

# The Hidden Gift

## Author-mother discovers pathways into autistic mind

March 8, 2004  
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Dayton Daily News

Whitney Conway was presumed severely autistic, deaf and mentally retarded with a 49 IQ a decade before he started taking college classes in 10th grade, sang in the high school musical and lettered in two sports.

Sam Bryan was labeled with severe learning disabilities and an IQ around 70 before his second-grade test scores last year put him at the level of a first-year law student.

They were able to flourish because Whitney's mother, a speech pathologist with post-doctoral studies in brain science, figured out the boys' brains were fluent in a language foreign to most schools. Where most people think in words, Sam and Whitney think in pictures.

"They're watching movies all day long," said Cheri Florance, Whitney's mom and Sam's therapist. "They have genius-level visual processing systems that are so strong, the language system doesn't develop."

Florance developed techniques for using the strong visual system to repair the weak verbal functions, said Sam's mom, Cathy Bryan of Beavercreek. The Ohio State University teacher and researcher has helped hundreds of similar kids and adults learn to process thoughts as words instead of pictures.

Maverick Mind: A Mother's Story of Solving the Mystery of Her Unreachable, Unteachable, Silent Son, is Florance's book about her long battle to bridge Whitney's thoughts with the rest of the world, written with Marin Gazzaniga. Florance will be at Books & Co. in Kettering Thursday with longtime assistant and Miami Valley resident Tammi Pistone.

The concept of rewiring the brain's learning pathways has implications for the 15 percent to 32 percent of Americans who have such communications disorders as autism, stroke damage, dyslexia and stuttering. Like Sam and Whitney, they have some barrier in the circuitry for expressing and receiving thoughts. But well under 1 percent of people have the compensating gifts of maverick minds, Florance said.

While Sam couldn't speak in sentences until he was 4, he memorized the alphabet and numbers at 2, recognizing them in script or block letters and began assembling complex Lego structures. By kindergarten, he drew a recognizable world map and scored the equivalent of a 160 IQ on a visual test.

Socially, though, Bryan said, "Sam was very timid, fearful of new situations, afraid to talk to anybody. He had no self-confidence and very much depended on my husband and me to interpret situations for him." The fear and withdrawal were understandable, she said, for anyone constantly hearing words that made no sense.

"Their gift is hidden by their disability," Florance said, "and they're thought to have ADD or not trying hard enough." But when maverick minds appear to be distracted or inattentive, it's because listening requires undivided concentration.

First, they're listening with substandard hearing ability and even more, they're "trying to take the words and put them into the brain's visual sketch pad," Florance said. Beyond that, a visual person is more apt to think by associating things.

So Florance teaches them to use what she called their brain's native language - pictures - to jump start verbal language.

In one example, Bryan said, Florance might have people draw a dozen silly pictures down the left-hand column of a page. An elephant doing math at a chalkboard would be a visual cue for the phrase "mammoth math," which would go in the middle column. In the right-hand column, people would write the phrase's initials, MM in this case.

Highly visual people have no trouble remembering all the phrases by seeing the pictures. The initials aren't so helpful right away, but after several repetitions, MM starts conjuring up the picture and then the phrase.

Eventually, their minds bypass the pictures and go straight from initials to phrases, Bryan said. "If you do that over and over again, you build a pathway in the brain to switch from visual to words, and you can switch it on or off."

Maverick minds gravitate not only toward visual arts but other fields that require navigating complex spaces. Doctors and athletes are examples, Bryan said, contributing to the stereotypes of poorly communicating docs and slow-learning jocks.

Florance has made it easier to identify these people by devising tests without words and using anatomical brain scans, but the condition is so little-known that only a small percentage are diagnosed. Even the National Institutes of Health were unaware of it until she inquired while writing the book, she said.

Toddlers with maverick minds tend to point instead of talk, recoil painfully from loud noise and have an uncanny knack for drawing and finding their way. But the most telling indication is a wide divergence between visual and verbal portions of IQ tests.

"Ask them to explain all the scores," Bryan said, "because if they just average the 20s and the 150s, they'll come up with 80." Ohio's Department of Education has a free guidebook for accommodating kids with communications disorders, the Ohio Handbook for the Identification, Evaluation & Placement of Children with Language Problems.

"Sometimes what looks like a challenge is really a gift," Bryan said, listing Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill and Steven Spielberg among visual-dominant luminaries. "Identifying and teaching these kids doesn't have to be hopeless because Dr. Florance has figured out what to do. People need to realize, it's not that there's something wrong. It's just a different way of learning."

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