

# Miss Girard's Christmas Gift



**Michell Girard and Chris Barrington in his new room at her home on December 20, 2019.**

*Photograph by Matt Rainwaters*

When her former student was found wandering the streets a decade after she'd last seen him, Michell Girard immediately agreed to take him in. Then she decided to do far more, including give him the Christmas he'd never had.

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**BY** **SKIP HOLLANDSWORTH**

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**DATE** **DEC 24, 2019**

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Holder helped Chris into the squad car, gave him a bottle of water, and drove him to the sheriff's department. Chris sat in a chair in the lobby, murmuring to himself. At times, he put his head in his hands and rocked back and forth.

A dispatcher at the department gave Holder the name of a woman who worked as a special-needs aide at Gatesville High School. "We've picked up someone who says his name is Chris," Holder explained to the aide. "He's African American, with short dark hair. Looks like he's in his mid to late twenties. I'm guessing he was one of your special-needs students. Do you have any idea who he is?"

She called a colleague from the high school, and together they went to the sheriff's department. "That's Chris Barrington," one of them said when they arrived. "No one has seen him in a long time."

Holder said the young man had mentioned a Miss Girard. "That's got to be Michell Girard," the other woman replied. She pulled out her cellphone and called her.

At 59, Girard was retired and living alone in a small house on 28th Street. She had been Chris's middle school teacher, though she hadn't seen him in nearly a decade. A bad hip made it difficult to walk or climb stairs, but when she got the call about Chris, she rose from her easy chair, reached for her crutches, and told her tiny dog Bella, a Yorkie terrier mix, that she'd be right back. Girard eased her way out of the house, settled into the driver's seat of her compact Honda Fit, made her way to the sheriff's department, and limped into the lobby.

Chris lifted his head. "Miss Girard!" he exclaimed. "My daddy is sick, Miss Girard!"

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**Audio:** Listen to this article.

The call came into the Coryell County sheriff's department on the afternoon of June 4. A young man had been seen walking aimlessly up and down a stretch of U.S. 84, a couple miles east of the Central Texas town of Gatesville. He had been there for at least two days, the caller said. He looked to be on the verge of collapse.

A deputy named Billy Holder headed that way. He soon spotted the young man, who was standing in the road. An eighteen-wheeler had to abruptly change lanes to avoid swiping him. Holder flipped on his squad car's emergency lights and parked in the middle of the highway to stop traffic. The young man waved at him. He was about five foot seven inches tall and painfully thin, maybe 110 pounds. His sweat-stained, blue-striped polo shirt was tucked into his faded blue jeans. He wore a gimme baseball cap and weathered tennis shoes. In one hand he held a flashlight; in the other, an envelope. When Holder approached, the young man smiled and patted the officer's shoulder. "Are you my buddy?" he asked in a gentle singsong voice.

The 37-year-old Holder, who has worked for the sheriff's department for nearly a decade, could tell the young man was disoriented. He had no identification. He said his first name was Chris, but he couldn't remember his last name. When Holder asked why he was pacing the highway, he replied, "My daddy's sick. My daddy can't walk." But no matter how many times Holder prodded, Chris couldn't remember where his home was.

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He again patted Holder on the shoulder. Holder asked about his mother, and Chris just shook his head.

"Is there anyone you know here in Gatesville?" Holder asked.

"Miss Girard," he said. "I know Miss Girard."





**U.S. 84, where Chris was found on June 4, 2019.**

*Photograph by Matt Rainwaters*

**She first met** him in 1996, at a summer program for special-needs kids at Gatesville Primary School. She was 36 at the time. He was 6.

By then, Girard had been teaching for six years. As a young woman, she had worked as a church secretary, in Houston, but after meeting some children with autism, she says she “felt called to do what I could for them.” She attended the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, in Belton, where she majored in special education. She taught special-needs classes in nearby Copperas Cove for two years, before landing a job in Gatesville. She was known as a patient teacher, rarely raising her voice.

