

Julian's Story

Our Experience at The Listening Centre

by Thelma Orchard

My autistic son is twenty-one. When he was diagnosed at age four, seventeen years ago, there was little in the way of 'therapies' or services for autistic children. He was placed in a class for the 'trainable retarded', and went to summer day camps run by Community Living, and that was about it!

It was not until he was fourteen that I learned about The Listening Centre in Toronto. I found out about listening therapy from reading Stehli's wonderful book, "The Sound of a Miracle." Georgie, her daughter, had been miraculously "cured" of her autism through listening therapy.

Naturally, we hoped our son, Julian, would be cured too!

It was not to be. But the sessions he spent at The Listening Centre were well worth it, and revolutionized the way we looked at our 'retarded' autistic son forever.

At this time in his life, entering puberty, Julian was going through a very difficult phase. He had become violent, self-abusive, agitated, hard to handle both at home and at school. He spent all his time pacing rapidly, shouting obscenities at himself (language we did not know he knew, that he had picked up from integration with eighth graders!) at home and at school. He was suspended endlessly from school, despite the well-meaning efforts of his teachers, and us, his parents, to calm him down. We were at the point of despair.

At The Listening Centre we were doubtful (and cynical) whether Julian would even wear the required head-phones necessary to undergo the therapy. He did. Not only that, he loved going to the Centre from the outset. It was located on Markham Street in Toronto, just doors down from "Honest Ed's", in a big old Victorian house. Julian's sessions took place in a comfortable pleasant carpeted room on the second floor. The therapy consisted of 'listening' to tapes of music, mainly Mozart, at certain frequencies that would stimulate Julian's hearing both to frequencies that bothered him, and to those that he seemed "not to hear". Like most autistic children, Julian had often appeared 'deaf'. However, formal hearing tests had proved negative. There was nothing wrong with his hearing but there was with his ability to respond to certain frequencies of sound and listen to them.

Before long Julian was speaking into a microphone learning to repeat words and phrases with meaning, drawing, writing, and listening to novels 'at his age level.' I had discovered this last by accident. One day I had noticed the therapist reading Farley Mowat's "Owls in the Attic" to Julian. Worried that my precious money was being wasted, I had asked anxiously was not that book too difficult for Julian to read. After all, at school, he was still on grade one primers, "Look, Jane, look"! The therapist explained that though it was true that Julian could not "read" the book himself, he understood the book when read to him. Not only that, Julian could answer comprehension questions about the book afterwards. I was invited to watch. To my amazement, Julian listened, obviously enjoying being read to, the chapter for the session. He answers simple questions correctly about the passage and then made a drawing of owls!

It did not take me long to figure out that what The Listening Centre was doing with Julian, I could try at home, and I did. I took an age level book from the Young Adult (teenager) section of our library, and began reading it after supper. Julian loved it. We began journal writing at home, and drawing pictures about the little daily happenings. I showed his teachers and urged them to give it a try. Julian still had

great difficulties with discipline, but everyone persevered. Eventually, Julian had to be put on medication to help him gain control of himself, but The Listening Centre had shown the way, and was the first successful experience Julian ever had at a difficult time of his life. My only regret was that we had learned about it so late in his life.

Therapies are expensive, but the earlier they are employed, the more effective they obviously are. Every parent has to make their own educated judgment of the value of different therapies - music therapy, speech therapy, listening therapy, occupational, visual and physical therapy. But I know from my own experience of teaching primarily autistic children that 'listening' is the prime essential of learning.

This testimonial was written for the Autistic Society of Ontario, Peel Chapter, newsletter, News and Views, Issue 11 (April 1998).

Mrs. Wheatley (Orchard) shares more of Julian's experiences growing up including his experience at The Listening Centre and his battle with aggression in her recently published book "My Sad is All Gone". (Thelma Wheatley, © 2004 by Lucky Press, LLC.)