

WINTER 2006
VOLUME 2 ISSUE 1



\$6.00 US

The AUTISM™

TAP INTO IT™

perspective

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normal
people
scare
me

A film about AUTISM



JOEY TRAVOLTA producer
TAYLOR DAYNE theme song
TAYLOR CROSS co-director
KERI BOWERS co-director



produced by joey travolta

ENGAGING AUTISM:
BUILDING HEALTHY FOUNDATIONS

**Opportunities Called
Restrictive and
Repetitive Interests**

O.C.D. & A.S.D.

COGNITIVE THERAPY INTERVENTION:
THE MILLER METHOD

Taylor Cross, Co-Director
Taylor Dayne, Theme song
"normal people scare me"



THE AUTISM PERSPECTIVE - TAP MAGAZINE
WINTER • 2006 - PUBLISHED QUARTERLY

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The Autism Perspective
is a magazine about
options...

The Autism Perspective's mission is to support those living with or touched by Autism Spectrum Disorders by providing unbiased information regarding available treatments, services, resources, and options, along with providing a forum for individuals to share their points of view about their autism experience.

This issue may contain articles having to do with alternative treatments that are not empirically-based, nor proven to be successful through scientific channels. Neither The Autism Perspective nor this magazine advocate, endorse or recommend the use of any treatments or therapies that may be discussed in this issue. Before starting any new treatment or therapy seek medical advice.

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- 8 How Autism Today Began**
By Karen Simmons-Sicoli
- 10 A Day in the Life**
By Michele Iallonardi
- 13 A Stranger Among Us**
By Lisa Ackerson Lieberman, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.
- 16 Project Lifesaver**
By Chief Gene Saunders
- 20 Autism and Hope - Conference Begins Dialogue for Change**
By Michael O'Hanlon
By Barbara Firestone, Ph.D.
By David Mandell, Ph.D.
- 24 Taking it to the Streets**
By Sharon Hensel-Cohen, SLP
- 26 Partnering to Achieve Success**
By Areva D. Martin, Esq.
- 28 A Regular Guy**
By Laura Shumaker
- 30 Autism Culture**
By Chris Seitz
- 32 Cultura Autisa (Spanish Version - Autism Culture)**
By Chris Seitz - Translated By Ina Martinez
- 34 O.C.D. & A.S.D.**
By Lance Steinberg, M.D.
- 36 Engaging Autism: Orchestrating Interventions to Build Healthy Foundations for Relating, Communicating and Thinking**
By Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.
- 39 The Miller Method**
By Rebecca Sperber, M.S., M.F.T.
- 48 TAP into it...**
- 50 The Mentor Network**
By Marjorie Malpiede
- 53 Rediscovering My Son During Winter Recess**
By Lynne Glucoft
- 54 Innovative Programs for Students with A.S.D. in L.A.U.S.D.**
By Debbie Moss, M.A.
By Pat Grayson-DeJong, M.Ed.
- 58 Opportunities Called "Restrictive and Repetitive Interests"**
By Barbara T. Doyle, M.S.
- 60 Kindred Souls**
By Chris Dodds written by Alexandra Levit

Departments &

LIVING WITH A.S.D.

- 62 The Origins of G.R.A.S.P.**
By Micheal John Carley
- 66 Where Would I Be Without You To Hold Me?**
By Johnny Seitz
- 68 Inside Empathy**
By Rhonda Gardner
- 71 Successful Older People With Aspergers**
By Temple Grandin, Ph.D.
- 72 What Are Friends For?**
By Barb Rentenbach
- 74 Blind Fate**
By Sam Rubin
- 75 Leap of Faith**
By William Stillman

OUR GRANDCHILDREN

- 77 A Very Special Word**
By Robert "Gill" Goering
- 77 A Very Special Child**
By Dawn Goering