At the summer program, she was assigned to look after Chris, who had been diagnosed with autism. Earlier that year, Chris’s mother had been killed in a car accident. Chris lived alone with his father, Billy Barrington, a machinist who ran a lathe. People who knew Billy said he was a quiet man, a loner. In his spare time, he tinkered with broken-down cars, pickup trucks, trailers, and motorcycles.

Girard took to Chris right away. “He made little eye contact with others, and he rarely interacted with other kids,” she told me. “He bounced from one side of a room to another like an Energizer Bunny. And then, sometimes, he would climb up in my lap, hungry for affection, telling me, ‘My mommy’s in heaven.’ If you met him, you couldn’t help but love him immediately—and I mean immediately.”

During the school year, Girard taught special-needs kids at Gatesville Junior High. And in the fall of 2000, eleven-year-old Chris entered her classroom. “He wanted to sit right next to me, trying to complete spelling words and simple addition and subtraction problems,” Girard said. “He had beautiful handwriting, and he loved to draw. For some reason, he especially loved drawing pictures of white doves. And he loved patting people on the shoulder. One day, I slipped off a curb and tumbled to the ground, and he walked over and patted me on the shoulder and said, ‘Miss Girard, you fell down.’”

Girard could tell Chris’s life at home wasn’t easy. Although Chris’s father, Billy, took him to school each morning and picked him up every afternoon, he only spoke to Girard once a year, when they met to discuss Chris’s progress, and he didn’t ask many questions.

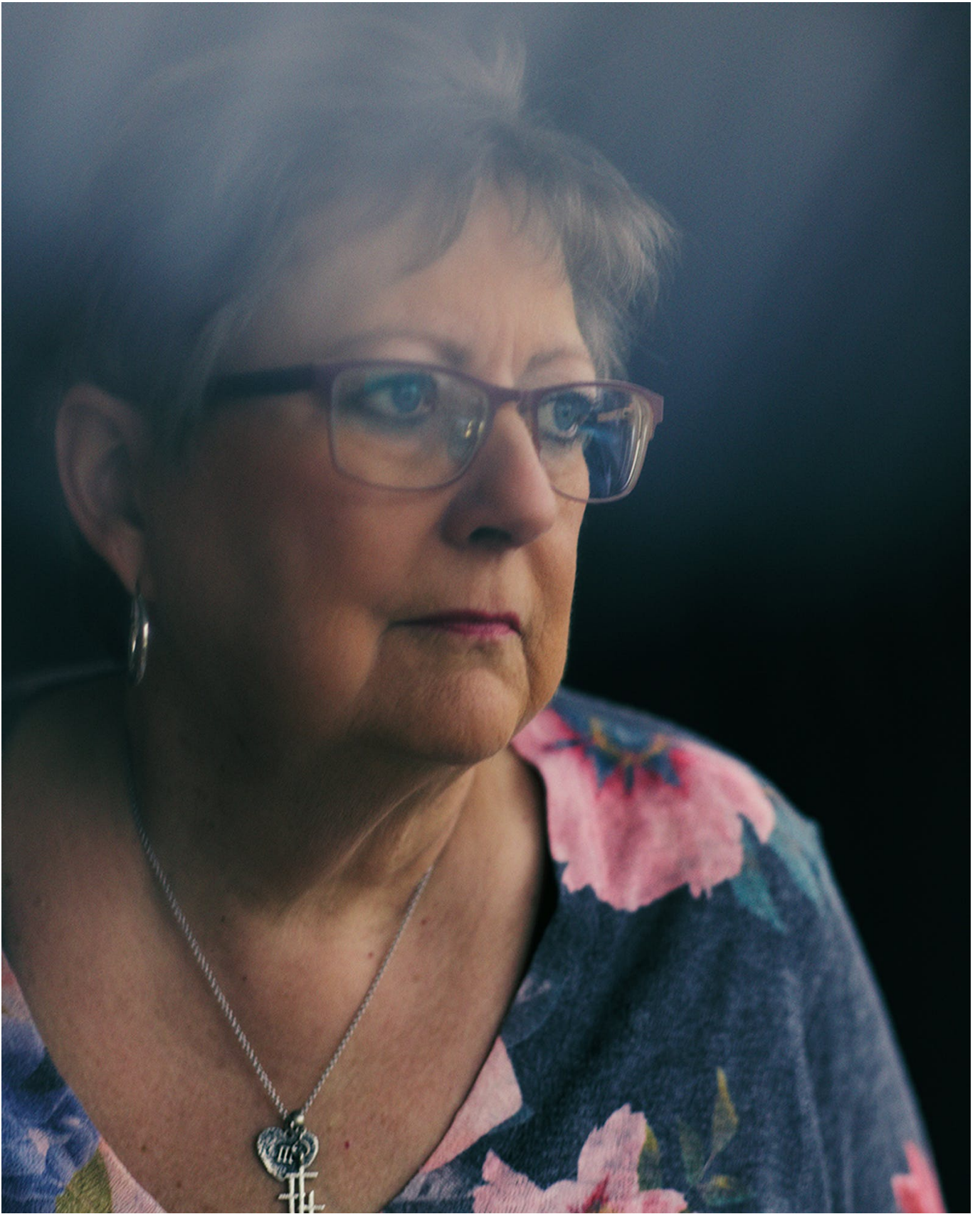
When she asked Chris what he and his father did after school, he told her that he sat in his room while his father worked.

