

TOMORROW'S VOICES

Tomorrow's Voices staff reflect on 10 years of assisting children with Autism

By Robyn Bardgett

It's been a long journey for Thea Furbert, co-founder of Tomorrow's Voices, but having watched the affect the charity has had on the children who have come through its doors has been continually rewarding.

From seeing her son, Cire, 13, who was diagnosed with Autism 11 years ago, to helping to bring a fully-supported Autism centre to realisation, it has been an exhilarating, although bumpy ride.

Tomorrow's Voices started out of the needs of concerned parents who returned to the Island having had their son or daughter diagnosed with Autism. At the time of the charity's founding, there were few resources for parents, many who felt bogged down with the weight of questions about their child's condition.

"When I came back to Bermuda after Cire was diagnosed we didn't know what to do or who could help us," explains Ms Furbert. "It was a group of parents that got together including Tricia Crow (now Simmons) and out of that we wanted to see what we could do to raise awareness about Autism. We started BASE (Bermuda Autism Support and Education) and it was recognised as a charity in 2001."

The charity began by organising workshops and bringing in experts from overseas including Dr Vincent Carbone of the Carbone Clinic in New York to provide training for parents and educators.

In 2006 the team felt there was more they could be doing to

help children diagnosed with Autism become independent members of society.

"We decided we needed to move a step further and start a centre to provide direct therapy. In 2007 we had enough funding to open up this Centre," Ms Furbert says, indicating the Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre, which opened in 2007 and is now the official home of Tomorrow's Voices.

For Ms Furbert, the 10 years has been a personal journey watching her son develop over the years. Because she felt she had to know the answers about how to work with her son's condition she decided to pursue a graduate certificate in applied behaviour analysis. In December she received her certification from the University of North Texas' online programme.

"I needed to know how my child learns. Before I didn't know if what was being done was the best for my child. But now I can come to the table and say I know what's best. It can be kind of intimidating for some people but as parents we must stay in touch with how our children learn," says Ms Furbert.

In a year or two, Ms Furbert plans to sit the certification to become board certified behaviour analyst.

"After 10 years of being here at Tomorrow's Voices it's not about it works because I say so but now it's because I have the education behind me. When I first started the graduate course it was so easy for me because I already knew a lot of the information - I had lived it for the



Co-founder Thea Furbert at the Tomorrow's Voices facility has spent over 10 years advocating for Autism awareness.

Photo by Mark Tatem

past 10 years! It was a testament to me that I am practicing the things I was taught. I have retained that information and I have been able to use that in real

world settings. "My first priority is I want to see children learn. If not, I'm not doing my job as a board member or as a parent. I just want a child to have a better outcome than my child did. I didn't have the ability to just walk into a centre and get the help I needed straight away."

For children diagnosed with Autism, it is important to receive a diagnosis as early as possible in order to start working on their behaviour, says Ms Furbert.

"I don't want any other parent to have to walk that walk. I don't

My first priority is I want to see children learn. If not, I'm not doing my job as a board member or as a parent. I just want a child to have a better outcome than my child did. I didn't have the ability to just walk into a centre and get the help I needed straight away."

want parents to have that burden but instead have professional people to help them and give them answers so they don't have to guess," she says.

Along with providing verbal behaviour therapists, the Centre also provides socialisation for the children, and some respite for parents.

"We've incorporated a lot of aspects that help our parents including monthly support groups. Parents can come here and let it all out and have other parents as a sounding board and receive professional advice as well," Ms Furbert explains.

On Saturdays they also provide a social skills group for the children to socialise.

"It's a respite for their parents as well," says Ms Furbert. "They don't have to worry about who is taking care of their child. It's key for parents that their children are interesting but also I use it for myself to get two hours of straight sleep or to run errands. I know that Cire is going to be taken care of on a weekend."

The Centre also provides training for parents and teachers. Teachers can gain professional development credits through Tomorrow's Voices, while parents can take home what they learn to help their child.

Dr Kim Mills, a specialist in applied behaviour analysis and Tomorrow's Voices director, also

provides in-home services to provide an all-inclusive service for children diagnosed with Autism, says Ms Furbert. The Centre currently works with six children.

