

YOUTH FEATURE

Finger Lakes student lends aid to the autistic

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

PHELPS — *Not being able to speak is not the same as not having anything to say.*

Displayed on a poster in front of a classroom at Midlakes High School, that adage is one that Doug Galens has come to fully believe during the past few years.

Doug, a Midlakes senior, regularly volunteers his free-time periods to visit the room, which houses autistic students through a Wayne-Finger Lakes Board of Cooperative Educational Services program. As part of "The Rainman Club", he has worked with autistic youths ranging in age from 17 to 20 since his freshman year.

The five autistic students whom Doug currently assists do parallel the behavior of Raymond Babbitt — the central character played by Dustin Hoffman in the movie "Rain Man" — in that they cannot easily grasp what's happening in the world around them. Often an autistic person's behavior is marked by sudden emotional outbursts.

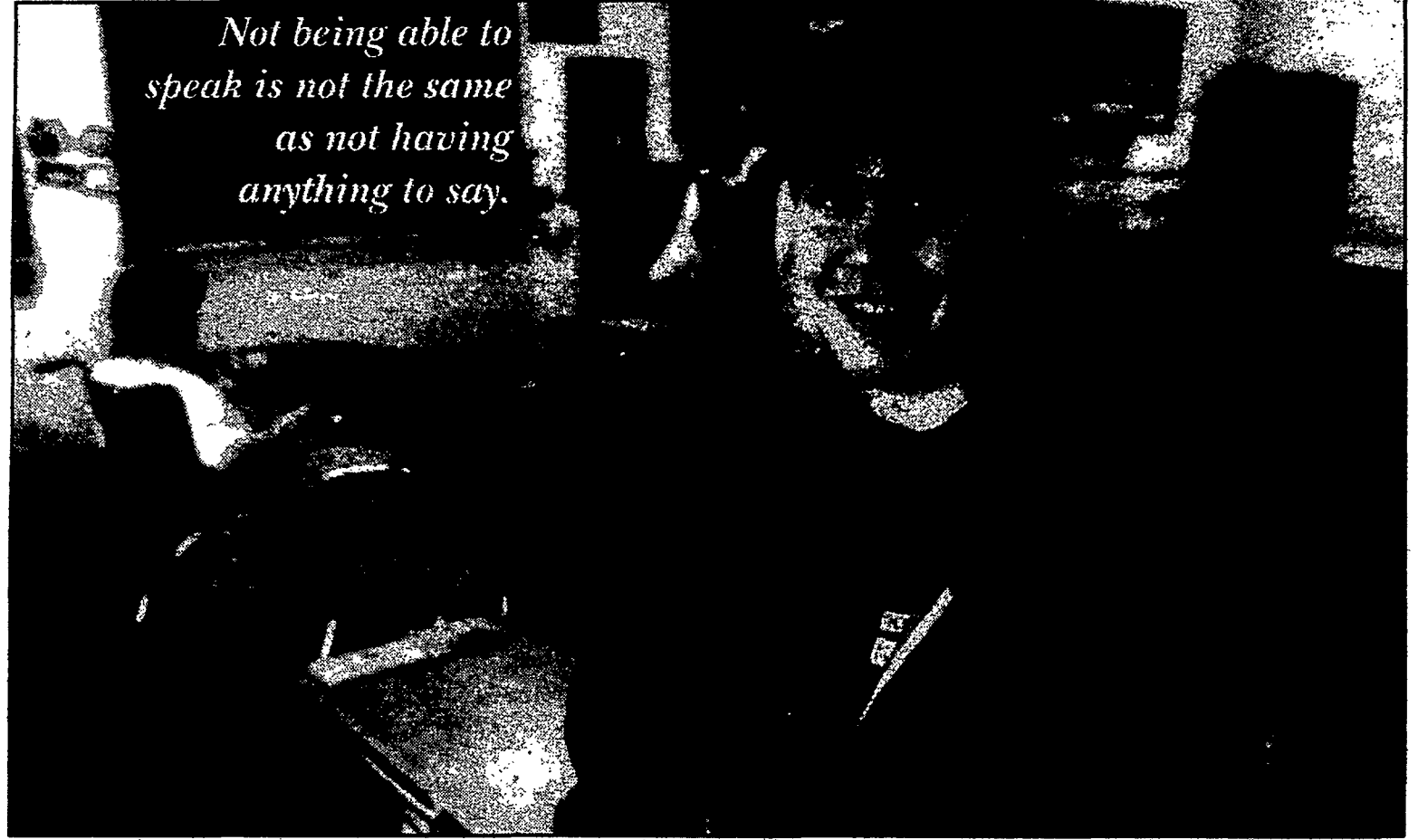
The Midlakes group faces even greater challenges in communicating than Raymond Babbitt because they are "non-verbal," capable of emitting sounds but unable to formulate spoken words.