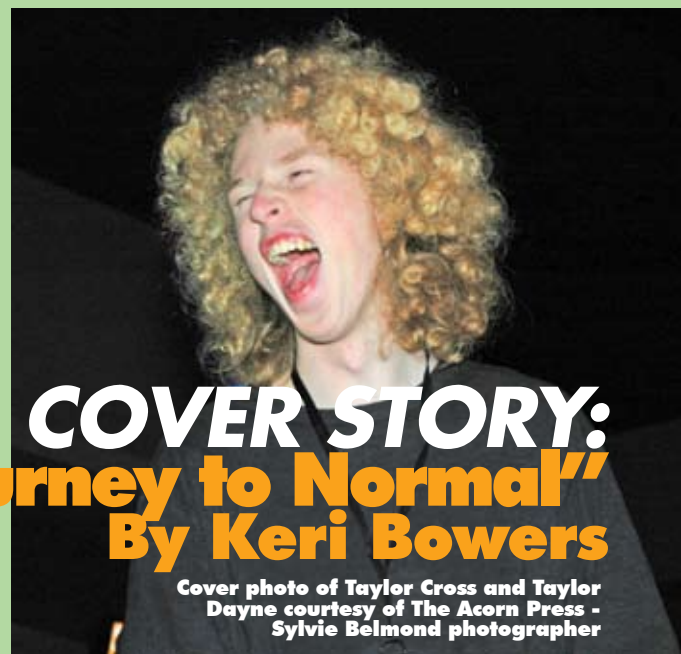
FROM A SIBLING

- 78 My Brother James**
By Alison Siebels
- 79 My Life with Benny**
By Adam Sperber-Compean

CONTRIBUTING COLUMNISTS

- 80 Around the World**
By Stephen Shore
- 82 Through the Looking Glass**
By William Stillman

42 COVER STORY: "A Journey to Normal" By Keri Bowers



Cover photo of Taylor Cross and Taylor Dayne courtesy of The Acorn Press - Sylvie Belmont photographer

That was my experience over twelve years ago when I first found out about my son Jonathan's diagnosis. I began searching for answers on how to best help him. I sought out autism conferences and bought all the autism resources I could get my hands on. You see, when my son's doctor uttered those unforgettable words, he also told me to just take my son home and come back in a year. My husband, Jim, didn't believe that Jonathan had autism. In fact, he thought the doctors didn't know what they were talking about. To Jim, his son was a brilliant baby

boy who began reading at age two. Thank God my sister-in-law encouraged me to get a second opinion, because early intervention is

Thank God my sister-in-law encouraged me to get a second opinion, because early intervention is really the key to success for children on the autism spectrum.

really the key to success for children on the autism spectrum. I was told over and over

again that they didn't know the cause and there was little hope and absolutely no cure. I had no idea what his future would hold, so I did my best to figure out as much as I possibly could.

When Jonathan was diagnosed in 1994, there was very little direction and even less resources accessible to parents who needed to educate themselves about autism and the different treatment methodologies available to help their children. It was out of the frustration I experienced searching for the help I needed for my son and my family that I decided to make the journey down the autism

By Karen Simmons-Sicoli

HOW AUTISM TODAY BEGAN

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR DOCTOR SAYS THOSE WORDS A PARENT NEVER WANTS TO HEAR, "YOUR CHILD HAS AUTISM?" YOU FEEL LIKE SCREAMING OR PUTTING YOUR FINGERS IN YOUR EARS TO DENY THE OBVIOUS TRUTH. YOU WANT TO CRY, SCREAM AND GO NUMB BUT YOU CAN'T. NOT WHEN YOU KNOW IN YOUR HEART OF HEARTS THAT YOU MUST DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO HELP YOUR CHILD.



L to R - Jonathan, Stephen and Alex Sicoli

path easier and more accessible for parents and professionals alike. I wanted others to benefit from all of the knowledge and answers I had spent countless hours seeking out. My relentless, insatiable thirst for knowledge was the seed that ultimately led me to founding Autism Today in 1998.