"We are looking at the paths that are currently empty for parents and fill them where we can." As Tomorrow's Voices marks 10 years and also celebrates Autism Awareness Month in April there will be plenty of ways to become familiar with what Autism means.

Marietta Janecy from the Carbone Clinic will be holding a workshop on applied behaviour analysis for the classroom for both teachers and parents to help improve children's outcome in the classroom.

Tomorrow's Voices is also launching a Facebook page called 1000 Voices of Autism to raise Autism awareness and gain at least 1000 Facebook fans. On April 22, the Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre at Tomorrow's Voices in Smith's will be holding an Open House for parents, educators and those in the community who are interested in finding out more or who want to volunteer can come and take a look around the Centre.

The charity is also hoping to increase awareness of Autism to a younger generation with their newly formed offshoot Day After Tomorrow. The group will be holding a happy hour on April 30 to raise funds and increase awareness among 20- to 35-year-olds, especially those who may wish to pursue a career in education.

"We are missing a whole generation of people because they haven't been touched in some way by Autism," says Ms Furbert.

"At the end of the day we have to remember that they are just children and need all the things that children need, including love and support."

For more information contact Tomorrow's Voices at 297-4342 or tomorrowvoices@northrock.bm.

US clinic provides current and effective treatments

By Robyn Bardgett

Tomorrow's Voices Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre provides international expertise for Bermuda's children diagnosed with Autism.

Through their partnership with the Carbone Clinic based in Valley Cottage in East New York, the private clinic, which specialises in treatment and education of children with special needs, provides on-going consultation and training on site for the Tomorrow's Voices' staff.

Dr Vincent Carbone is a board certified behaviour analyst with over 30 years of experience designing learning environments for persons with Autism and developmental disabilities. He is the designer and presenter of a series of workshops on teaching verbal behaviour (VB) to children with Autism, and also has provided preparatory training and clinical consultation to hundreds of board certified behaviour analysts across the US.

"The Carbone Clinic is a world-renowned research institution," explains Dr Kim Mills, executive director of Tomorrow's Voices. "Dr Carbone is one of the foremost researchers on Autism

- in particular the applied behaviour analysis and verbal behaviour approach to teaching behaviour. He has written scholarly research to teaching language to children with Autism. He established a clinic in New York and we replicated his programme so we are excellent because they are excellent - we replicated their wonderful programme."

The charity initially invited Dr Carbone to conduct training seminars for parents and professionals on the Island before the Centre at Tomorrow's Voices had started up.

"The developers of Tomorrow's Voices found the information presented in the trainings consistent with their philosophy of treatment and their needs," explains Dr Carbone. "Consequently, they invited the Carbone Clinic to conduct the initial staff training at our clinic in New York as part of their programme start up. Since that time we have been providing on-site training and consultation to the programme staff on a regular basis."

Dr Mills adds that a consultant from the Clinic comes to Bermuda two or three times a year to ensure that the programme at Tomorrow's Voices is adhering to the same standards



Dr Vincent Carbone

as the New York clinic.

"One of our consultants travels regularly to Bermuda to observe the children and to provide consultation to the staff related to the application of behaviour analytic methods of instruction and therapy," says Dr Carbone.

In the end the international experience this affords the children of Bermuda is a great reward for the Centre.

"It is our intent to provide the children of Bermuda with the most current and effective treatments to overcome the challenges presented by persons with Autism spectrum disorders," says Dr Carbone.

Through our services we hope to provide families and children with improved qualities of life and greater independence and community involvement."

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"ABA in the Classroom" Workshop - Bermuda College, Paget - April 13th
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Tomorrow's Voices Autism Centre 'OPEN HOUSE' - Smith's - April 22nd
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An advanced programme for Bermuda's children with Autism

By Kyle Hunter

Tomorrow's Voices is revolutionary so much so that it is the "best model for service delivery for children with Autism in the world".

So said Dr Kim Mills who took over as the executive director of Tomorrow's Voice in June of last year.

