their search into a stratosphere of publicity. While cajoling clinic staff about opening their files, a phone clerk let slip to Wendy that their donor had fathered a minimum of three other children through the bank. They had stumbled across another largely unmonitored door into the banking practice - it's up to the clinics to decide how many live births they will allow from a donor before "retiring" his samples. Some say six, some say 15. "But they didn't really keep track," Wendy said, "So it could be as high as 30."

That meant Ryan had potentially dozens of half-siblings in the world. That torn photograph was larger than he had dreamed. Here was a corner torn off holding clues to a sister who might look like him, there was a corner missing with a brother who might ride a bike as fast as Ryan did.

Meanwhile, millions of people across America were finding old college buddies or ex-boyfriends through a few keystrokes on the Internet. Wendy decided to launch what she called a "Donor Sibling Registry," a clearinghouse for curious "offspring." Sperm banks permanently attach a tracking number to their anonymous donors. Donor babies or their families could register on the site, and post messages to half-siblings seeking the same kind of genetic link.

"It's solely by mutual consent," Wendy said. "It's only for those of us who want to know each other."

Wendy spent thousands of her own dollars to create a usable site. They had no idea how many donor families would be interested. They needn't have worried. No one who already knows both their parents can understand the desire among those who know little, said Barry Stevens, a Toronto filmmaker who has long sought the donor who created him and a half-brother he has since met.

"Why keep on searching for our ancient masturbator?" he likes to muse.

"It's a profound curiosity," he said. "It's a hole in your personal narrative from which humans derive meaning."

Not all the longings are so high-minded. When Ryan was 6, Wendy took him shopping at Foley's. He went to the men's room, but was having clothing trouble, and Wendy tried to talk him through it by shouting in the door as shoppers walked by. "Now you know why I really need a dad!" Ryan yelled.

Many on the medical side of the transactions respond to the right-to-know argument with the observation that all kinds of kids don't know one of their parents. "He donated a cell. He's not the daddy," said Betsy Cairo of Cryogam.

That tends to infuriate searchers like Stevens. The anonymous donor "makes an unequal contract with a party that doesn't even exist yet. The place they go to give the sample is called 'the collection room.' And I don't think people know it's the same term used in cattle reproduction," Stevens said. "Except that in the cattle business, you can get a lot more information about the donor."

Ryan eats lunch in between classes at CU.

Ryan and Wendy's website, www.donorsiblingregistry.com , now receives hundreds of messages a month from offspring who have found each other, or parents who want the half-siblings to play together and grow up knowing each other.

More than 550 families have now made matches.

The registry and its emotional origins caught the kind of television wave now familiar to Americans who watched the Scott Peterson trial or recall the "Baby M" surrogacy scandal in the 1990s. After Ryan explained the registry to a Denver television station, Diane Sawyer invited him for a chat in front of a crackling fireplace in December on the "Good Morning America" set. Over the next six months, he appeared on "The John Walsh Show," the "Today" show, local news networks, and finally "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

The "Oprah" episode appeared on Ryan's 13th birthday, as he was advancing to his senior year in high school four years ahead of schedule. When Wendy got back to Denver, she made a routine check of the sibling registry for new message traffic.

"Was that your Ryan on 'Oprah' today?" was the first message. And then the news they had been longing to hear: A mother was writing to say that as soon as she saw Ryan's face on television, she knew he was related to her daughters. They traded e-mails immediately, confirming the sperm bank and the donor number.

Ryan indeed had more relatives in the world, two girls ages 8 and 11 who were his genetic half-sisters. Ryan and Wendy laughed and cried. Ryan sat down at the keyboard and wrote one message after another to the mother. She attached a family photograph, and the faces he saw were like a kick in the gut and a kiss on the cheek, all at once. The sisters looked like Ryan wearing a wig. Wendy and Ryan have since cut and pasted one of his childhood photos into the group, and it's a natural fit. On the downhill drive to a restaurant for Ryan's birthday dinner, he leaned out the window and shouted at everyone he knew, "Woo-HOO! I have two half-sisters!"

