

TOMORROW'S VOICES

Autism centre tends to growing young minds

By Tricia Walters

A diagnosis of Autism can be a frightening event for parents. Autism is a complex and wide ranging disorder, with varying degrees of severity and consequently a huge range of effects in almost all areas of a child's physical, social and psychological development.

The condition prevents a child from interacting normally with others and it is believed that Autism affects as many as one in every 150 children (according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2007). While there are no figures available in Bermuda as to how many children have been diagnosed with Autism, it usually appears in early childhood prior to school age and is four to five times more prevalent in boys than girls.



Doing what's right: Tomorrow's Voices co-founder, board member and volunteer, Thea Furbert.

"With all our students we have seen tremendous growth. It makes me want to cry."

However, with early diagnosis and intensive applied behaviour analysis and treatment, autistic children can become almost indistinguishable from typically developing children.

That's where Bermuda's only early intervention centre, Tomorrow's Voices, plays a critical role. Since opening its doors in October 2007, the centre has become a beacon of hope to many parents

whose children have Autism.

The centre emerged through the efforts of BASE (Bermuda Autism Support and Education), a group made up of parents who struggled for years to get their children the kind of intense, specialised help they needed, including Tomorrow's Voices co-founder Thea Furbert, whose son Ciro is autistic.

Until the centre opened, there had been no specific education programme for children with Autism in Bermuda, and nurseries and preschools did not have the training necessary to offer the vital one-on-one therapy the children need.

Mrs. Furbert explains that thanks to five therapists, the centre provides children with intensive therapy and equips them with the necessary skills to be accepted into the school system — as part of the centre's school inclusion programme.

Emphasis is placed on verbal behaviour and each child is treated individually because they range in their Autism severity.

The centre caters for ages two through 21 and currently offers therapy to six children.

"We've grown so much since we opened," she says. "We've gone from four children to six and they come in at varied times during the

day, some are full time, some are half day and some are hourly students. With all our students we have seen tremendous growth. It makes me want to cry. They have grown and developed so much."

She insists that early intervention is critical: "At a young age it's easier for a child to get concepts and when they get older it's a little more difficult to teach them, but for us at Tomorrow's Voices, it doesn't matter what age they come through the door. Our teaching is about motivating our students, and we use what motivates them to help them learn."

April is Autism Awareness Month and she hopes to raise awareness in Bermuda through the work done at Tomorrow's Voices, and advises parents to have their children checked by a paediatrician if they suspect something is wrong, or observe behavioural changes.

"There's also the Child Development Programme they can approach, or they can call us here at Tomorrow's Voices," she says.

"Go online and learn about Autism, or just learn about typical development to see that your child is developing appropriately."

For more information about Tomorrow's Voices visit www.tomorrowsvoices.bm

Promotion to raise funds and awareness for Autism

By Tricia Walters

Last April shoppers were given a unique opportunity to help autistic children and save some money in the process through Tomorrow's Voices' Eat Shop Give offer. The special Eat Shop Give card, which sells for \$10, or the VIP card for \$100, provides discounts to over 90 restaurants and retail stores across the island for the first ten days of Autism Awareness Month in April.

Money from the discount card campaign allows the charity to help autistic children and their families who can't always afford these specialised services.

Last year just over \$22,000 was raised through the sale of the cards and this year the number of merchants participating in the campaign has grown from 70 to over 90.

Co-founder of Tomorrow's Voices, Thea Furbert, explains that the aim of the campaign was to not only heighten awareness of the vital services offered by Tomorrow's Voices, but also to increase traffic through merchants' doors and help consumers to save money.

"For a donation of \$10 people get an Eat Shop Give card and for one week from April 1 — 10, they can use their card in all the participating stores and take advantage of the discounts and special offers," Ms. Furbert says.

"The cards are reusable so if you use it at a restaurant, you can still turn around and use it at a retail establishment or at a hotel or other participating business and get the deal for that week."

"The 90-plus businesses that have signed on are being

incredibly generous in supporting Tomorrow's Voices and will simply honour their chosen discount offer when an Eat Shop Give card is presented to them."



Cards are on sale at various merchants such as Secrets, Daisy & Mac, Bermuda Linens & Gifts, Just Roses, DEMCO Florist, Swizzle Inn, Caesar's Pharmacy, at card booths located in Washington Mall, Phoenix Store, and Gibbons Company, and from staff, parents and board members of Tomorrow's Voices.

