

SPEECH FOR OPENING OF WOODBURY SCHOOL

Thursday 27 April 2006

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Good morning and thank you for attending the opening of our school.

My name is Jonathan Harris and I have the pleasure of being the Chairman of Woodbury.

We are here today for 3 reasons:

1. To remind the members of government and the press and whoever else is willing to listen that more attention is needed to be given to the issue of Autism and its treatment and related services;
2. to acknowledge the contribution made by some very special people and one very special organization towards the creation of Woodbury School;and finally
3. to celebrate the opening of the Woodbury School.

There may be a few of you here who may not know what Autism is. It is a severe disability that affects the way someone 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, 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.

What is not talked about is the potential for improvement in a child's condition – a belief that appropriate intervention can create positive gains and improvements. What we describe as "hope".

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

"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 what is fundamental to the effective treatment of Autism, namely that parents must start immediate and effective intervention as early as possible in the child's life.

It is our belief 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.

The Woodbury families represented here today are different from everyday Australian families. Yes they have a child with autism, but most importantly they believe they can make a difference to their child's life. They have demanded effective treatment. They have searched and pressed and pushed doctors and service providers to find it. Yes they have very high expectations. These families demand hope for their children and they deserve everything they achieve. Sadly governments on the whole are not providing adequate support by way of funds or resources, to go with that parental determination.

Woodbury is very much the embodiment of parent power – of parents refusing to be dissuaded from a goal.

The opening of the Woodbury School is the culmination of 7 or more years of dedication and perseverance by a core group of families. You know who you are. I applaud you all. You did not give up even when your own children appeared unlikely to benefit from Woodbury. You ignored the numerous frustrations and knock backs and you focused on the one goal ... to establish the first ABA school for children with Autism in Australia. And today, we are here to celebrate that reality.

In paying tribute to some special people, I am only able to name just a few. In doing this, I do not wish to understate the significant contribution of all of the others ... but time restrains me.

I wish to respectfully acknowledge the silent contribution of Esther Woodbury, whose name was chosen for our school and company.

Esther Woodbury is the mother of a now 16 year old boy with autism. Esther has fought with little support for an appropriate education for her son Jack since he entered school at age 5. For a period of 2-3 years in late primary she managed to have an ABA class set up for him by the Education Department of the ACT. The ABA class proved highly successful but it was a continuous struggle to maintain services.

After the department frustrated the operation of the class and caused the families to withdraw their children, Esther Woodbury launched the first case in the Human Rights Tribunal against the ACT Department of Education arguing that her son was being discriminated against by not receiving an education that was appropriate to his needs. Her claim commenced in May 2003 and the judgement has yet to be brought down.

Since the ABA class was disbanded Jack has regressed enormously. Esther describes every new thing offered as 'groundhog day'. In her words "we had what he needed but the department were not willing to allow it to continue".

Esther Woodbury is symbolic of the efforts parents make and the constant battles they endure to achieve what they believe to be necessary for their child with autism.

The delay in setting up Woodbury was due to our inability to find a suitable location for our school. Even though the NSW State Government has been closing down schools and having empty buildings and classrooms around Sydney, the State Government and some local councils were unwilling to lend a hand to our cause and offer us vacant premises. In some cases, premises that were refused to us are still vacant some 3 years later. For those of you who consider this a travesty (and it is), it will all be forgiven if they offer us the additional premises that we are seeking for Woodbury No. 2. Let your local member know of our need.

Unlike all other councils, Baulkham Hills Shire Council took the plunge. They have developed this wonderful estate here for community groups. Baulkham Hills Shire Council offered Woodbury a building and we sincerely hope that you have not been and never will be disappointed with your decision. Woodbury will help the community with improved skills and services for autism and the notoriety arising from its success. And, we will not forget that it was your council that stood up to be counted.

In particular, I wish to thank Councilor Raymond Harty who was determined to achieve Woodbury's inclusion. So to you Councilor Harty, thank you from all of us within the Woodbury community.

I also must thank a few other people from the Council who were instrumental in getting Woodbury open. Please join me in thanking:

- (a) George Simpson;
- (b) Bryson Millers;
- (c) Ray Millers; and
- (d) Steve Warner.

Finally, and before passing the microphone to our other speakers, I would like to recognize 1 special person without whom we would not exist and could not function.

I met this woman 10 ½ years ago when she worked with my son. I believe she actually said that he helped inspire her work with Autism and focus on ABA as her preferred method of treatment and education. And it was this woman who taught Jack Woodbury in his ABA class in Canberra and it was there that she learned what could be achieved by applying strict ABA methods to a classroom setting.

I have great pleasure in inviting my fellow director and the Clinical Director of the Woodbury School - Elizabeth Watson to come forward and accept from the head of Woodbury's opening day committee Sarah Bazley, a small symbol of our appreciation for the incredible hard work and tenacity that Liz has demonstrated over many, many years and to receive from everyone here the applause she richly deserves, as a sign of their gratitude and affection.

Thank you.