Ryan was ready to jump on a plane. Time for the oddest of family reunions. But the mother bruised him with her last e-mail message the next morning: She had never told her girls how they came into the world, and she wasn't sure if she ever would.

The irony doesn't escape Ryan, that he and his mom have helped match hundreds of other siblings, while he's at a dead end.

# # # # # #

Ryan has been the man in Wendy's life for years now.

She likes to tell the story about Ryan at age 3, toddling up to his mother and declaring, "Do you know why I came here?" Well, no, Mom said, why did you come here, little Ryan? "I came here to teach you." From then on, Wendy consciously or unconsciously pushed nearly everything from her life except the goal of delivering Ryan wherever his brain demanded to go.

Her ongoing drive to figure out Ryan is in part an admission that she never has figured out other men who meant a lot to her.

Wendy's father, Harvey "Hank" Kramer, was a toy designer who couldn't stand children. Including his own. Growing up in New York, Wendy remembers tiptoeing around in pajamas, awed by but trying not to aggravate the hard-drinking men who gathered with her father to play Toss Across in the living room. Hank invented that one, and built the prototype out of wood and clay.

His head full of university degrees and his hands able to find only trivial work, Hank Kramer created many of Ideal Toys' most famous games, many still sold by Mattel - Mouse Trap. Score Four. Hands Down. Kaboom.

He suspended a pile of marbles over long toothpicks in a plastic tube: Pull out toothpicks, but try not to release the most marbles. He couldn't think of a name 't think of a good name for it until one day in the company's bathroom stalls, where he decided the dropping game should be called Ker-Plunk.

"One of the reasons Hank was so crazy," said Wendy's mother, Jacki, "was that he felt his genius was never recognized. He felt he should have lived in the days of Caesar or the great sculptors."

Before Jackie divorced Hank when Wendy was 10, Wendy shielded her little brother, Mitch, from the family troubles. As Hank would walk up the driveway after work, Wendy studied his expression from the front window. Bad moods meant pulling little Mitchell to the back of the house, for his own good.

Typing out his autobiography while declining in a Boulder nursing home, Hank said that without multiple sclerosis slowing him down by his early 50s, he would have been on his 19th wife. No one in his family disputed it. Women who made a home for him were repaid in disdain. Wendy moved Hank to Boulder from New York and managed his life for the last 11 years; in a manuscript well over 70 pages, Hank doesn't mention Wendy by name until four pages from the end.

Ryan doesn't remember much about his grandfather. Nursing homes are tough places for kids to start a relationship.

Ryan always has said not knowing his genetic father leaves too much of his self-portrait blurry, or blank altogether. Yet there are pieces of his personality that are easy to attribute to the restless genius of Hank.

In May, as graduation and vacation finally looked close, Ryan realized he wanted money for summer mountain biking trips. Too impatient to find paper before his brain erased the ideas for lack of space, he grabbed the nearest black marker and wrote moneymaking schemes on the living room window. "Teach computer classes. Tutor someone in math or physics. Work odd jobs." Wendy saw the list scribbled over her mountain view and shrugged, knowing Ryan comes from a long tradition of men creating new problems when solving others.

The window is right next to a looming totem pole carved by Hank. The mythological faces grin madly out through Wendy's potted plants. Hank decided to carve the totem after seeing an authentic one in a New York museum. He was sure he could do it better. He glued slabs together and chipped away for weeks, enlisting co-workers when he grew tired. They carted away sawdust by the garbage-can load.

Ryan chooses to name only one tangible gift from Hank. "When I was 7, at summer camp, the only thing that kept me alive was kids playing Toss Across, and I could say, 'My grandpa invented that."'

Ryan could find other connections, if he looked harder. This bald statement, for example, in the disjointed autobiography dictated by Hank, in the chapter titled "About Me."

"Through high school, I found the curriculum rather simple and graduated before my 16th birthday and was enrolled in the University of Vermont at a very young age."

Wendy's ongoing hunt for male role models for Ryan grows even more complicated when she looks to her ex-husband, Boone Thompson. Wendy is trim, compact, precise with her steps and her words. She tends to believe worrying solves problems before they happen.