Ms Furbert says there is also an option for companies interested in supporting Tomorrow's Voices to purchase bulk cards for employees as gifts of appreciation while giving to a worthy charity or matching staff donations through a 50/50 contribution for the cards and she's hoping that more companies will sign up for this.

This is one of Tomorrow's Voices' major fund-raisers for the year. "This centre takes over half a million dollars to run annually, and we subsidise what fees our clients' parents pay by 75 percent, and so we need to go out and do this major fundraiser in order to operate."

She says she wanted the public to know that the centre wasn't 100 percent funded through service fees, and they need the additional funds from donations and fundraising efforts to keep operating year to year.

"But at the end of the day it's about changing our children's lives and making sure we give them the opportunity to have better lives and we'll continue to do until we can't!" she concludes.

For more information visit www.tomorrowsvoices.bm



Lunch break: Students at Tomorrow's Voices and their therapists and paraeducators take a break for some lunch at the centre.

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presents

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Tomorrow's Voices - Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre invites you to help us in continuing our mission of providing services to children with Autism in Bermuda.

Make a donation of \$10 and receive your Eat! Shop! Give! discount card, then during the first week of Autism Awareness Month APRIL 1 - 10TH, 2010 show your card at any of the fabulous retailers, restaurants, or hotels displaying the Eat! Shop! Give! logo and receive special money saving discounts and offers reserved just for Eat! Shop! Give! Cardholders.

Cards are available at our Eat! Shop! Give! Booths located throughout Hamilton or from the following merchants: Secrets, Daisy & Mac, DEMCO Florist, Bermuda Linens and Gifts, Just Roses, Caesar's Pharmacy and Swizzle Inn.

Quantities of 10 or more cards can be delivered by calling 332-7255 or 537-5922 or by emailing tomorrowsvoices@northrock.bm.

There is a limited supply of cards available so, get out there, make a donation and receive your Eat Shop Give card! You'll not only be saving money at your favorite restaurants, retailers and hotels, but you will also be giving to a very worthy cause.

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FACE TO FACE WITH AUTISM

Tomorrow's Voices
Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre

Hey Bermuda...It's Tasha!

You may have seen me out and about Bermuda, smiling and enjoying everything that our beautiful island has to offer... but have you ever seen me Face to Face with Autism?

Have you ever seen me teaching kids for months and months things that we would expect every child to know? The smile I give you is nothing compared to the smile I get from the child I work 8 hours a day with trying to get them to say, and recognize their Mom. And when mom walks in the door and her child looks at her and says, "Mommy"! Well, that's a smile that no camera can capture, cause that's when I smile with my heart!

The current rate of Autism is 1 in every 110 births...do the math Bermuda, chances are someday you will be Face to Face with Autism too. I want to be able to help every child get the services they deserve, and their families the support they need and that's what I do at Tomorrow's Voices.

Remember - Autism knows no boundaries and affects families from diverse racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and together Bermuda, we can all be part of ensuring that no matter who you are, when you need us, we will be there.

Yep, it's me, Tasha...and I am Face to Face with Autism...

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For two families tomorrow is a brighter day

By Tricia Walters

Hardly a day goes by that Evelyn Simons isn't told off by a member of the public for having a "naughty" or "rude" son. Be it in the supermarket, on the bus or in town running errands. It's not easy for the mother of six whose son Martin is autistic. She doesn't always have the luxury of explaining that her little boy isn't like other six-year-olds.

He might smile, laugh, and give his mother lots of hugs, but Martin only recently learnt to use words to communicate and sometimes still lashes out in anger and frustration. He loves playing with toy trains and it's this game that made his mother first suspected that something might be wrong.

"Martin would spend a lot of time pushing his favourite train up and down on the tracks," she recalls. However, the game never changed and the monotonous pushing of the train up and down raised concern.

She recalls that he also never spoke and would often lash out in anger to those around him, including her. He would, for example, sit next to you and stroke your arm and then suddenly slap you without warning.

When Mrs. Simons took Martin to his local doctor, he referred the family to Boston Children's Hospital for an evaluation.

"That's where the doctor told us that Martin was autistic," Mrs. Simons recalls. "We just didn't know. He would sit for a long time pushing the trains back and forth and we thought that was normal because that's what little boys do, but we didn't realise that he had Autism. We just didn't know."

Understandably Mrs. Simons was upset, but she refused to give up. "I said to myself 'That's my little boy I have to get him into some type of programme', so when I heard about Tomorrow's Voices I spoke to Thea (Furbert) on the phone. She told me if a spot opened up she would call me and she did, in December last year, I said 'Oh thank the Lord for that!'"