For over 17 years Dr Mills has helped young people, particularly those with learning disabilities, and she was attracted to Bermuda by Tomorrow's Voices and their programme.

"That is what basically brought me here. The methodology that they have been using has been referenced by most of the Autism researchers around the globe as the best practices. That is what attracted me to this programme."

The National Autism Centre, which includes hundreds of the top Autism researchers around the world, evaluated the evidence of the service delivery for kids with Autism by Tomorrow's Voices and came away very impressed, said Dr Mills. "Tomorrow's Voices is revolutionary. It is tried and proven through scientific evaluation," she said adding, "with Autism diagnosis you can get the flavour of the month. Parents are naturally anxious to try anything. The problem is that while some of it is well meaning, it does not necessarily work - there is a chance of false hope. And some therapy is dangerous."

Dr Mills came to Bermuda through her professional organisation Applied Behaviour Analysis Intervention.

"However I have Bermudian family and I used to come here as a child - the first six years of my life every summer. I don't remember much but I have pictures of me on the beach!"

She is originally from New York but has worked a lot in the state of Georgia and also graduated from the highly respected Emory University.

Dr Mills recently returned to the US in her role as executive director of Tomorrow's Voices. "I went to liaise with the Autism, Disability and Mental Health policy leaders, researchers and advocates. I also went to attend the Applied Behaviour Analysis International Conference on Autism."

Along with Dr Terrylynn Tyrell, a board member and chairperson of the clinical and educational committee for Tomorrow's Voices, Dr Mills met with the executive directors of Autism Speaks as well as their senior policy advisor. She also met with the Bazelon Center for Mental Health's policy director and staff attorney and the executive director and vice principal of Youth Build Public Charter School. "We laised around policy, programming and research issues," said Dr Mills.

"At the Autism Conference, I met the top Autism researchers from around the world and was able to get the latest developments on their service offerings. The goal was to increase our knowledge of cutting-edge Autism services and to form partnerships surrounding Autism, disability, mental health research and policy in order to increase the capacity of the country of Bermuda to serve youth with Autism and other disabilities."

While it is not known exactly how many children with Autism there are in Bermuda, Dr Mills said that members of the Tomorrow's Voices board managed to get Government to have that question on the Census. "So we will have some number shortly provided everyone answered correctly and honestly."

But it is thought that there are about 60 children with Autism in Bermuda.

"There is no reason to suggest we would be outside of the US average which is one in 110."

While parents volunteer for the social skills group on weekends at the centre, they also have children volunteering as well.

Dr Mills said the children with Autism learn from the other children about how to act and behave. "Those peers are there to help model typical behaviour," she said adding that those volunteer children also learn about children with Autism.



Photo by Mark Tatem

Dr Kim Mills who is the executive director of Tomorrow's Voices.

"They increase their knowledge about disability. It is a win-win situation. They are fantastic, wonderful. All the young kids who have volunteered with our social skills group are amazing - they are so compassionate and

are great with the kids (with Autism). A peer model is definitely better than an adult model."

And of course they are always looking for more volunteers. "The volunteers at the Satur-

day social skills group are a great help with that programme. The group is designed to teach them (children with Autism) social skills and it also gives a weekend respite for the parents. "Everything is more difficult and more challenging for parents who have children with disabilities. Just a trip to the grocery store can be complicated."

And unfortunately when some members of the public see a child with Autism acting up in the gro-

cery store "they assume the kid is a spoilt brat".

Dr Mills said: "Kids with Autism look like typically developing peers. I have intervened in the store with families (with a situation going on). I sense that the child has a disability and I know what to do - I am able to help. But if you are not trained it looks like the kid is a spoilt brat. Autism can sometimes be considered a hidden disability. You often cannot see anything - obviously (wrong) right away."

Children with Autism who are high functioning and are old enough are mainstreamed (into school) to a certain degree - they are in regular classrooms and Dr Mills said: "That is a statement to the great work we are doing because you better believe that when they first came to us they could not be in anyone's classroom. That is our goal - intervene intensely and get them right back out there."