She asked if they celebrated Chris’s birthday. No, he said.

What about Thanksgiving or Christmas? Girard asked. No, Chris said.

Did they ever go out to dinner at a restaurant? No, Chris said. They only ate canned food or frozen microwave dinners.





**Girard at her home in February.**

*Photograph by Matt Rainwaters*





**Chris spent four years** with Girard at the middle school. When he was promoted to **Barrington at home in February.** **Gatesville High,** he was still unable to read or do simple math. He had only one friend, a boy who suffered from severe muscular dystrophy. But that boy moved to Arkansas and later died from complications caused by the disease.

*Photograph by Matt Rainwaters*

At Gatesville High, the special-needs teachers focused on basic life skills: grocery shopping, counting money, mailing letters, and preparing simple meals like spaghetti.

Chris did his best, but even so, he struggled. “He basically functioned on a six-year-old level, and in some areas he functioned as a three-year-old,” said Girard, who periodically visited Chris at the high school.

When he graduated, in 2010 (in Texas, students with disabilities can stay in public school until they reach age 21), Girard and his other teachers worried that his father wouldn’t be able to properly care for Chris. “He was doing the best he could,” said Girard, “but I wondered if he too suffered from his own form of autism.”

By then, Billy was in his late seventies, retired from his job as a machinist. He had sold his Gatesville home and bought a secluded piece of property outside of town, at the end of a dirt road, just off U.S. 84. He filled the property with rusted-out vehicles, trailers, engine parts, motors, bumpers, and tires. He built a makeshift two-bedroom house, most of it constructed from plywood, Sheetrock, particleboard, and metal siding. There was no air-conditioning or central heating, just a couple of fans and space heaters. Electric wires dangled from the ceiling. The living room was crammed with broken computers, broken furniture, old tools, and stacks of paper, and the kitchen counter held cans of food and bug spray.

Chris lived in nearly complete isolation. He never saw a doctor or dentist. He was never issued a government ID. He never visited a social services agency, and he never dropped by any of the Gatesville churches that hosted programs for adults with special needs.

Not long after Chris’s high school graduation, Girard spotted him sitting inside his father’s pickup, in the parking lot of the local Walmart. Chris rolled down his window, a wide grin on his face. “Miss Girard!” he said. “I’m waiting for my daddy. He wants me to stay here while he goes inside.”

Minutes later, Billy returned and reassured Girard that he and his son were doing just fine. “Is there anything you need?” Girard asked Billy. “Anything I can do for you?”