For the last two and a half years



Photo by Tricia Walters

Mother's love: Nothing can come between Evelyn Simons and her son Martin, 6. Every day she deals with the struggle of having an autistic child and says she's regularly told off by members of the public for having a "difficult" or "rude" child when in fact Martin is autistic.

Martin has been working with para-educator, Patricia O'Connor. She accompanied Martin to preschool — before he enrolled at Tomorrow's Voices — and when he enrolled in St. David's Primary School last year (and started coming to Tomorrow's Voices) she was there every step of the way.

Martin spends every Monday and Tuesday at the centre working with his therapist Mona Wierzbicki. On Wednesday mornings he also attends the centre, but this time with Mrs. O'Connor before she accompanies him back to school for the rest of the day, and the week.

Both his mother and Mrs. O'Connor have noticed a change in Martin since he started at Tomorrow's Voices. He is much calmer and has less outbursts.

Mrs. Simons says her greatest reward is watching her little boy working with his therapist — watching, learning and understanding.

"He also does very well at school," Mrs. Simons proudly declares. "The teachers told me they were proud of his behaviour. He used to be very aggressive, but now he is much calmer and I'm confident because I know he's a smart little boy and he will go a long way."

year that something wasn't quite right," Mrs. Dehaney says.

"She was growing up with my aunt's children and I noticed that she was dribbling a lot and wasn't behaving the way a six month old child should be behaving," Mr. Dehaney recalls. "When you called her, or talked to her she wouldn't respond."

Mrs. Dehaney says it was suggested that they have LaTeaka tested so they took her to Child Development. They said she had a developmental delay, but they couldn't diagnose Autism. We had to wait for an appointment in Boston (Boston Children's Hospital) for an evaluation."

The couple waited two years for an appointment and when LaTeaka was four she was diagnosed as autistic — which is very rare in girls.

As for the help LaTeaka received at Tomorrow's Voices, the couple smile broadly in agreement that they noticed her progress almost immediately.

"As far as her toileting, brushing her teeth and getting her to do things, it was much better," Mrs. Dehaney says.

"Also using words," Mr. Dehaney adds. "Before she couldn't even say daddy, and now she says thank you daddy and asks politely for things."

Mrs. Dehaney says Tomorrow's Voices made sure they knew how to use some of the techniques at home, which made life much easier.

However until LaTeaka started at Tomorrow's Voices two years ago, it was very different for the family. Mrs. Dehaney says she had to quit her job to take care of LaTeaka when she was two years old because the day care that she was in could no longer work with her.

"That was before the day care allowance so the only option we had was to hire a paraeducator along with the nursery fees, which was about \$2,000 a month," Mrs. Dehaney recalls. "So I stayed home with her until she was four when she went to public preschool where they had a full-time 'para'. Then she went to the special needs school, Hope Academy, and they recommended Tomorrow's Voices for her."

The couple agree that the centre has been a lifeline for them. "I just wish I had found about them sooner so we could have started the integration sooner," she says.

The Dehaney's have five children with LaTeaka being the youngest. "She has a good relationship with her older sister. She loves being around people, which I understand is rare with autistic children, but she loves being around her peers, especially her siblings."

The couple say their daughter is a real "girlygirl" who loves dressing up and dancing and singing like

Beyonce.

"She loves her music and she learns a song very quickly," Mr. Dehaney adds.

In fact while at Tomorrow's Voices, LaTeaka quite often breaks into song while she's playing and therapists use music videos in their therapy sessions with LaTeaka as an incentive to complete tasks.

"Some children love Sesame Street, or Tom and Jerry, but LaTeaka loves music videos," her therapist Ashley Lee says, adding that she accesses music videos on YouTube from her computer during sessions with the seven-year-old.

When asked how having an autistic child in the house has impacted their lives, the couple agree that "everything changes".

"Some of the things we like to do we can't," Mr. Dehaney says. "We wanted to give going to movies another try, but we had to leave because she won't sit still and she yells."

Even going on family vacations is a challenge. Mrs. Dehaney says it's easy enough sending the other children to their grandmother, but they can't do the same with LaTeaka. Even for a romantic weekend at a local hotel they have to take their daughter with them.

Luckily their relationship is strong enough to take all these challenges in their stride and when talking about the future, the couple hope that LaTeaka can eventually be mainstreamed into public school.