"We also do a lot of training with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health professionals as well as other health professionals. We just finished a year-long training institute (once a month) where we had workshops relating to Autism and dis-

ability issues to increase awareness. We train the community in that way. We had nearly 70 participants in some of the workshops. Also in addition, we have had some school principals who have hired us to come in and train their staff."

Dr Mills said that usually parents suspect something is wrong by the time the child reaches three years old.

"I think that they probably sense something is different - especially if it is their second or third child - is their second or third child is different from their other children and how they developed. Fortunately we have some great tools in Bermuda now. For instance the Child Development Programme do early screening."

Then there is the new Autism Clinic at Child and Adolescence Services which has early identification "and then we can provide those early intensive services".

Dr Mills said they are also lobbying to get the insurance companies to reimburse for applied behavioural analysis (ABA) services.

"We are involved in an effort to make it happen," she added.

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Dr Kim Mills, second from right, met with members of the US charity Autism Speaks. From left: Ann Booker Gibbons, executive director of Autism Speaks, Dr Terrylynn Tyrell, chairperson of Tomorrow's Voices Clinical and Educational Committee, Dr Kimberly Mills, executive director of Tomorrow's Voices and Stuart Spielman, senior policy advisor and council Autism Speaks.

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Family cites Tomorrow's Voices as best intervention

By Robyn Bardgett

Early intervention is the best intervention, states Vernette DeShield, whose oldest son, Stephan, was diagnosed with Autism at two and a half years old.

"Trust your instincts as a parent," she says. "The longer you wait the harder it will be for you to get your child where you want them to be. It's not easy to accept that your child might have a disability but you need to do it for your child and get the help that your child needs."

Mrs DeShield and her husband Aaron have watched as Stephan, now six, has grown to become more independent and the top of his class at West Pembroke.

Stephan was born premature and had been developing fine until about 18 months when Mrs DeShield noticed him doing things such as obsessively lining up his toy cars and other objects.

The couple had him screened through Child Development who confirmed that there were some areas in which he needed help and advised them to get him tested for Autism. They received a referral to Baltimore's Kennedy Krieger Institute, which specialises in children with disorders of the brain such as Autism.

As soon as they returned home to Bermuda with a diagnosis of Autism they got the help they needed through Tomorrow's Voices.

"Stephan's speech was delayed. He had some speech but not what was expected at his age level. Once he started at Tomorrow's Voices the speech came. There were so many words he didn't have and now he is non-stop. He asks for things now instead of pulling you to it and



Vernette DeShield and her husband, Aaron, believe early intervention helped their son, Stephan, seen at left with his nine-month-old brother, Aiden, become independent and better socialised.

they have also helped with his toilet training and socialisation," explains Mrs DeShield.

"This (the Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre) has helped him tremendously with school. He also works with an occupational therapist and speech therapist through school. They help him with reading for learning, understanding sequencing, handwriting and working on his social skills."

"Stephan just gives me goose bumps," adds Thea Furbert, the co-founder of Tomorrow's Voices. "First day and he did a 360 degree turn. It has changed his life so drastically. Now he's in school and although he has a paraeducator he is majority independent. It's so rewarding."

Stephan still struggles mostly with his behaviour and social

skills. Some of his behavioural issues have played out as tantrums, falling down on the floor, running away screaming when he is told no or is asked to do something he doesn't want to do.

But Mrs DeShield has seen a marked improvement.

"Stephan is considered to be high functioning. While there's no cure, with help he should be able to function," she explains.

The socialisation group he attends every Saturday has helped and it has brought him into contact with other children of all ages and abilities, says Mrs DeShield.

Although many people in the community still are not aware of how Autism can affect a child, Mrs DeShield says she has never received any negative comments from strangers.

"I've gotten the look like what bad parenting, but his behaviour has improved."

"Tomorrow's Voices gets the kids out in the community so that he's used to being around other people."

