

TOMORROW'S VOICES

Centre is giving voices to Autism in Bermuda

April is World Autism Awareness Month and Tomorrow's Voices is raising awareness and empowering families living with Autism

By Tricia Walters

Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the US, affecting one in 150 children. Every 20 minutes, a child is diagnosed with

an Autism Spectrum Disorder. And Autism is more common than juvenile diabetes, childhood cancer and AIDS combined.

While there is currently no definitive figure on exactly how many children/adults have Autism in Bermuda, according to the Bermuda Autism Support and Education Society (BASE) in 2007, there were at least 40 known cases.

With these powerful statistics as motivation, Bermuda's only Autism early intervention centre, Tomorrow's Voices, is working towards raising awareness.

Since opening its doors almost two years ago, the centre has been billed a "Godsend" by parents whose children have the disorder.

The centre emerged through the efforts of BASE, a group made up of parents who struggled for years to get their children the kind of intense, specialised help they needed.

BASE Founders Thea Furbert and Tricia Crow, both mothers with autistic children, finally took matters into their own hands and in October 2007 opened the centre's doors — thanks to the generous contribution of the Lancashire Foundation (see



story on page 30).

Until the centre opened, there had been no specific education program 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.

Angela Patricelli explains that 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.

"We use a method called Applied Behaviour Analysis — with

emphasis on verbal behaviour," she elaborates. "Each child is different and they range in their (Autism) severity. That's why it's called Autism Spectrum because there is a wide range of severity of autism. It can be mild in some and very severe in others. That's one reason why some children can speak and some can't."

She adds: "Once children have been identified as able to enter a school setting, we set up a schedule and our therapist goes into the school with the child. We give them the skills they need to go into the school setting and once the child succeeds at becoming independent, we fade back and their hours are increased in the school setting."

However the therapy doesn't end at 5:30 p.m. when the children go home. "When a child is brought into the centre, we have parents fill out an intake form and assign a parent handbook," Ms Patricelli continues. "We believe there has to be some kind of parent participation. We also do parent training and they have to come into the centre and observe their child, while also receiving training at home."

The centre caters for ages two through 21 and currently offers therapy to six children. However, there are five children on a waiting list and Ms Patricelli expects the number to increase as it's estimated that at least three children a year will be diagnosed with autism.

"We would love to be able to bring those extra children in, but because we are a non-profit charity, we need more funding to be able to do so," she explains.

Ms Patricelli 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.

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



Photo by Tricia Walters

Angela Patricelli - Director, Tomorrow's Voices.

Before coming to Bermuda, Angela spent 11 years in the field, providing services as a supervising therapist to children with Autism throughout the US and Canada.

"When I found out that Tomorrow's Voices was looking for a Director, I thought it was a unique opportunity for me to come out and help provide services to a country who never had services before for children with Autism," she recalls.

"It was a great opportunity to gain experience from a different perspective of being in another country but also to help share my knowledge of Autism and Applied Behaviour Analysis."

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However, if you make a donation of \$100, you receive not only a VIP card which entitles you to extra discounts at selected merchants, but your shopping is extended until April 11, and you are invited to the Eat Shop Give Kick off party at Opus Lounge.



Hands on: Therapist Dionne Greene works on a one-on-one basis with Cire Furbert. Photo by Tricia Walters

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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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Capital G is proud to be a donor to Tomorrow's Voices and applauds all the work they do as Bermuda's Early Intervention Centre for autistic members of our community.

We encourage you to join us in supporting this worthy cause. Take part in the Eat, Shop, Give programme. Purchase your discount card that not only saves you money but raises funds for Tomorrow's Voices. As Bermuda's local bank, we believe in supporting our community.

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Working Hard Today for Tomorrow's Voices

Father shares hope for his son's future



Photo by Tricia Walters

I love you dad: Darren Ming and his father, Leroy are able to communicate more freely thanks to the work done at Tomorrow's Voices.

By Tricia Walters

When Darren Ming was 34 months old he was diagnosed with Autism. It came as a blow to the family as there was no support system in Bermuda for children with this condition.

His father, Leroy Ming explains that at first it was very challenging, and stressful when he was diagnosed.

"Child Development only had a programme until age four, so after that there was nothing! They put us in contact with the Bermuda Autism Support and Education Society (BASE) and they in turn directed me to Kennedy Krieger in Baltimore."

It was here that the family learnt that Darren would need a therapist. Of course there weren't any in Bermuda, so the family had to bring one in from abroad — at a personal cost of some \$45,000 a year.