“No ma’am,” said Billy. He got behind the wheel and drove away. It was the last time she’d see Chris for eight years.

Girard continued teaching, but gradually, her hip problem became debilitating. She also suffered a minor stroke. And so, in 2016, after more than two decades in the school district, she decided to retire.

To supplement her meager pension, she occasionally worked as a substitute teacher. To stem her loneliness, she sat a couple of times a week with an elderly woman who could no longer care for herself. When she was younger, Girard had been engaged to be married, but the relationship hadn’t worked out. She rarely saw her mother, brother, and



sister, all of whom lived in other states. She had a handful of good friends, but she had made peace with the notion that, for the most part, she would spend the rest of her days alone.



**Chris's old home with his father, Billy.**

*Photograph by Matt Rainwaters*

**At the sheriff's** office that day in June, as Girard talked to Chris, Holder examined Chris's flashlight (the batteries were dead) and the envelope he'd been holding, an advertising mailer addressed to "Occupant." Holder and another deputy drove to the address printed on the envelope. Turning off U.S. 84 onto a dirt road, they pulled onto what they discovered was Billy Barrington's property. Holder glanced around at the piles of scrap, then stepped onto the porch and knocked on the front door. When no one answered, he walked inside, dodging several holes in the floor. He made his way past a disconnected toilet in the hallway. Inside one bedroom was a twin bed without sheets—just a thin blanket atop it—and a rickety dresser. On top of the dresser was a beat-up laptop with a few keys missing. Taped to the walls were illustrations of skyscrapers and birds that seemed to have been drawn by a child.

When Holder entered the second bedroom, he found an old man curled in bed in the fetal position. It was Billy. His breath came in spurts, and he was barely able to move. Holder called for an ambulance, and Billy was taken to a hospital. Holder returned to the sheriff's department and told Girard about Billy's condition. A sheriff's official then walked up and said that they had no place to keep Chris. The official asked Girard if she would take him in. "Of course I will," Girard replied.

**On the way** to her house, she stopped at Walmart and brought Chris inside with her. He looked around in wonder, awed at the size of the store. She helped him pick out clothes, pajamas, and toiletries. They then drove to a Chinese restaurant, where Chris went through the buffet line—three times. When they made it home, Girard showed Chris the guest bedroom, which had clean sheets on the bed. It was late, so Chris pulled on his new pajamas and curled up in bed. But he couldn't sleep. He wandered into Girard's room, sat on the edge of her bed, and said, "It's dark outside, Miss Girard."

Chris began talking about his life with his father, explaining how he spent a lot of time in his room, drawing pictures and watching Disney movies on a portable DVD player (his favorite was *Brother Bear*). He said his father had taught him how to turn on the old laptop and use YouTube and Google Maps.

He suddenly switched subjects. "Do you have a Christmas tree?" he asked.

Girard was surprised. It was June, after all. "I have one in the closet," she replied.

"Will you put it up?" asked Chris.

"Yes," she said.

"Will you have presents?"

"Absolutely."

Then Chris repeated what he had told her several years back, in junior high—that he had never celebrated Christmas at his home.





**Miss Girard's Christmas tree, which Chris helped decorate this year.**

*Photograph by Matt Rainwaters*

**A few days** later, doctors diagnosed Billy with late-stage leukemia, and he was transferred to a nursing home. When Chris and Girard would visit, Chris dutifully sat by the bed and held his father's hand. Chris would ask Girard if his father was going to heaven to be with his mommy. "I think he'll be there very soon," Girard said.

Chris also asked Girard if he could continue living with her. "You can stay with me forever," she said.

Chris last saw his father on July 31, nearly two months after Chris was picked up on U.S. 84. Billy was unconscious by then. Chris patted his shoulder to comfort him, as he often did. He walked out into the hallway, where Girard was sitting. He climbed into her lap and sobbed.