Thompson builds houses and raises pro rodeo bucking bulls. He has tallied 42 broken bones over a lifetime and walks as if he might have overlooked a few. He tends to believe people should fail on their own terms, especially perhaps Ryan. Ryan confirmed this belief for Boone when he came home to his Lyons ranch a few months ago and found his hay truck mired in a field with a flat tire. Ryan had taken it for a joy ride and stuck it fast, leaving a nice note on the steering wheel as explanation.

Ryan's need to test any piece of equipment he confronts, whether it be a computer or a homemade cannon, is a huge delight to Thompson, who sees it as the best sign that the genius remains "all boy."

"Ryan has to know the extension on everything," Thompson said. "How high will this go? How fast can you drive it? How much weight can this pick up?"

Boone met Wendy when he was building a custom home for her boss. She is deliberate and watchful, a Boulder County liberal who delights in describing the family politics as somewhere to the left of Gandhi. He's a proud yahoo who wants to move to Wyoming because Wyoming is what Colorado used to be when it was still good. In the course of her day, Wendy gets paper cuts; Boone busts a knuckle when he forgets that in a race with a bull toward an open gate, the bull will always win.

Infertility is more than enough to strain the best of marriages. But that uncomfortable conceptual fact was only one of many problems she and Boone avoided facing.

Wendy blames Boone for drinking heavily at the time. He agreed, while adding he "wasn't a drunk," and that they simply had little left in common after finishing their house.

They both say the backyard firing range for Boone's howitzer was a good example of their mismatch. Behind their home above Lyons, Boone had mounted a cannon pointed up into the foothills. He would invite friends over to crack a beer while they crammed bowling balls down the barrel and fired away, baby nap or no baby nap. Wendy dismissed the proving ground as "macho flats." ."

Boone moved out, taking Ryan on Tuesdays and Thursdays until he was about 2.

Boone had thrown himself wholesale into a new sinkhole of a hobby, building hot rods. He says he has lived both versions of an old joke: Want to have a million dollars? Start with $5 million and buy a ranch. Want to have a million dollars? Start with $10 million and buy a race car.

All that blown money bought a lot of wrenches, and during his visits to Boone's garage, Ryan would toddle around in diapers and fit a box or an open-end or a crescent on any nut he could find. With the two of them lying next to each other underneath a car, Boone would ask for a screwdriver. Ryan always handed over a Phillips when a Phillips was needed.

Wendy called off the arrangement for a year when Ryan turned 2. Then she called Boone when Ryan turned 3, and both of them remember the phone conversation as an epiphany. She forgave him, he forgave her. Ryan went back to visiting Boone's land of wrenches, explosions and other man-toys.

Over the years, Ryan whipped around Boone's properties on a four-wheeler, a rifle in tow to shoot off bricks of .22 shells. They built

science-fair projects together, with Ryan strapping model rocket engines to narrow-gauge trains in search of a perpetual-motion machine.

Boone watched Wendy's perpetual school search from afar, hearing the stories of teacher clashes or student hazings. He sympathized, though he admits it was from the opposite side of the tracks. "Ryan's good at saying, 'I don't fit in here, I'm going to stay out of that.' For me, I wasn't that smart, so I stayed out of things too - I stayed out of the things that were over my head, all the things that Ryan is good at."

The wariness that creeps into Wendy's voice as she thinks of Boone is not part of his vocabulary. He prefers to remember the high points and save those in photo albums.

Sun-bleached Ryan fishing off the family pontoon in Iowa. Ryan on horseback, near the homemade stalls he insisted Boone should paint forest green.

Their view of Boone is more complex. Wendy says Boone won't call for six months at a time, and that's when they know he's in trouble. Boone says Ryan stops by the Lyons ranch all the time; Wendy says twice a year, tops; Ryan reports it's somewhere in the middle, definitely not "all the time."