But there was a light at the end of the tunnel for the Ming family when Tomorrow's Voices opened its doors in 2007.

Darren, who celebrated his sixth birthday last month, was one of the first students to enrol and Mr. Ming sings the praises of the centre and the "tremendous

strides" they have made in Darren's ability to communicate and socialise.

"He has acquired a lot of extra language and is much more aware of what is going on," Mr. Ming explains. "He has come a long way!" As for the continued therapy at home, Mr. Ming says they have their "to do" list, but it's based on the work the therapists do at Tomorrow's Voices.

What helped was that parents were encouraged to attend sessions at the centre and observe the therapists at work.

"It's much easier and less stressful now," he says with a broad smile. "It's a blessing to have this place."

The couple also have a nine-year-old daughter, Lisa and the family is looking forward to Darren joining his sister at school later this year.

"He was due to start at five-years-old, but we didn't feel he was ready so we didn't want to force the issue," Mr. Ming elaborates. "We asked the Department of Education for a deferment, to which they agreed, so we're looking at getting him in school in September."

"He's a very different little boy to what he used to be like," concludes his proud father, Leroy Ming, as the two share a hug.

Charitable trust helps lay foundation for hope

By Tricia Walters

The Lancashire Foundation, a Bermuda charitable trust originated by Lancashire Holdings Ltd., was started in 2006 with the aim of creating a charitable trust for the benefit of charitable causes in Bermuda and elsewhere. One of their first charitable causes was Tomorrow's Voices, which opened its doors the same year. However, the Foundation did more than just donate money.

Lancashire staff literally helped every step of the way — from painting walls to drilling holes, to get the building in Smith's ready for the Grand Opening in October 2007.

Lancashire Foundation Chairman, Charles Mathias chuckles at the comment by centre Director, Angela Patriceili, that Tomorrow's Voices "would not exist if it weren't for the Lancashire Foundation".

"They exist because of the extraordinary hard work and dedication of the people who set it up,"

Mr. Mathias points out. "We did the easy bit. We provided the money. What was nice was that we got staff involved. Our CFO was drilling holes and some of our underwriters were painting and assembling furniture, but all the credit goes to Thea (Furbert) and her staff at the centre."

Why Tomorrow's Voices? Mr. Mathias explains that then-chairman, Sarah Burnsted, who had an academic background in special needs and was working with special needs children in Bermuda, became aware of the project and was thrilled at the prospect of an early intervention Autism programme — a first for the Island.

"We try and stay involved," he adds. "If they have a ribbon day, we'll get people to volunteer and we'll take a location over for the whole day. We will give staff an hour of work to go and do that. We also like to try and energise people to do more than just give money." "We have tremendous admiration for the extraordinary hard work that Tomorrow's Voices do, and we would like to continue supporting them in any way we can," Mr. Mathias concludes.



File photo

Helping hands: The Lancashire Foundation Donation Committee Members are (L-R) Rosetta Lanoy, Carole White, Charles Mathias, Peter Carey (The Learning Center), Sara Altman, Greg Lunn, Anna Mathias. Missing from picture was Ana Parkin.

tion for the extraordinary hard work that Tomorrow's Voices do, and we would like to continue supporting them in any way we can,"

Mr. Mathias concludes.

TOMORROW'S VOICES
Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre

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The varied spectrum of Autism

From www.tomorrowvoices.bm

Autism is a complex condition and it is the most commonly diagnosed pervasive developmental disorder.

Autism is a neurological and developmental disorder that usually appears during the first three years of life. Autism impairs a person's ability to communicate both verbally and non-verbally, to form relationships and to interact with others. It also typically results in a range of unusual and repetitive behaviours. Autism is classified as a spectrum disorder which means, it can vary from mild to severe. In many cases, individuals with Autism will show uneven levels of intelligence, with highly developed talents in some areas.

The core symptoms that define Autism consist of deficits of varying degrees in three areas of development:

1. defective social or personal relatedness behaviours
2. language or, more broadly, communication difficulties
3. play or preferred activities which are characterised by preoccupations having a repetitive or stereotyped quality.

Through medical research, the condition known as autism has been considerably broadened to include many childhood developmental disorders. Today the term of pervasive developmental disorder is often applied to identify what is commonly called Autism. PDD disorders include: Autistic Disorder, Rett's disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Asperger's disorder and PDD not otherwise specified.

