



Tomorrow's Voices set to expand By Tim Smith

Providing crucial support to children who need it the most, Tomorrow's Voices has made great strides in its eight years serving Bermuda's autism community. So much so, in fact, that the charity is set for an expansion to cope with an increasing demand as a result of its growing reputation. The charity — which gives one-on-one attention to youngsters who don't thrive in the traditional school system — has a waiting list of some 16 children, meaning staff are planning to expand into a new, bigger location, as well as evolving their service to help families better cope with their own situations.

Thea Furbert, co-founder and board chair of Tomorrow's Voices, Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre, said: "Over the last year our waiting list has increased.

"We find it great that people are reaching out, but also it is concerning that we are the only facility in Bermuda that can provide these services to the children that need them.

"We are going to be growing in the next couple of months to get children off that waiting list."

There are currently six children in the main programme based at the Sunshine League Building in King Street, Hamilton.

The waiting list includes 12 new clients aged between two and 15, while four of the existing children are seeking additional hours.

Ms Furbert said the increased demand is partly down to a heightened awareness of autism.

"I think parents have become better at identifying when their children are falling behind," she said.

"There is more screening which can lead to the diagnosis of autism. There are also referrals from other professionals. Some children have behavioural challenges: they may just need intense therapy to get them

where they need to be." Natasha Pedro-Petty, one of two senior verbal behaviour therapists at Tomorrow's Voices, said: "We have been reached out to by parents who have been in normal schools and it hasn't worked out. Some of the children are quite typical, but they can't be facilitated in a



Tomorrow's Voices Therapists Analie Hawes and Natasha Pedro-Petty help Nathaniel McManus (aged five) and Serena Van Putten (aged six) play tug of war with each other. (Photo by Nicola Muirhead)

mainstream school. "Some are often just at home with their parents."

Fellow senior verbal behaviour therapist Emma Martin said: "That affects the children long-term.

"They come to us for the early intervention. If we can get in with this specialised and intensive intervention, research shows we can really help them.

"We have a research-based approach, and part of that is getting these children at a young age."

Ms Furbert said Tomorrow's Voices has been

striving to create light at the end of the tunnel for those on the waiting list. "We have changed our social skills programme to give the younger children on the waiting list access to as much therapy as we can," she said.

"If they are aged below four, they need to be

benefit their children. It will help them to understand what we do and the research behind it.

"We are dealing with children's lives. We want to make sure that, when parents leave here, they are going to use methods which have been used for many years, so that they know the techniques work, and they are not implementing ineffective strategies that are not research-based."

Ms Furbert said the charity is also looking for a new space it can grow into.

"We are moving from this building; we are in the process of searching for new premises," she said.

"We are hiring additional staff. We are currently training staff to accommodate new children into our environment."

Boston Children's Hospital and the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore have both acknowledged the service Tomorrow's Voices provides the community.

Ms Furbert thanked donors such as the Lancashire Foundation, the Simons Foundation International Ltd, the Bank of Bermuda Foundation and many others for helping with funding, and stressed there is a continuing need for more donations.

"The amount of people seeking out our services has grown exponentially this year. They are seeing Tomorrow's Voices as a place that can provide the recommended services for their children," said Ms Furbert.

"It's because of our donors that we are able to expand and add more children and adolescents to our programme. Our board also does an excellent job with all the endless administrative work.

"We want to make sure we are changing their lives. And for those on the waiting list, I want parents to know there's some light at the end of the tunnel."

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'They are emotionally invested in those kids'

By Tim Smith

A schoolteacher herself, Angela Tota-Francis is taken aback with admiration when she sees the Tomorrow's Voices therapists in action. "What they do: it blows my mind," said board member Ms Tota-Francis of senior verbal behaviour therapists Emma Martin, Natasha Pedro-Petty and the rest of the staff. "Every day they come to work with this high energy. They love what they do, they love to see the children every day. "They are excited about their plans for the children, and to see the children learn the skills they are being taught. "It takes a lot physically as well as mentally and spiritually to do that job. They are emotionally invested in those kids." Ms Tota-Francis, a teacher at Gilbert Institute, joined the Tomorrow's Voices board after being so impressed by its work with her godson. "I got to learn a little bit about the therapy that they do at Tomorrow's Voices — I saw it for myself," she said. "At first, I thought they were doing something wrong with him, because their methods were so different from my own. But I had a one-on-one conversation with the therapist, and it helped me understand what they were trying to achieve. "Since then I have watched the way he has grown, and how much he interacts with the other children. When I was asked could I be a board member, I was very happy to say yes. "I have seen just how much they do to touch these children's lives, how children can learn through ABA therapy to speak to their



Angela Tota-Francis, a board member of Tomorrow's Voices.

parents better, for example. It's just amazing." For all the staff's great work, however, Ms Tota-Francis said the charity is in constant need of funding. "We are trying to grow Tomorrow's Voices because there is such a high demand for what they do," she said. "One of the challenges is funding, because we are a non-profit organisation. So we really do need whatever help we can get." To become a donor, or for more information, call Tomorrow's Voices on 297-4342.