Still, Boone gets things about Ryan that it takes a guy to see. Sitting outside a deli in Boulder after his final chemistry class of the week at CU, Ryan idly plays with a cigarette lighter he found on the ground. As Wendy talks, Ryan flicks the lighter at a wad of white butcher paper from his sandwich, and gets a flame going, to his mother's horror.

"I took Ryan out to the Greenbriar a few months before his graduation," Boone said with a laugh. "Ryan ordered one of everything that catches on fire."

Where Boone and his rodeo belt buckles fit into Ryan's life is a question with evolving answers. Wendy rolls her eyes when Boone's name comes up, but she and Ryan spent an October day at a family barbecue on Boone's ranch, hugs all around. Ryan used to say he was searching genetic records for his "father," eventually changing it to "donor." He still calls his mom's ex-husband simply "Boone."

"I call him my boy," Boone said. "I wouldn't say I was a father figure. I'd just call it ... family."

# # # # # #

Freshman freakout is a common occurrence at every university.

By October of each year, CU associate vice chancellor for undergraduate education Michael Grant has a long list of new students convinced they won't make it, heartbroken that the drop-add deadline has passed and wondering when they'll ever sleep again.

Ryan's freshman freakout was a little more dramatic than most.

Though he had doodled his way through the first day of Calculus for Engineers, thinking the sample problems too trifling to bother with, two weeks later he was pondering a washout. The chemistry lab on Tuesdays is four hours long, a meticulous set of tasks that must be solved one by one, correctly, or the whole process falls apart. At first he had felt comforted by the anonymity of classes with hundreds of peers, none focused enough to ask how young he is; but by Sept. 2, he still hadn't talked to the same student more than once. The crowded isolation got to him in chemistry, where he trembled to demonstrate the lab problems with older students and a teaching assistant watching.

"Chemistry sucked," he said at the end of two weeks of CU classes. On the proficiency exam used in part to find out if the chemistry students belong in the class, Ryan got 10 problems right out of 20.

The teaching assistant in charge of the lab took a tough-love approach, suggesting he could review the lab work with tutors and deliver the results to her office after class hours.

Can't make that kind of schedule, Ryan said. "I don't drive, by the way," he told her. "I'm 14." She had no idea.

When Ryan feels that kind of nagging anxiety, it tends to lay bare an obsessive-compulsive vein a doctor diagnosed some time ago. "Ironically, because I'm a Buddhist, my anxiety is about material things," he said. Because he has no dorm room to retreat to between classes, and no hallway locker, stuff management has been a challenge for both Wendy and Ryan. The valedictorian at Ute Creek's graduation had gloated in her speech about "no more wheeled backpacks," and here Ryan was dragging a wheeled backpack and wearing another, all over campus, from Mom's car to class to work to bus and back.

The backpacks seriously got on his nerves. He settled into the crosstown bus and put in his iPod ear buds, but soon checked between his knees to make sure he had put his laptop computer in the backpack. Ten minutes went by. "I know it's in there," he thought. But he had to check again. Over and over again until he reached his stop.

He went home that Thursday night, exhausted. "It's way harder than I expected," he said.

All they needed for utter chaos was for Ryan's genetic father to show up. Waiting for Wendy and Ryan on their home computer that night was an e-mail they thought revealed his identity.

Months before, a DNA testing company asked Wendy for a link in the donor registry, offering a trade of a free DNA test. Some donor offspring get themselves tested on the off chance they might match a person already in the data bank. Wendy sent in a sample Ryan swabbed from inside his cheek, then forgot about it. Eventually a list came in the mail. Ryan's DNA markers were 99.9 percent identical to 250 names in the company's vault.

From their thin file on Ryan's sperm donor, they knew Ryan's genetic father was born June 22, 1967, in the Los Angeles area. They compared the DNA list to a tally of all the males born in California on that date, and found three identical last names. A few Google searches later, they had three e-mail addresses to try.

Two e-mails came back no, sorry, don't know anything about sperm donations. But on the night Ryan came home exhausted and on the verge of quitting chemistry, a note in their e-mail queue said, "Hi, I have a second cousin with that same name and birth date."

