

## WOODBURY FUNDRAISER - 12 August 2006

### Speech of Jonathan Harris (Chairman, Woodbury)

Hello everyone! My name is Jonathan Harris and I have the great pleasure of being the Chairman of the Board of Woodbury Autism Education and Research, which is the organization behind tonight's wonderful event. Thank you all for coming. It is just fantastic to see you all here.

Ladies and gentlemen, a number of dedicated people have put a huge amount of effort into making tonight fun and exciting. Anyone who has been involved in event organization and NOT been paid for their trouble knows that it is a labour of extreme love and patience and the organizing committee members - **Angie Hatcher, Sarah Bazley, Robyn Harris, Eva Patterson, Helen Kealey, Caroline Shea, Nigel Hatcher and Gavin Bazley** and all the other helpers deserve some furious applause.

With that done I would like to explain what it is that Woodbury wants to achieve with the money that we hope to raise.

Some of you attended our fundraising event in late October 2003. At that time, we expected our school to be open in January 2004. Sadly the premises that we were promised were withdrawn from us and we waited two years to find replacement premises. Those premises were eventually offered by Baulkham Hills Shire Council who have been wonderful partners with Woodbury and we are extremely grateful to Councilor Raymond Harty and his fellow Councilors. Councilor Harty is here tonight and I ask you to show your thanks to the Council for providing the wonderful premises that now house the Woodbury School.

Some of you may not know what Autism is. Let me explain. It is a severe disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to other people and the world around them. There are 3 main areas of impairment – social interaction, communication, and behaviour.

Many other difficulties and hyper-sensitivities may occur including sensitivities to light, sound, touch, smell, taste, temperature, or pain. Autism is a complex and draining disability for the person affected, and also for their family, friends, and the many other people who interact with them including teachers, doctors, dentists, carers etc.

It is suggested that close to 1% of the population has to deal one way or other with the effects of Autism.

When preparing for today's speech, I recalled two commonly used statements about autism -

That it is a life long condition; and

That there is no cure for Autism.

When our 13 year old son was diagnosed some 11 years ago, the diagnostic team told Robyn and me –

“your son has severe Autism with significant developmental delay. We suggest you go home and grieve for the loss of your son.”

We were not told that parents must start immediate and effective intervention as early as possible in the child's life.

Woodbury believes that therapy and education using applied behavioural analysis (or ABA) maximises a child with Autism's opportunity for effective lifelong gains. Worldwide research validates that belief. There are 72 other ABA schools in the world providing best practice ABA education to children with Autism. Woodbury is Australia's first.

Let me briefly tell you our own experience with our son and ABA. Within 6 months of commencing our home based ABA program, our son Finley's diagnosis was downgraded from severe autism to mild autism. Sure it was damn hard work, but it was much harder for him than it was for us. Today Fin can speak, read and write and has fun. He also laughs, cracks practical jokes and can travel with us wherever we go. He can quote you the name of every one of the 500 Pokemon characters and knows each and every word of the Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, and X-Men movies. Thankfully, he has moved on from Disney movies. Finley now attends a mainstream school and socializes.

But originally he had to be taught everything on a one to one basis.

For example, imagine this – it is your child's birthday. He is given a sensationally wrapped present that looks good enough to eat. For most kids the concept of present opening is “grip and

rip". It is innate ...no instruction required. Maybe you might say to your child "slow down" or "say thank you to Aunty Mary for the present" or worst of all "read the card before opening the present".

For Finley a present meant nothing. He had no concept of being given something or the possibility of there being anything of wonder inside the wrapping paper. To teach him Robyn had to wrap his most loved toy inside clear cellophane paper to teach him to look inside. She had to wrap his toys up again and again and only after a while did she begin to use coloured cellophane and eventually opaque paper to conceal the contents of the present. It took quite a while to teach him mystery and surprise. Teaching him how to blow out candles also took weeks.

Could I ask those people who are parents or grandparents of students at Woodbury to put their hands up? Could anyone here who works at Woodbury (in whatever capacity) please also put your hand up? Thank you.

If someone who put their hand up is close to you, have a chat with them about Autism or the School and what it's like to live with a child with Autism.

Friends, the first 21 students who are attending Woodbury and their parents are real pioneers. The parents have taken an amazing leap of faith and agreed to spend a large amount of money to educate their children in a different way. This is not ground-breaking education. ABA has been recognized as the pre-eminent educational methodology for kids with autism for many, many years. Australian educators have simply balked at introducing it as the fundamental method of education. They question the cost benefit analysis.

Woodbury has been open for only 23 weeks. We had to find all the staff, train them all in ABA. We accepted 21 kids who had some very unusual behaviour to contend with. We needed to assess each child's skills, abilities and needs; to set their individualised education program and their ABA drills, and organise a million other things.

I asked the staff for some anecdotes or signs of the kids progress over that very short period of 23 weeks. This is what I was told.

1 child cried and tantrumed everyday before school and hid his school clothes to avoid school –now he sometimes wakes between 12am and 5.30 am gets dressed and ready for school. He was almost uncontrollable at school entry and is now happily engaged and learning at an extraordinary pace.

1 child who had only a few speech sounds is now using the sounds mastered at Woodbury to label picture objects and people at school.

1 child has tripled his work output in the last 2 months.

1 child could say 10 speech sounds at entry after 9 years learning and in 6 months can now say 25.

2 children have each learned 100 sight words in less than a term.

2 children are being prepared for integration.

For us, tonight's function is about "expectation" and "opportunity". It is about us believing in the worth of children with autism, and children with other intellectual disabilities. It is about demanding that they too are recognized as worthy members of our society. It is about giving other children an opportunity to access applied behavioural analysis and thereby have the quality of their lives improved.

With your support:

1. Woodbury will provide schooling for many, many more autistic children within NSW; and
2. we will make Woodbury a centre of excellence for the education of autistic children and a quality resource for educators and other service providers dealing with persons with autism.

We have ambitious dreams, and we want your dreams to include the hopes and aspirations of a child with Autism.

I hope to come back near the end of the night to tell you how we are going. So, for the moment thank you very much for coming and make sure you have a great time.