Billy died the following day. As word spread around Gatesville that Girard had taken in Chris, her friends worried that caring for him would overwhelm her. Chris was always going to be a challenge, they said. He would constantly need her, day and night. With her bad hip, how would she keep up? And on her limited income, how could she afford it?



She'd gone through most of her savings a few years back on repairs after part of her home had caught fire. And instead of paying for Chris's food and clothes and visits to the doctor, shouldn't she be saving her money for much-needed hip-replacement surgery?

"I understood what they were saying," Girard told me. "But I didn't want someday for God to say to me, 'I was thirsty, I was hungry, I was homeless, and you turned your back on me.' And, you know, I had always prayed for a child. I had always prayed for a family of my own. I realized this was God's way of answering my prayers."



**Chris cuts paper to wrap Christmas gifts.**

*Photograph by Matt Rainwaters*

**Because Chris had lived** such an isolated life, Girard was determined to make 2019 memorable for him—a year of firsts, she called it. For his thirtieth birthday, on August 9, she arranged a boat ride around Lake Waco. Chris, who had told Girard that he had never been on a boat, was euphoric, squealing as the boat glided across the water.

For Halloween, she went to Walmart and bought him a top hat and a T-shirt decorated with pumpkins. Chris trick-or-treated around the neighborhood, always making sure to say “thank you” to whoever gave him candy.

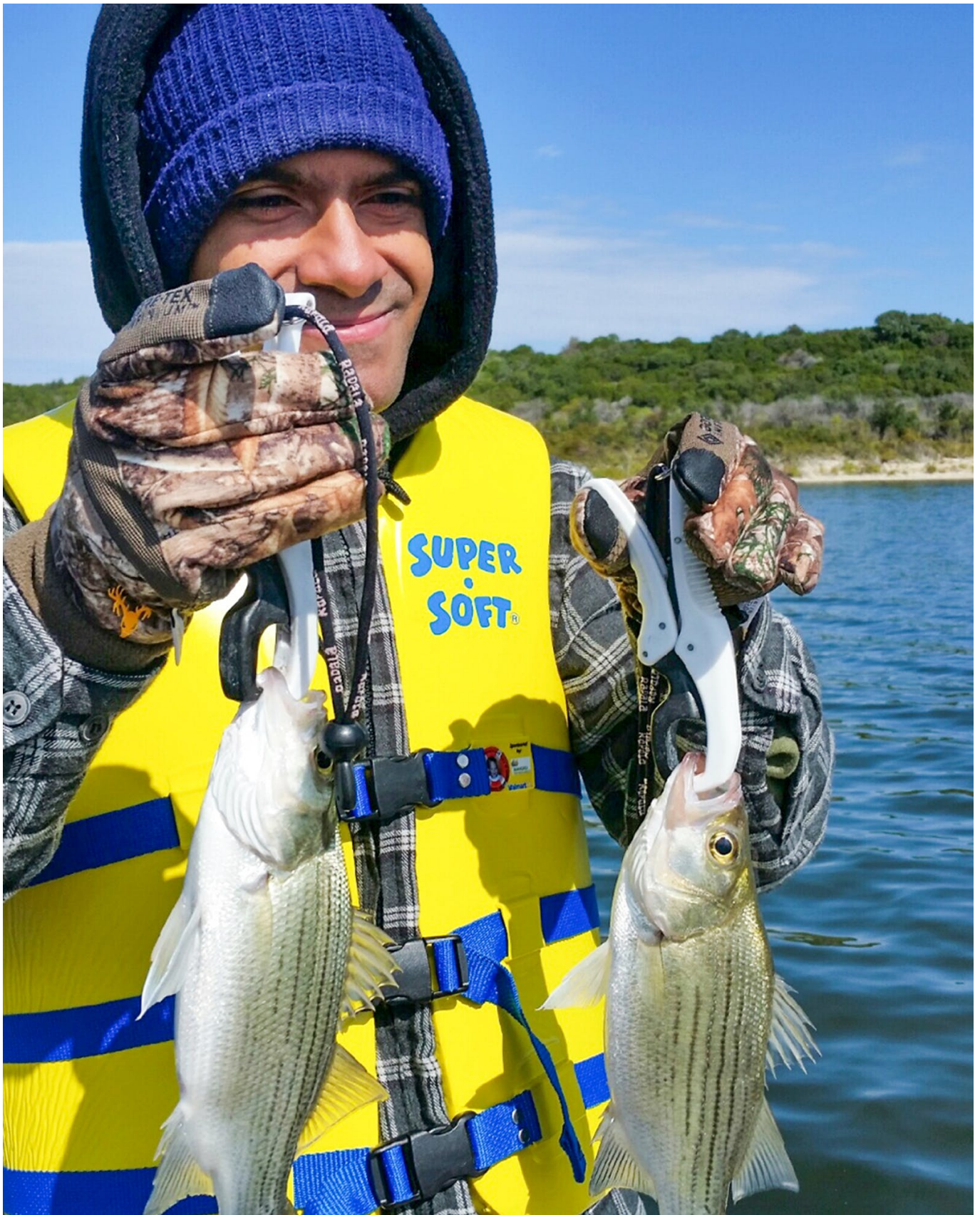
Every Sunday, Girard took Chris to Coryell Community Church, where he enthusiastically clapped along with the praise music. She entered him into the local Special Olympics program. At home, she taught Chris how to make a peanut butter sandwich, scramble eggs, put his dishes in the dishwasher, do his own laundry, sweep the floors, and make his bed—tasks he had struggled to pick up before. “You can do it, Chris,” she said over and over whenever she taught him a new skill. “You can do it.”