Autism Today is now a leading, global online information and resource center providing educational conferences, publishing, service provider directories, along with hundreds of autism resources and services. Our website can be accessed at autismtoday.com. We have coupled with many of the world's leading autism and Asperger's experts to provide an "Ask the Experts" section where anyone can have their most pressing autism related questions answered. We also work with autism experts to provide invaluable and practical information at live conferences all over North America. We are excited to be finalizing the details of our 2006 conference schedule including Hawaii, Seattle and a cross Canada conference tour including Vancouver, Kelowna, Edmonton, Calgary, Halifax,

Autism Today is now a leading, global online information and resource center providing educational conferences, publishing, service provider directories, along with hundreds of autism resources and services.

Ottawa, and the Maritimes. And when you cannot attend in person, our Autism Education Online (AEO)(tm) conferences have all the latest information available via our web-

site, www.autismevents.com. This format has helped make autism education accessible for thousands of teachers, families and professionals by allowing them to view our experts' presentations

via their home or office computer at a time that best fits their sched-



L to R - Alex and Jonathan



L to R - Karen Simmons Sicoli, Jim Sicoli and Christina Sicoli

ules.

Autism Today's most recent endeavor is an E-Book called "The Official Autism 101 Manual," which is dedicated to the experts, professionals and other caregivers who know and care about our children. What's exciting about this E-book is that it is interactive, informative, comprehensive, and can be easily updated as new information and research emerge over time. It is also easy to access at www.autism101manual.com from anywhere in the world because it doesn't take long to open or download. You see, we want to make your journey quick and easy, not like the adventure many of us have had to endure.

Our experts, which include names like Dr. Temple Grandin, Dr. Barry Prizant, Dr. Bernard Rimland, Dr. Tony Attwood, Dr. Jed Baker and over forty more leaders in the autism field, pave the pathway from explaining what Autism Spectrum Disorders are, through the history of autism, its characteristics, to exploring the relationships between

autism and ADD. Other topics include the increase in autism, ways to help parents cope emotionally, creating positive parent/physician partnerships, developing strengths, leading methodologies, enrichment, school planning, planning for the future and also a section by and for people on the spectrum. The beauty is that this book strives to guide people down the path and provide the latest, most current information to the people who desperately need to know what to do when they first hear those words from their doctors echoing in their ears, "Your child has autism!"

I'm also thrilled that I've been selected to be a Chicken Soup for the Soul Co-author

This format has helped make autism education accessible for thousands of teachers, families and professionals by allowing them to view our experts' presentations via their home or office computer at a time that best fits their schedules.

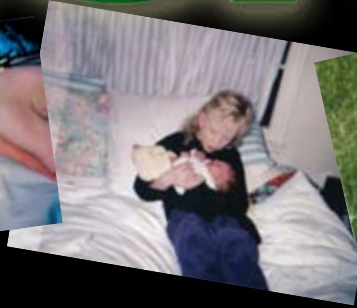
along with Mark Victor Hansen and Jack Canfield. We are looking for heartwarming, goosebump-raising stories around any type of special needs condition. If you have a story to tell visit: chickensoupstories.com to submit yours.

Once again, if you have any questions about autism, please visit our website at autismtoday.com. **TAP**

For information about our upcoming conferences, visit www.autismevents.com. To access "The Official Autism 101 Manual", go to www.autism-101manual.com.



A JOURNEY TO



By Keri Bowers

“BREATHE KERI, BREATHE!” CHOKE, SPUTTER, SPLAT. I CRASHED AND BURNED ALL AT ONCE. “AIR. I NEED SOME AIR...” I FELT MY BREATH CATCH AND GO SHALLOW AS THE CONSULTING NEUROLOGIST TOLD ME HE JUST COULDN’T SAY WHETHER TAYLOR WOULD EVER WALK OR TALK.



Taylor Cross

NORMAL



Taylor Cross and family: The Early Years

Though I knew we had issues with Taylor's development, nothing could have prepared me to hear those ominous words. I had become somewhat cynical about the reports from the various physicians and other specialists who had seen Taylor. Assessments included speculation of "mental retardation," "clinical depression," and the deflating opinion that I had not properly bonded with my child. Ultimately, a diagnosis of "non-specific developmental delays" was what was used until he was six years old. In May of 1996, Taylor was finally diagnosed with autism.