Ryan summoned the energy for a "Woo-hoo!" and a dance in his socks around the hallway nook where he and Wendy keep their computer. "To put a name to it is bizarre," Ryan said.

Wendy's head was reeling too. She had a few other things on her mind, not all of which she had shared completely with Ryan. The Boulder ad agency where she had been working for years as an accountant made steep cutbacks over the summer. By late August, her hours had been slashed in half. Wendy knew she had only a few weeks before she was laid off completely, just as she was paying a new set of university bills for Ryan.

She also was closing the books on the Nederland restaurant she had co-owned for 10 years, the Tungsten Grill. They had lost a quarter of their business in the state's recent economic stagnation, and they had let the staff go and locked the doors for good after Labor Day.

Nearly two years after hitting national television with their donor search, and seven years after scribbling a note to the "haspitl" demanding his dad's "phon numder," Ryan and Wendy realized that Thursday night they had never thought through what to do once they had a name.

"We need to be sure it's him before we do anything," Ryan said. "And even if we do know, he signed up for complete anonymity. So do we write him a letter? We don't want to stalk him."

Ryan went to bed and slept for 15 hours.

Saturday morning, Wendy had an e-mail waiting in her queue from the teacher's assistant overseeing Ryan's CU chemistry lab.

"I just wanted you to know," the note said, "that Ryan is probably better prepared for this chemistry class than you might imagine. I have 41 students, and Ryan did as well or better than 80 percent of them on the proficiency exam. ..."

The school's drop-add deadline was approaching on Sept. 8. It's like expunging the record - drop the class and nothing stays on a transcript. Wendy became phone buddies with Jim Sherman, the assistant dean. Sherman doesn't want to see burned-out cases and supported Wendy's inclination to end Ryan's experiment with no-mercy chemistry. There was an easier introductory class Sherman could get Ryan into.

She called Ryan on his cellphone and left him a message: "I'm pulling you out of chemistry."

He called back. "Don't do it! You're ruining my life!"

Back she went on the phone to Sherman, begging to let Ryan keep trying the hard stuff. Suddenly the CU computers were saying Ryan's spot in the higher-level course was already taken, and he might not get back in. Wendy called Ryan back and told him to go to the CU bookstore and buy the introductory text just in case. That only made him more agitated.

Meanwhile, Wendy found time to compare their stunning e-mail to their other clues. Turned out this second cousin had different parents and a different place of birth than the names on their list. The veil had fallen back into place.

"It was 48 hours of intense freakout," Wendy said.

When the 48 hours were up, Ryan felt whipped, but he was back in the harder class where he wanted to be. His recuperation largely involved beating Connor at Risk.

Wendy thought about how having a husband to consult might have eased her constant second- guessing. "I don't have another parent to bounce it off of," she said. "I just want a happy kid. And the road signs aren't so clear."

# # # # # #

There are a few students at CU whose social benchmarks appear to have been set by the liquor companies.

On Ryan's first day of calculus this fall, the campus newspaper stacked in piles outside every building blared a headline from the football recruiting-sex scandal. "Indictments Pending?"

As he suffered the deepest fears of his freshman freakout, Boulder police investigated a frat hazing where a freshman drank himself to death, and hazers wrote obscene insults on his unconscious body.

"Frat Brothers Scrawled Slurs on Dying Pledge."

Ryan's social benchmarks are a bit more pedestrian. He would be happy if the girl next to him in calculus talks to him one more time before finals.

With no dorm room, no peer group and no natural hangout, Ryan's social life is at best a work in progress. He hesitates to talk with fellow freshmen for fear of the conversation-ender, "Yeah, I'm 14, I can't drive, and I live with my mom." He disdains meetings with gifted students from the Boulder area, being the first to admit he stereotypes them as geeks. His grandmother Jacki likes to giggle over the prospects of Ryan meeting girls at CU, where dating would bring up age-of-consent statutes.

Ryan hasn't ventured to any campus parties. He sniffs at drinking with the inexperienced ridicule only an adolescent could pull off., saying, "I know too much about what it does to your brain cells. What's the point?"