Another family that knows only too well the challenges of raising an autistic child is Leila and Collin Dehaney. Their seven-year-old daughter LaTeaka is autistic and has been receiving therapy at Tomorrow's Voices for about two years.

"Collin realised within the first



Photo by Tricia Walters

Overcoming all obstacles: Leila and her husband Collin Dehaney realised early on that something was different about their daughter LaTeaka, 7, but it wasn't until she was four that doctors diagnosed Autism.

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Photo by Tricia Walters

Play time: Verbal behaviour therapist, **Mona Wierzbicki**, has been with Tomorrow's Voices since it first opened in 2007.

MONA WIERZBICKI is a Verbal Behaviour Therapist at Tomorrow's Voices and joined the centre when it first opened its doors in October 2007. She's worked with about eight children since then, using Applied Behaviour Analysis and Verbal Behaviour Therapy.

Skills are broken down into the smallest tasks and taught individually. Mona teaches eye contact, imitation, fine motor skills, self-help, academics, language and conversation.

Working with the children in a one-on-one basis, therapists start with learning small skills, and gradually learn more complicated skills as each smaller one is mastered. For example, if Mona is teaching a child imitation skills she may give a command, such as "Do this," while tapping the table. The child is then expected to tap the table. If the child succeeds, he receives positive reinforcement, such as something to eat, playing with their favourite toy, watching cartoons or Sesame Street.

If the child errors, then the therapist will repeat the same com-

mand and prompt the correct response, ensuring that each trial is separate or discrete.

With a broad smile Mona admits that nothing gives her greater joy than when a student makes a breakthrough.

"When they finally get it," she says. "It's wonderful!"

However there are challenges.

"It takes everything out of you," she says. "It's not the type of job you can do half way. You have to give it 100 percent, even if you feel you have 80 percent, or you have 20 percent, or something is going on at home, you have to drop it at the door and walk in ready to work. The hardest part is that we love these kids and want to be around them, but they don't always want to be around us."

This sometimes means being slapped in the face and staying calm. "You can never let a child's aggression or behaviour towards you affect your behaviour towards them. That's the greatest challenge and what most people struggle with. With typical kids if they

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Working with Autism

Verbal behaviour therapist at Tomorrow's Voices, **AZUREE WILLIAMS** was teaching home school in Bermuda, something she'd been doing for 13 years, when she saw the advertisement in the newspaper for the position at the centre. With a degree in psychology, she leapt at the chance to work with autistic children.

"I was very interested, and I had been familiarised with Autism prior to coming here, but I never realised the full scope," she recalls. "I came in full steam and it was definitely an eye-opener."

Having graduated from University in 1997, Azuree says the experience was definitely more hands-on than what she had as a student.

"This is not what they show you in college," she chuckles.

She joined Tomorrow's Voices in August last year and says one of the greatest challenges is not always knowing what the child wants, or needs.

"The key role of a verbal behaviour therapist is to assist them in communication," she explains. "At first, when you come in without any prior experience, it can be quite overwhelming, but once you get the training and the hands-on experience you have an appreciation and better understanding of what your role is as a therapist."

"As I've progressed over the last six months I've noticed a change in myself," she says, adding that she's worked with children most of her life, but when it came to Autism it was a whole different "ball game".

"I've seen myself grow and I've seen the children grow," she says smiling. "I've seen the progress, and the actual therapy we provide here is unique and amazing. It works for autistic children and it will work for all children."

When students from Tomorrow's

Voices make the transition to public school, the therapists accompany them to make the transition easier.

"Teachers and staff members are not always educated, or aware of Autism," she says. "And it was challenging at first, but now they see the need for the knowledge, information and education because there are so many children in Bermuda with Autism."

"I think it's key for parents, all parents, to be educated on Autism, because their children will have classmates who are autistic," she adds.


A highlight for her is when a



Photo by Tricia Walters

Look and learn: Verbal behaviour therapist, **Azuree Williams** works with **Ciré Furbert-Lambert** at Tomorrow's Voices.


child makes a breakthrough: "It's like 'Wow!' They learn and process things so differently from us, so when they get something they've been working on for some time, it's the biggest reward."




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Taking Autism into the classroom

By Tricia Walters

Patricia O'Connor has been a paraeducator for about 15 years. She works with children who have special needs, or who have behavioural issues, accompanying them to preschool and primary school and helping them socialise with other children and adapt to a life of routine.

However, when Mrs. O'Connor was asked to work with Martin Simons three years ago, she had never worked with an autistic child before and was hesitant at first.