From the time Taylor was born, it was evident he had problems. His long, lean body appeared like a rag doll. Limp limbs dangled like rubber bands without intention. Taylor surely would have slipped through my arms if I hadn't held him closely to me. It didn't help that he had sensory issues that caused him to scream when I held him. Taylor was just over two when he finally took his first steps.

In my journal entry in late November 1991, I wrote: "It took you a long time to decide to put words together, but now you're finally doing it." Taylor was about to turn three when he began to talk. It would be a couple more years before

was fleeting. I was angry and afraid. Not just for Taylor, but for myself. As a single mother at the time, all the work of raising him fell solely to me. What, I wondered, would our lives be like? Sometimes I bargained, other times I cried. There were days I was in denial, and there were the times I would ask: "Why God? Why me?"

"Why not you, Keri?"

One night just after Taylor's first birthday, as I lay alone in the dark with fear covering me like a blanket, I once again asked, "Why me God?" With my fists clenched—my mind in victim mode—tears wet my pillow. How could this happen to me? And then, I heard a big, yet little voice saying to me: "Why not you Keri? ... Why not?" At first, I was startled. Where did that come from? Then, a knowing came over me. My time to learn acceptance had come. I hit the pavement and there was no turning back. After that night, I never asked God 'why' again, because I knew why. I was chosen to be Taylor's mom—exactly how he came into



Keri Bowers and son Taylor Cross

Taylor's words would begin to make sense.

During the first year of Taylor's life, my struggle to come to terms with his disability

JOURNEY TO NORMAL

this world—period. That was the day our lives changed forever.

The transcendence from emotional distance, fear and anger to acceptance and greater love was ultimately a conscious choice aided by a spiritual transformation. In retrospect, I couldn't say exactly where my newfound strength came from or how I came to change my internal feelings, but it happened as quickly as turning on or off a light—with a flick of the hand on the switch. With my new attitude, I quickly found myself falling deeper and deeper in love with my

kids—judgmental as I might have been—but that was not what I felt would work for my kid. I believed, and still do, that all kids (with or without disabilities) need strong boundaries; a sense of accomplishment for self; and to learn to make choices, determine outcomes, and be accountable. They need to make mistakes in the lov-

eleven. We worked harder, smarter, and later in the day than some. I made "missions" out of everyday events: going to the bathroom; crossing a street safely; learning to use a pay phone, to read a map, or to call the police in an emergency. I allowed him to make messes in the kitchen and laundry room, over and over again, until he could do things like make an egg by himself and clean up afterwards—though even today at 17 he still doesn't get the dishes quite clean. Most of all, even when tired, we trudged on and raised the bar.

We've had a parade of OT's, speech pathologists, behaviorists, therapists, and others work with Taylor throughout his life. And when they weren't working with him, I



Photo by Sylvie Belmond
The Acorn Press

child in ways I had not experienced before.

I began to educate myself and look for answers from any expert or parent who would share their experiences with me. But mostly, I followed my instincts to make Taylor work hard. I saw other parents doing what I thought was too much for their

ing environments we create for them. How else will they learn?

I began to hold Taylor accountable for things they said he couldn't do. So many things they said he couldn't do—he did. Many times, we failed miserably. But for every ten times we fell down, we got up

was. I put up with people thinking I was cruel, because I knew I had to push him hard. Otherwise, it was far too easy for Taylor to isolate and retreat and be lazy in his world. That was where he lived most comfortably. I believed by raising the bar, he'd have a chance. A chance at language, a chance at inclusion, and ultimately a chance for inde-

pendent living—maybe even college.

Taylor remained in a special day program until he entered the first grade. Just after his visit to UCLA in 1996, I decided he would be best served by placing him in a regular education environment. It was not an easy transition. Back in those days, there were not many kids with disabilities in general education classes. But Taylor's tantrums, his odd behavior, sensory issues and other things began to be greatly influenced by the so-called typical peers in his class. He began to make friends in school and adopt desired behaviors. It was a good choice for us. Still, as the years went by, Taylor's earlier friendships began to fade as his peers got older and began to point out and repel from his differences.