The team of therapists at Tomorrow's Voices (left to right): Tamara Bean, Sherena Dickinson, Natasha Pedro-Petty, Analie Hawes, Emma Martin and Gahnae Harvey. (Photo by Nicola Muirhead)

Max is learning to express himself

By Tim Smith

Being able to communicate independently makes a huge difference to Max Lopez's life. Max, aged 15, has a global developmental delay which means, although he understands a great deal, he finds it difficult to express what he's thinking or wanting. But while this has inevitably led to frustrations for Max and his family, they believe with Tomorrow's Voices' social skills programme, they've finally found a place that can help. Since he started attending the programme's weekend outings a year ago, Max has become more comfortable with his interactions. His parents, Jose and Emma Lopez, say he's happier meeting new people and, thanks to the social skills one-on-one training, is able to communicate more independently. Mr Lopez said: "Max has a global developmental delay, one result of which is his having difficulty processing information in the way the average person does. "He understands a great deal, but he is not able to express what he is thinking or wanting, so much of our effective communication is circumstantial. "We know, given the circumstances, what Max likely means. Max will always need someone to help him with everyday life tasks, so finding ways for Max to improve his communication should help him feel better understood and so less frustrated. "It is very difficult to get all the services special needs children get prescribed, and we are always looking for ways to help Max gain independence. "But Tomorrow's Voices' social skills programme provides an environment where we know verbal behaviour professionals, greatly assisted by caring volunteers, are helping Max to expand his language and understanding capabilities. "The group go on outings and Max is encouraged to interact with peers, the programme staff and the Bermudian community in general. "We hope Max is becoming more comfortable with new interactions, and new persons, while gaining valuable training specific to his



Max Lopez is improving his communication skills at Tomorrow's Voices.

needs that will help him communicate more independently." Tomorrow's Voices has also helped Mr and Mrs Lopez in their role as parents. "Max is a very loving and kind person, not very different than most, apart from his special needs," said Mr Lopez. "But because his communication needs are significant it is very difficult to entrust anyone with Max. We have tried a few different well-meaning programmes, but none have really worked for us. "Tomorrow's Voices' social skills programme combines the right spirit, energy, and professional understanding to help parents have their child be included."



Join Tomorrow's Voices
Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre
as we celebrate Autism Awareness Month this APRIL 2015.

AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH

26 MARCH "Royal Gazette Special Feature" – Featuring our services, staff, board members and accomplishments in the field of Autism and our ramp up to celebrate Autism Awareness Month throughout April. Royal Gazette Newspaper | March 26th, 2015

11 APRIL "Saturday Social Skills Group Gives Back to the Community" – Come join in as our clients and their typically developing peers show their thanks by giving back to the community. This giving day will involve delivering specially made Easter Baskets to the elderly. Drop off your child and enjoy a half-day of respite. Volunteer and see how you can benefit our children with special abilities! 9AM - 1PM | \$35 per child

11 APRIL "Get Puzzled Car Rally Scavenger Hunt" Fundraiser – Join the DATs as they host the best Car Rally Scavenger Hunt "EVER" to raise funds for Tomorrow's Voices. Get your team together to seek out clues and have a great night of fun! 6:30PM | Starts from City Hall Car Park | \$15 per person. To enter your team or for further information Email: dayaftertomorrow.tv@gmail.com

15 APRIL "Tomorrow's Voices Training Institute Workshop" – "In Touch With Autism" – Autism Awareness Month is here again as we continue to strive to meet the needs of the Autistic population in Bermuda. But how much do you really know about Autism? We have developed an interesting and thought provoking training on Autism including the history, symptoms and the most current research on treatments and causes. Participants will receive Professional Development Certificates. Email: info@tomorrowsvoices.bm to register | 6 - 8PM | \$25

17 APRIL "Autism Tags It!" Tomorrow's Voices 2nd Annual Tag Day – Help support our 2nd Annual Tag Day to raise essential funds for our Centre. Volunteers will be stationed outside businesses in the City of Hamilton and beyond to distribute ribbons to passersby and help to raise funds toward our unique Autism Charity. To Volunteer call 297-4342



24 APRIL "Autism Rocks Socks" Charity Fundraiser – Have fun while showing support for our Charity. Companies, Organizations and Schools are invited to participate in our unique fundraiser by wearing crazy, fun socks on this day and donating \$5 to Tomorrow's Voices. Email: info@tomorrowsvoices.bm and Register to participate.