Yet Doug, who also has two autistic cousins, emphasizes that these students still have normal thoughts and feelings.

"They're just like anybody else; they just have a few problems with self-control. They're very intelligent," remarked Doug, a parishioner at the Ontario County cluster consisting of St. Felix Church in Clifton Springs and St. Francis Church in Phelps.

Doug added that the students' frustration often stems from the awareness of their handicaps.

"They don't know how to communicate, and that's what upsets them," he noted.



Doug Galens, a senior at Midlakes High School, regularly volunteers his free-time periods to assist autistic students enrolled in a Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES program known as 'The Rainman Club.'

The Midlakes setting is designed to enhance the autistic contingent's desire to communicate and also fit into the mainstream. Together with the guidance of teacher Sue Greene, her aides, and other Midlakes volunteer students such as Doug, the Rainman Club goes through a daily agenda similar to that of other Midlakes students. Activities include reading and speech exercises; gym; recreation; and global studies.

A recent Thursday began with a "current events" session, in which everyone in the room expressed what was on his



Doug shares a light moment with Lee Gunsalus during morning activities.

or her mind. Many non-verbal autistic students make known their thoughts through the use of a "facilitator" — a person trained to communicate an autistic person's thinking through the use of devices similar to keyboards.

"They all have opinions on music, what's going on in school. They share their news of the day and talk about political events," said Doug.

Greene noted that this group setting has been extremely successful since autistic students began coming to Midlakes four years ago.

"There was a need for them to have interaction with their peers," said Greene. "There's been a significant increase in positive behavior."

Although Doug has not gone through facilitator training, his presence in the Rainman Club is valuable in other ways, such as lending a reassuring touch on the shoulder when a student begins having an outburst.

In addition to his involvement with the autistic group, Doug is an active member at St. Felix-St. Francis. He is a longtime altar server as well as a youth representative on the parish council, and he recently received a diocesan Hands of Christ Award — the annual honor for high-school seniors who have demon-

strated outstanding service.

As he prepares to attend college next year and pursue a degree in engineering, Doug will take with him some important wisdom he has gained through his time working with the Rainman Club.

"You see that there are things wrong with people and you can't put them down," he said. "You also learn to be happy with what you have, because you see that these kids are trying hard."

Mercy-McQuaid Players will perform 'Aladdin'

BRIGHTON — The Mercy-McQuaid Players are scheduled to open their 1994-95 season with four presentations of "Aladdin" early next month.

All shows will take place at Our Lady of Mercy High School's auditorium, 1437 Blossom Road. There will be 8 p.m. performances Thursday through Saturday, Dec. 1-3; with an additional 2 p.m. matinee on Dec. 3.

General admission tickets will be available at the door. Tickets for adults are \$7; \$5 for students and senior citizens. Special discounts will apply for the Dec. 3 matinee. Those wishing to obtain advance tickets may call 716/288-7120.

GOD AND THE SICK AWAIT YOU



DOMINICAN SISTERS OF HAWTHORNE

Living the vows and participating in a life of prayer gives us the ability to serve God in the Apostolate.

95 years of giving free, hands-on nursing care to incurable cancer patients. Our Sisters come from all walks of life. Prior nursing experience not required.



Contact: Sr. Marie Edward • Rosary Hill Home
600 Linda Ave., Hawthorne, NY 10532 (914) 769-4794

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Home Tel. () _____