And then, the day after Thanksgiving, which they celebrated at the home of one of Girard’s friends, Girard pulled her Christmas tree from the closet. She assembled it in the living room and asked Chris to hang the ornaments. Thrilled, he spent several hours decorating the tree, making sure each ornament was perfectly placed on its branches. “He even set up the Nativity scene,” Girard told me when I visited the week before Christmas. She was beaming. “Somehow, he knew exactly where to put Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. He must have seen a Nativity scene when he was a little boy and never forgot it.”

Chris, who was listening intently to our conversation, strolled over, patted me on the shoulder, and said, “I like Christmas. Do you like Christmas?”

Girard admitted that she had gone “a little over budget” buying Christmas presents for Chris. He had become fascinated by the New York City skyline, often exploring Manhattan on his laptop using Google Maps, so she’d bought a six-foot-tall cardboard cutout of the Statue of Liberty. She had also wrapped boxes of Paw Patrol characters, a basketball, Matchbox cars, a couple sweaters, a sterling silver necklace, and drawing paper. (Chris loves drawing pictures, everything from the Manhattan skyline to his favorite birds, white doves.)





**Barrington with his catch on Lake Belton during his first fishing trip.**

*Courtesy of Michell Girard*





**Barrington dressed up on Halloween.**

*Courtesy of Michell Girard*

“Oh, well,” she said. “Think of what he’s been through all these years. He deserves something good.”

Girard is hoping to gain legal guardianship of Chris, which thus far has cost her close to \$4,000 in attorney’s fees—disposable income she doesn’t have. She’s also planning for Chris’s future in case something happens to her. A couple of her friends have said they’d consider taking him in. If they don’t, Chris will most likely end up in a group home.

Despite the improvement he’s shown since moving in with Girard, he’ll never be able to live on his own. “Hopefully, I’ve got twenty years left in me,” she said. “And I plan to enjoy every one of those days with Chris.”

Chris, who was pacing across the room, stopped again to pat my shoulder. “I love Miss Girard,” he said, “and she loves me.”

He continued like that for a few more seconds, patting my arm, comforting me.

*This article has been updated since it was originally published online.*

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41 COMMENTS

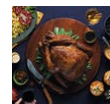
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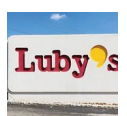


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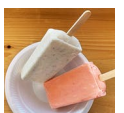
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