"I think it's harder for people who don't have children to understand. Sometimes it's just about going up to that parent and asking if they need any help or asking if they can pick up their child and give them a hug - or if the parent needs a hug! But I've had a lot of encouragement from people who say this is just what children do, don't be embarrassed - encouraging words rather than judging the parent or the child is much more helpful. Don't be quick to judge," she advises.

The DeShields have recently welcomed a new member to the family, brother Aiden was born nine months ago. Although at the beginning it was rough bringing a new child into the

home, Mrs DeShield has learned how to cope.

"The most difficult part is spending time between the two as it's hard for Stephan to understand me trying to spend time with him and the baby. If it wasn't for my husband I would have given up a long time ago."

She believes wholeheartedly that coming to Tomorrow's Voices as soon as they received Stephan's diagnosis was one of the best decisions they ever made.

"Tomorrow's Voices do home training and give lots of advice. They are always available if I have any questions, and I find that no question is stupid."

Concern as major fundraiser postponed

By Robyn Bardgett

A massive fundraiser for Tomorrow's Voices has been postponed this year due to lack of interest.

Last year the Eat Shop Give card, which sold for \$10, gave cardholders access to special deals from participating merchants, from shops to restaurants across the Island.

Unfortunately, due to the downturn in the economy there has not been enough interest for the promotion to continue this year.

"Since Eat Shop Give has been our major fundraiser for several years it is extremely devastating to Tomorrow's Voices, and our ability to provide services to additional Bermuda children and families suffering with Autism," explained Carmen Phillips, Tomorrow's Voices board member.

"Just last night in our monthly board meeting, our director indicated that we have received two new enquiries from recently diagnosed families! It is also disheartening because I have been contacted by many members of the public who

have participated in Eat Shop Give over the last two years, looking to find out where/when they can donate and get their Eat Shop Give cards, as they wanted to once again take advantage of the savings."

Money from the discount card campaign allowed the charity to help Autistic children and

their families who may not have the funds to afford specialised services. In 2009 the promotion raised \$22,000

through the sale of the cards and the number of merchants grew from 70 to 90 merchants participating in 2010. The promotion not only saved money for cardholders but increased traffic for the participating stores.

While Ms Phillips said the charity realised that the economic problems are a reality for everyone, they are still hoping to hold the promotion later in the year.

Any retailers or restaurants that are interested that we have received two new enquiries from recently diagnosed families! It is also disheartening because I have been contacted by many members of the public who



Students at Tomorrow's Voices participate in a Fun Time circle with the facility's therapists. From left: Mona Crabtree, senior VB therapist; Kara Richardson, assistant VB therapist, student Cira Furbert-Lambert; Omar Dill, assistant VB therapist and student Kuhn Bean.

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Welcome to the family.

Volunteers always welcome

By Kyle Hunter

She is the current director of the Economic Empowerment Zones Agency and has been on numerous Government boards and committees and has also played softball for Bermuda's national squad and been the president of the Bermuda Amateur Softball Association. On top of that she has served as a council member on the Duke of Edinburgh's Award in Bermuda.

But for Erica Smith it is her work with Tomorrow's Voices that has given her the most rewarding experience.

Mrs Smith, who has been honoured with the CableVision Community Service Award for her work with children with Autism, is a founding member of Tomorrow's Voices which is designed to meet the individual needs of children who are diagnosed with Autism or on the Autism spectrum between the ages of two and 21 years of age.

She is also the chairperson of the organisation and said she became involved after watching her nephew struggle with Autism.

"I became involved initially because it was personal - I think that is what most people get involved with work like this," said Mrs Smith who said she watched as the burden of having children with Autism was placed on her sister, Thea Furbert, and other parents.

And it has been a "life-altering" experience volunteering to work with children with Autism. "I would say categorically this has been the most exhausting initiative I have ever worked on in my entire life - but it has also been the most rewarding and greatest experience I have ever had."

"I have done a lot of volunteer work before and other work but this is totally a labour of love."

"My nephew (Ciro) is now 13 years old and he was diagnosed with Autism when he was two and a half years old. So I became initially involved and also because one of the other founders, Trish Crow, had three children with Autism and I saw the burden it placed on her."