By the third grade, Taylor began to isolate more and more. By the fourth grade, it was apparent we needed more intense social intervention. I found social skills groups, drama and art classes to be among the best answers. Where he was unable to make or maintain friendships in regular education classes, his social skills groups provided safety and plenty of friends who accepted him as he was. Where he could not stand to make a speech in school, public speaking classes gave him courage. Where he could not express his inner feelings and emotions—even anger at having autism—art gave him an outlet for expression.

It is interesting to note that, since third grade, Taylor had never been invited to a birthday party, an after school get-together, or other activity by a typical peer in his general education classes. His friends consisted of the kids with autism and Asperger's in his social skills group. At first, I felt sorry for him, and then one day he said to me: "Mom, I like to be with kids like myself." I began to see that my dream that he mingle with typical peers was not his dream. He was comfortable in his autism peer group.

Taylor, like any individual facing a challenge, needed to go through the normal stages of "recovery." He bargained, he denied, he was angry. Finally, one day when

TAYLOR DAYNE IN QUOTES



"When I heard the song and learned its content, it was very moving. I had learned that Taylor Cross was named after me. His mother felt strongly about me as a singer and contacted me to tell me Taylor's story. It touched my heart. I wasn't exposed to anybody directly with autism, but I know there are many different dimensions to it. Seeing portions of the film, "normal people scare me," made me feel I could contribute something to this song. It just made a lot of sense."

"Lyrically, the song was demanding in the sense that you could feel the isolation. There's a tone to it. I think lyrically it was captured and expressed that way."

"As a singer it is my job to convey what's on the page whether I write the song or not... The feeling in this song is very hopeful. A great song and a great lyric hits everybody. It's universal. So universally speaking, the lyrics in this song are very relatable to anybody going through a difficult period of time."

he was 12 and a half, he announced to me, "Mom, I think I blew my autism up." I knew he had come to accept who he was—even with the label "autism."

Fast Forward...

Just before his 15th birthday, Taylor announced to me that he wanted to make money to pay for gifts for the less fortunate families we adopted every Christmas. He told me he wanted to make films and sell them. After I told him every reason in the book why he could not succeed—after all, was I not wiser than he?—I caught myself and stopped. "Taylor, forget

everything I just said. If you can come up with a 'hook,' something people want to know about, you can make a film." Thus began our journey to Normal.

His short 10-minute film, 'Normal People Scare Me,' was Taylor's contribution to a student film festival in 2004. We found Joey Trivolta, who was once a special education teacher, and asked him if he would mentor Taylor for the film festival he was sponsoring at his daughter's high school. He agreed to help Taylor, and the result was phenomenal. So much so, that Taylor's film



Promotional movie poster

tion teacher, and asked him if he would mentor Taylor for the film festival he was sponsoring at his daughter's high school. He agreed to help Taylor, and the result was phenomenal. So much so, that Taylor's film

JOEY TRAVOLTA AND THE MAKING OF "normal people scare me"



"This project came to me as a student film concept. Originally, Keri had heard I was a special education teacher earlier in my career. She approached me to propose that I include kids with autism in the acting workshops I run through my company Entertainment Experience. I found myself saying "yes" to both inclusion and the film project before I even realized what I was signing on to. It's been an amazing journey ever since. We've been fully included in our workshops for over two years now."

"Taylor participates in acting workshops every Saturday in a full-inclusion model."

"For kids with autism, the arts are especially important. Acting, for example, gives kids the opportunity to express in a very relaxed and supportive environment. Expression allows kids to develop self-confidence and skills that help them in everyday life."

"The opportunity to produce "Normal People Scare Me" came when Taylor's mom came to me and proposed that I mentor her son in making a student film about autism. I agreed to help him make the film and include it in a film festival I was sponsoring at my daughter's high school. The response to the 10-minute short was phenomenal. People wanted to see it. They wanted to see more. It was natural to continue our work to make it a feature film; something to help the global autism community."