30 APRIL "Autism Awareness Month Ends On East Broadway" – Join us on East Broadway as we display our Autism Signs and Puzzle Pieces and remind the community that it may be the end of Autism Awareness Month but it's not the end of Autism. 8:15AM | East Broadway

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
Email info@tomorrowsvoices.bm
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EVENTS

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As a devoted supporter and partner of Tomorrow's Voices, Clarien proudly applauds the organization in their accomplishments in early intervention for autistic members of our community.

Tomorrow's Voices is designed to meet the individual needs of children who are diagnosed with Autism or are on the Autism Spectrum. The overall goal of the organization is to provide clients with the skills to assist with their reintegration into their neighbourhood schools with minimal supervision and to provide them with a better quality of life through intervention.

Proudly local and fully invested in the community, Clarien believes in supporting the endeavours of charitable groups like Tomorrow's Voices that help to improve the lives of those who live in Bermuda.



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Dakari gets to hang out with cool kids like himself

By Tim Smith

Not every summer camp prepares you for a future career as a pirate-author-chef.

But then Tomorrow's Voices doesn't provide the typical summer programme — and as far as Dakari Saunders is concerned that's just the way he likes it. Eight-year-old Dakari, who has cerebral palsy affecting his speech and mobility, loves the programme so much, he wakes his parents up at 6.30am to ask whether it's time to go yet.

And according to his father, Pete Saunders, it's also helping him move towards his goal of one day becoming Bermuda's — and possibly the world's — first pirate-author-chef.

"Tomorrow's Voices has become an important part of why Dakari loves life," Mr Saunders said.

"We are big fans because Dakari is a big fan. It allows him to grow and be normal, and be okay with who he is.

"He gets to be himself, learn and hang out with cool kids like himself. At school right now he has a hard time. His experience is that it's really difficult to keep on track, to keep up with the other kids — that causes him to pull back, because he thinks, 'I'm not going to catch up anyway so what the heck.'

"But here's an environment where he can succeed. It affirms where he's at and where he's going. It doesn't put an emphasis on what he's lacking. And that's important.

"He wants to be a pirate-author-chef when he grows up. Most summer programmes don't take that kind of thing into account, but at Tomorrow's Voices he gets to cook, jump in the pool and do things that are relevant to what he's interested in. That boosts his confidence."

Mr Saunders said many camps are not necessarily geared towards pushing children to the next level during the summer months.

But of Tomorrow's Voices he said: "Here

was an opportunity for our son to play and learn at the same time. He has a lot of fun here and he also develops."

Thea Furbert, the co-founder and board chair of Tomorrow's Voices, explained why she created the summer programme for parents who want a more specialised environment for their child.

"As a parent, there wasn't a camp I could send my son that was safe and secure but also where he would not lose the skills he had learned over the year," she said.

"One thing about our staff here is that they push our children. We don't baby them because they may have a disability: we push them to their full potential.

"Having a summer programme gives parents the ability to breathe and see their child is in an environment for two months and being taken care of and pushed in a way they might not be at a regular camp."

Mr Saunders said Dakari loved Tomorrow's Voices from the moment he saw its sensory room.

"While we were here, someone took him in there and he saw all these balls and he did not want to leave," he recalled.

"When you ask Dakari his favourite place on the Island, he says Tomorrow's Voices. This is a real sacred place for us.

He's not forced to fit into a particular mode. These guys here are fitting their programme to match his interest." Natasha Pedro-Petty, a senior verbal behaviour therapist, said fun activities can improve the youngsters' academic abilities.

"Dakari lights up during the scavenger hunts — he forgets he's doing maths and English," she said.

Ms Furbert said: "Our staff look past their disability. We want to look at them as kids. Yes, they may have a disability, but they are not going to lose access to things because of that disability. We want them to have fun like the other kids during the summer."



Loving life: Tomorrow's Voices helps put a smile on Dakari Saunders' face.

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Dakari Saunders has fun on the Tomorrow's Voices playground.

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