The severity of Autism varies widely. Experts are beginning to agree that the cause of Autism has neurobiological origins, and is not the result of poor parenting (an early misconception). Current research is showing that there are brain differences between the person with Autism and his or her typical counterpart and it is the dysfunction of specific nerve net-

works that appears to be responsible for the behaviours observed in Autism. Unfortunately, the precise cause of Autism in the majority of children is not yet well understood.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a statistic in 2007 for the prevalence of Autism (in the US), it was found that 1 in 150 children are living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ASDs occur in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups and is four times more likely to oc-



Photo by Tricia Walters
Play time: Stephan DeShield takes a break from therapy to play and have fun with therapist, Mona Weirzbicki.

cur in boys than girls.

The diagnostic standard used to identify Autism is called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association, fourth edition (DSM-IV). It includes diagnostic criteria grouped into three categories. Individuals with Autism may not necessarily have all the signs and symptoms as described below.

The core symptoms that define Autism consist of deficits of varying degrees in three areas of development:

- Impairment in social interaction;
- Impairment in the use of non-ver-

bal behaviours such as lack of eye contact, unable to read facial expressions or respond to social cues and gestures.

- * Failure to interact and to develop appropriate peer relationships.

- * A lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g. lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest).

- * Prefer isolation and appear uninterested in other people, lack of social or emotional reciprocity.

2. Impairments in language, or more broadly communication difficulties:

- * Delay in or total lack of, the development of spoken language.

- * In individuals with adequate speech, a marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others.

- * Echolalia (rote repetition of words or phrases) or repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language.

- * Lack of varied, spontaneous make believe or social initiative play appropriate to developmental level.

3. Impairments in play or preferred activities which are characterised by preoccupations of having a repetitive or stereotyped quality:

- * Display repetitive patterns of behaviour such as hand flapping, eye-gazing (staring or looking from the side of the eye), body rocking, grimming, and vocalisations

- * Encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus.

- * Display apparently inflexible adherence to specific, non-functional routines or rituals.

- * Have an abnormal interaction with toys that may include an extreme focus on parts of objects.

Two other popular rating scales that are sometimes used to help diagnose and determine the severity of Autism are the Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) and the Autism Behaviour Checklist.

For more information, visit www.tomorrowvoices.bm.



Photo by Tricia Walters
Natasha Pedro-Petty - Therapist

On a flight back to Bermuda after college, Natasha met a woman who had children with Autism and learnt about the pending opening of Tomorrow's Voices. With a degree in Psychology and Neuroscience, she needed her Masters to get a job, but needed experience to get her Masters, so working at Tomorrow's Voices made perfect sense.

"You need a lot of patience," Natasha says of working with autistic children. "They become normal to you and you find yourself wondering why they just don't get something... you forget sometimes that they have Autism.

"You also need to treat each child differently because they are."

Natasha says she wakes up looking forward to coming to work and finds it incredibly rewarding. She works exclusively with student, Darren Ming (see story on page 30) and says the one-on-one therapy helps in getting to know the child.



Photo by Tricia Walters
Maurice Azzano - Therapist

Maurice Azzano works as a therapist with the only girl with Autism at Tomorrow's Voices, La'teaka Dehaney. He was a high school and elementary teacher for 27 years in Canada before moving to Bermuda.

"As a music teacher, through the last 15 years I noticed more and more children were coming into my class with some strange behaviours, which I later found out to be the autistic spectrum," he explains of his introduction to Autism. "I found it very interesting because there was very little we could do with them in the inclusionary class, so that's where my interest peaked."

Over the next few years he started teaching special education classes and learnt as much as he could about behaviour analysis in an attempt to get "into the world" of the autistic child and help them master the necessary skills to succeed.

"This is turned out to be a wonderful challenge and a wonderful reward."



Photo by Tricia Walters
Chelsey Cook - Volunteer

During the day Chelsey Cook works as a nanny on the Island, but loves volunteering at Tomorrow's Voices for an hour every day - allowing the therapists a break over lunch time. With a degree in secondary education, she says Tomorrow's Voices seemed like the ideal place to volunteer because she had experience with autistic children. "A lot of times I'll stay and just observe the therapists so I do a better job when I'm with the kids," she says. "If you have free time you should volunteer, I couldn't imagine doing anything else."

Tomorrow's Voices is always looking for volunteers that are interested in helping out at the centre and enhancing the lives of those touched by Autism Spectrum Disorders. For more information on volunteering at Tomorrow's Voices please give them a call at 297-4342.



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