He's most comfortable with 14-year-old buddy Connor, who can be smart or juvenile as the occasion requires.

A few weeks into his CU start, a lonely Ryan started wandering over to the nearby high school where Connor had started ninth grade, playing ultimate Frisbee during Connor's P.E. hour. The mindless running and catching were a huge release for Ryan's big,

graceful frame, and suddenly he could enjoy the good parts of high school without feeling stuck in an academic eddy. Even there, though, Ryan drifted on the edges, waiting on the fringe of a strategy huddle. And he's not sure the school wants him around. The principal seems to think he created his own problem graduating so early.

Three weeks into the semester at CU, he finally had a conversation with a fellow student.

He overheard a girl next to him say she wanted to buy a headlamp for nighttime bicycle riding. Ryan found the courage to lean back and ask, "Are you talking about the 24 Hours of Moab race?" The girl said yes, and they had an enthusiastic exchange about hard-core cycling that left Ryan grinning. He started to wonder if letting somebody know he was only 14 would be the end of the world, after all.

He also started to wonder if finding his "father," or his "genetic dad," or "Donor #1058," was quite so important. Ryan has appeared in front of millions of TV viewers, in what is one of the most public searches ever by a boy looking for the man who created him. Yet he enjoys strong family roots, beginning with a mother who has given up much of her own social life to make sure Ryan never wants for parenting.

And he and his mother already have accomplished a great deal, forcing the secretive world of fertility and reproductive donation toward the same kind of open discovery now gracing most adoptions.

Their donor's sperm bank, California Cryobank, in June copied their idea of a sibling registry, charging $25 for people to seek each other by plugging in their donor number.

A few banks also have contradicted their own warnings about the harmful affects of disclosure by creating a separate donor track for donors willing to guarantee they can be contacted once the offspring reaches 18. California Cryobank, after resisting such suggestions for years, started a separate track in August, said spokeswoman Marlo Jacob. Thirteen donors already have passed out of quarantine who are willing to be contacted in the future.

Great Britain and other nations now mandate that the donor's contact information be released to the offspring when the child reaches 18, and some experts believe U.S. laws will move in the same direction.

And the first generation of aggressively curious donor babies, like Ryan, are now reaching the age where they can cut through bureaucracy for themselves. California Cryobank just had its first contact from an 18-year-old conceived under the old contracts requiring the bank to act as intermediary, Jacobs said. They in turn contacted the donor, who was willing, and "we may have our first meeting very soon," she said.

That leaves Ryan less than four years to wait before a new effort to meet his donor.

There's an easier solution to all this. The Kramers long ago could have hired a private investigator and found Ryan's donor within a few weeks or a few months. They have a birth date and place. Educational background. Birth dates of the parents. Names of potential relatives. The father is just a little legwork away, plus expenses.

Ryan and Wendy want to know. But do they really want to know?

They can't explain it - other than to say that, despite their vocal shots at the system, shouted on TV and across the Internet, they do in the end revere that remaining wall of privacy.

"The fact is, he signed up for 100 percent anonymity," Ryan said. "And if that's what he wants, we'll respect it."

Besides, Ryan at age 14 is discovering so many other things he hasn't yet mastered. Things that control his daily rituals to far greater annoyance than his vague paternity.

Take cars, for instance.

He's on his way back to the leaf-strewn CU campus after lunch, Wendy as always letting him have his say while closely monitoring his every word. Ryan is agitated, riding shotgun.

"I'm much more curious about driving," he said, enunciating the two syllables of that life-enhancing noun in case no one gets the point.

"Mom, why won't you teach me how to drive the clutch?"

Ryan did receive one dispatch from the man who made him. When #1058 filled out his forms so long ago, he was asked to write an epistle to those who would use his sperm to make a family.

"Educate the child," wrote Donor #1058. "Raise him or her without any bias of any kind. Teach him or her to trust in others, but to rely on self. Instill in him or her a sense of humor, and the ability to enjoy life."

Still looking for the messenger.

But living the message.

The contributors

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