

Child's inspirational graduation story touches hearts

By Leigh Garner

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TUSCALOOSA, Ala. (WIAT) – It's the happiest and saddest day of the year at The University of Alabama RISE School in Tuscaloosa. Over 20 five and six year-olds are putting on the caps and gowns that make them look, as director Dr. Martha Cook puts it, "like little angels."

After years of learning, growing, and loving; another batch of babies are graduating to kindergarten. The RISE school is a unique learning environment.

Started back in 1974, the program was designed to serve children with disabilities. Over the years, the program broadened to serve an equal number of children with disabilities and their typically developing peers.

At graduation rehearsal Thursday morning, Ute Jocham got a sneak peek of the night's performances. Her daughter, Mandy, is graduating.

"This is what we didn't expect when she was born," Jocham says. Mandy was born with a heart defect and Down syndrome. Her parents are from Germany, and Jocham didn't know much about the condition.

"To be honest, I was shocked," she says. "I didn't know it, and when the doctor came into the room and said she had Down syndrome, I was in tears."

Dr. Cook explains that in Germany, they don't currently have any programs like RISE, and that people with Down Syndrome are often hidden away or institutionalized.

"I'm sure that her [Jocham] expectations were probably tempered by that," says Cook.

Jocham learned about RISE from friends in the Tuscaloosa area. She was told that early intervention could be key the Mandy's success in life.

Mandy first enrolled at RISE when she was just 9 months-old. Since then, everyone around Mandy has been amazed by how much she has achieved.

"I wouldn't change her for anything else, and she's a blessing," says Jocham.

Mandy is now trilingual, fluent in German, English, and sign-language. Cook says her fiery red hair reflects her big personality.

Her mother describes her as a social butterfly.

"She was standing in front of Northport Elementary," Jocham says,"and Mandy said, 'Wow!' And she was so impressed, like, this is the school I'm

going to, and I said, okay. She's ready."

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