"When I first met Taylor, I had serious reservations about whether we could actually complete this project. It was not always easy to work on this project with a teen, and especially a teen with autism. But he came through in a powerful way. Taylor has grown so much these past two years. He has really taken on a new vitality and self-confidence I had not seen before."

"Sometimes getting Taylor to ask the questions was as hard as getting the kids to answer them."

There have been times I wondered how I got myself into this. Then I sit in with the kids on a Saturday acting class, and I see how magical the ability to express is for them. They come alive, and I just don't wonder anymore."

"Working with kids with autism is not always easy, but it is always, in the end, rewarding."

"Taylor and his mom have co-directed an important piece of work for the autism community. I am just happy to be a part of this world."

The song I wrote with Jeff Lass, "Locked Inside of Me," was written after I learned more about the world of kids with autism. We wanted to express in some way what it might look like to feel locked inside of this thing called autism. But moreover, we wanted to convey that within that world is a world of hope and ultimately, love."

It was a natural progression for Taylor Dayne to sing the song - especially after Keri explained that her son Taylor was named after the singer."

went on to win a few awards and make some headlines. With that, we all agreed that we had a feature film on our hands.

Making the film with Taylor has been a wonderful and sometimes hair-pulling experience. The journey to Normal was not without major challenges. Sometimes, getting Taylor to ask the questions was as difficult as getting his subjects to answer them. There were times Taylor would get stuck in a perseverative idea and would not budge. Unfortunately, some of those ideas were only understood by him. Those frustrations were made all worthwhile by the outcome of our efforts.

As an aspiring film maker, Taylor conducted over 65 interviews for his film. Interview subjects range in age from 9 to 57 years, and represent different levels of abilities on the autism spectrum. Taylor asks questions such as, "What is autism?" "Do you like or not like being autistic?" "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and "What are you good at?" The courageous kids, teens and adults Taylor interviewed offer powerful, poignant, and deeply moving insight to life and living behind the many faces and mysteries of autism.

In one of Taylor's most moving interviews, he connects with surf champion Izzy Paskowitz of Surfers Healing. Izzy is revealing in his honesty and perspective on raising his son, Isaiah. Other interviews feature young aspiring artists, poets, actors, college students, and a quirky special education bus driver with autism. Cindy and Janice are mothers with autism who have kids with autism. Four sets of siblings are interviewed. Graham Nash provides narration in the film, and singer/songwriter Taylor Dayne sings the film's theme song, "Locked Inside of Me," written by Joey Travolta and Jeff Less.

As of this writing, we are three weeks away from finishing this two-year long project. During that time, Taylor has spoken in front of audiences as large as 500 people. He shares his experiences, hopes and dreams for the film and for his life. When we get up on stage together to share our work, Taylor

JOURNEY TO NORMAL

will inevitably challenge me in front of the audience: "Mom, they don't want to hear you, they want to hear me," as he veers off to a topic not related to our talk. But that is my boy, with quirks, perseverations, and ideas that you and I might not relate to, but that he understands. As he is, just the way he is, oddities and all, Taylor is perfection. He is my muse, my inspiration, and perhaps one day, will inspire you too. I see Taylor as not so much defined by his autism, but rather guided by its many mysteries to make choices for his life. Whatever those choices, they will be his to make.

"We did sure show them!" Taylor says in his film. Indeed, we sure did. **TAP**

Cross' mother, Keri Bowers, is a disabilities advocate, author, speaker, and founder of PAUSE4kids—a non-profit serving the developmentally disabled. She joins her son, Taylor, and Joey Travolta in the making of this film. The three of them continue to speak and share the upcoming feature film throughout the country. Panel discussion includes Q&A about the making of the film; alternative interventions for supports; and social and life skill training for those with autism in the dramatic and fine and musical arts.

For more information on how you can host your own event, please contact: Keri Bowers at penbooks@adelphia.net

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