"At first I said no because I had been through every year level in primary and I didn't want to go back to a younger child, but when I met him I fell in love with him," she recalls. "I didn't know much about the situation so I observed him at first and asked the mother what he enjoyed."

Turns out Martin loved trains and fish so Mrs. O'Connor made sure she had plenty of those to win the six-year-old over.

"The first few days were difficult because when his mother came with him in the van, but then left, the separation anxiety was terrible," she recalls. "He would fuss, cry and hit out, so we started allowing him to get on the van with the other children, without his mom, and he would follow the other children and do what they do."

Mrs. O'Connor quickly noticed that Martin loved routine: "Within the first week I had him doing what he was supposed to do and it worked. It amazed me. The second week someone asked me how I managed to get him to obey and follow through and I said it's because I was consistent right from the start."

Until she met Martin, Mrs. O'Connor admits that she didn't know anything about Autism. By accompanying him to Tomorrow's Voices she has learnt some of the techniques the therapists use to help the little boy communicate

and resolve some of his earlier, more severe behavioural issues.

As for his interaction with other students at St. David's Primary, where Martin is in P1, Mrs. O'Connor says it helps that many of the students were in preschool with him.

"Children are loving and they have always reached out to Martin," she explains. "There are some that are afraid he will hurt them, but there are others who will come running over to him and hug him and talk to him, and there are times when I have to tell them not to be so forceful with him because he might be having a bad day."

Mrs. O'Connor recalls during her first year with Martin he never really made eye contact, but during the second year he started observing the other children and his eye contact increased.

"In my heart I always felt he wanted to be just like them. They (autistic children) want to be like the other children," she says. "When I saw times when he plays on his own, but this year Martin I encouraged them to reach out to him."

Now instead of spending much of the time by himself, Martin joins in games and interacts with his peers. "There are times when he plays on his own, but this year Martin wants to do what the other children are doing," she adds. "We have a routine in the morning where all the children meet in the assembly hall and he will be sitting with the other children. After the principal comes in, they all stand up in the line and it still amazes me. We knew transition will be difficult for autistic children, and we had no idea how he would adapt. But he follows the other students to the classroom, takes out his lunch box and follows them."

But the problem with routine is that as soon as you change something, the child is thrown by the change and might act out. "Sometimes I could tell when he was going to hit out, and other times



Photo by Tricia Walters

Dedication to Education: Paraeducator, Patricia O'Connor has been working with Martin Simons for two years and now accompanies him to St. David's Primary every day where he is a P1 student.

I couldn't tell," she elaborates. "He wants to be friends with the other children, but can't communicate verbally so he acts out. When he touches you or taps you, it's because he wants your attention."

She went back to the school and explained this to the teacher and students and that helped.

Mrs. O'Connor adds that Martin is very intelligent and she taught him how to use the computer while

he was still in preschool.

"I believe every child is gifted and you have to find a way of reaching them," she says. "My frustration came because of the aggression that was interrupting his learning. I'm glad for Tomorrow's Voices because ever since he's been here, he is much less aggressive."

"He has really shown me the importance of having patience with children who have special needs."

Working with Autism

Continued from Page 34

say something like 'I don't like you' or they hit you, you can explain that this hurts your feelings or makes you feel bad, but our kids don't get that. You have to have a tough shell, take it in your stride and keep moving forward."

Mona is originally from Rhode Island and graduated in 2003 with a double degree in Psychology and Art. "When I graduated I wasn't sure where I was going," she recalls. "So I decided to teach preschool because I'd worked with kids my whole life."

She started teaching preschool at an inner-city school where she had quite a few "challenged" children in her class.

"My boss set it up for me to go to a workshop on managing and preventing difficult behaviour in children, offered by a centre that taught children with Autism and other disorders," she recalls. "That kind of led me into this field."

She ended up working at a cen-

tre for children with Autism, mostly teenagers who had "exhausted all of the services in the school system" in New York.

"That was the best way to do it because I started at the highest end (older children), and everything since then has been much easier," she adds with a laugh.

Mona insists that early intervention is critical. In many cases if therapy begins early on, many of these autistic children will no longer require their services.

"That's not the case for everyone, but the earlier you get in there the better," she says. "The youngest child I worked with was 18 months and we had him because his older brother had Autism and the mother knew what to look for. When she saw similar behaviour in her youngest, she knew what to do, who to seek out and was able to get the necessary services. The last I heard they were both doing extremely well."

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