"I said why don't we create a centre that delivers services col-

lectively instead of each individual parent trying to go it alone'. So the idea was born in late 2006 and in 2007 we worked on a business plan and worked on funding and opened in (October) 2007."

Besides helping to relieve the burden of having a child with Autism placed on their parents, Mrs Smith said that those at Tomorrow's Voices - the staff and therapists and other parents - want to bring an "awareness to those in the education arena - the educators who deal with children on the daily basis who may not have the skills". They now form a partnership with Tomorrow's Voices.

"We are about education and advocacy. People with special needs and challenges are often - and I hate to say it - left behind in society. They have to have people to advocate and lobby for them."

"We need to do a lot more work with helping the special needs population in Bermuda. Some do not fit into this world and provisions are not made for them. That is the bigger work that needs to be done and that is what Tomorrow's Voices is trying to do as well."

And Mrs Smith said Tomorrow's Voices is always on the lookout for more volunteers.

"We do have a small group of committed volunteers but we can always use more. We run a social skills group every other Saturday where we introduce children with Autism to all kinds of social skills so they can learn to interact with people. We use the natural environment so they can practise their socialisation skills. And the volunteers are not out there by themselves (with the children) - there are always staff with them. But we can use more volunteers. Ultimately I would like to see more Bermudians trained in this field so we have a good core of trained professionals to serve us and the community across the board."

The volunteers and staff often go on field trips with the children and in fact last month they took a trip to the East End for the St. George's Foundation Family Day at Penno's Wharf.

"The volunteers and staff took the children on the bus to St. George's. Part of it was to teach the children to cope in those situations. Just getting on and off

the bus - which is natural for most people - is a big learning experience. We wanted them to be around people to they could learn how to manage their emotions and behaviour. It is not just about the academic part - although that is very important. Some of our kids may be five years old and not potty trained so we have to teach them how to appropriately go to the bathroom."

"With the Family Day it was sensitising them to be around people and how to act appropriately and control themselves - and not to bolt. It teaches them how to have eye contact. They went on the bouncy castles to teach them to play with other children - of course they want to play... but by themselves."

Mrs Smith said that all of their "clients" (children) attend public schools. "It is important for them to be around their peers. They will learn from them and try to replicate them."

People are becoming more aware of children with Autism in Bermuda now, said Mrs Smith. "I have seen the growth of awareness on the Island over the last 10 years. Most people now have heard of Autism. At the end of the day it is trying to bring about a level of compassion and understanding. It is so easy for human beings to classify children as misbehaving. Today I think people do begin to ask questions - what is going on here - is something happening - when a child acts up in say a grocery store. Before they might have just thought the child was misbehaving but now some people come up and ask whether they can assist and that moves the discussion and dialogue."

"Parents of children with special needs - especially Autism - have to deal with a whirlwind of stuff and just to take a child to the grocery store is a whole undertaking in itself. It can make a parent nervous - will the child be turned off by the lights? Will there be too much noise? It is a break in the child's routine. But we need to help those children to become sensitised and enhance their skills to be able to cope."

And Mrs Smith has seen what the programme at Tomorrow's Voices has done over the last few years.

"We try and get them to reach



Photo by Mark Tatem

Erica Smith

their potential and I have seen examples of children who have not been verbal, have not spoken who, after our services and intensive intervention, have become very verbal to the point where they are constantly talking!"

In June last year top American specialist Dr Kim Mills from the United States became the executive director of Tomorrow's Voices and Mrs Smith said, "She has made the world of difference with her knowledge and training. She has brought to the table a great level of understanding of how people can become lost in a society if we do not have the tools to help them. Her involvement in our centre has really elevated the quality of service that we provide."



Photo by Mark Tatem

ACE 2010 summer interns Rosy Hall, Christine Jack and Alanah Bacon paint colourful characters on the walls in a bathroom at Tomorrow's Voices, Bermuda Autism Early Intervention Centre during a community day last year.



The Duke of Edinburgh's Award in Bermuda is proud to have Tomorrow's Voices as one of our Approved Activity Providers for the Community Service Award Section.

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