

PARENTING

Hope Hall helps pupils hone listening, learning

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

There was a time when Slade Gerstner, a fifth-grader at Hope Hall school in Gates, looked forward to going to school the way most people look forward to having their teeth drilled.

"We always had hard stuff to do, and I didn't like to go and do it," said Slade, 11, who attended Holy Cross School in Rochester through the middle of his second-grade year.

It's hard to believe Slade had any trouble learning, given that he is well-spoken, polite and obviously enthusiastic about everything in his life, including his family's pet iguana, Iggy, and his two mice, Squeaky and Mousey. Yet, he will tell you that at one time, for example, reading was difficult because he couldn't string words together in sentences when he saw them on the page.

His mother, Tammy, said she often cried about her son's plight and had to battle her son to get him to complete his homework.

"It was two hours of sitting there and saying 'Do it!'" she recalled.

The son of Tammy and Mark Gerstner, Holy Cross parishioners, Slade didn't know until three years ago he has a still relatively unknown learning disability known as central auditory processing disorder. A child with this neurological disorder has difficulty listening to or comprehending auditory information despite having normal hearing ability, according to Sister Diana Dolce, SSJ, executive director of Hope Hall, a private, nondenominational school located in Gates on Buffalo Road.

Opened in 1994, the school's 115 students have a variety of learning disabilities, but, regardless of whatever other disabilities they have, 98 percent of them have some form of central auditory processing disorder, the nun said. In fact, she said, some parents have the disorder as well.

The nun taught in various Catholic schools as well as St. Joseph's Villa in Rochester from 1969 until she founded Hope Hall. The school serves students in grades three through nine, though it occasionally admits students like Slade at an earlier age, she said.

Slade's parents transferred him to Hope Hall after a pediatrician diagnosed him with central auditory processing disorder, which is hard to detect, Sister Dolce said.

"The kids look perfectly normal," she said. "(Yet) they give the appearance of being lazy or unmotivated."

She added that this disorder can bring trouble at home because parents may misinterpret their child's inability to process a request or command as deliberate defi-

ance. Often, she added, as the students grow older, they become troublesome in class as well because they are unable to learn at the same pace as their fellow students. Given that they are sometimes in classrooms with large numbers of students, kids with central auditory processing disorder can feel like they are being bombarded with meaningless sensory stimulation, she noted.

"It's like if we went to a six-hour lecture — and the whole lecture was in Japanese," she said. "You'd tune out after 15 or 20 minutes."

Some kids with the disorder are erroneously mislabeled as "retarded" or placed in special education programs that aren't designed for them, she said. Many such students are initially labeled as having some form of attention deficit disorder that can be remedied with prescription drugs. However, it's not medicine such children need, Sister Dolce said. It's a different teaching style, one that involves slowing down the process of imparting information to such kids. Students with central auditory processing disorder have brains that are like unorganized file cabinets, she said, and they need tools and techniques that enable them to put those mental files in order.

At Hope Hall, kids like Slade work in classrooms with no more than 12 students, she said, allowing teachers to give extensive individual attention to each child. Students are taught through a variety of techniques that include acting out the various steps of a task they are assigned.

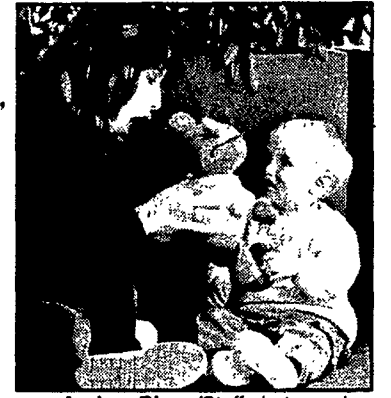
Sister Dolce added that it's helpful for such students to verbalize the various steps of a task one by one so that the teacher knows the student completely understands what's being asked. To illustrate her point, Sister Dolce said imagine a mother asks a child to go down to the basement, take the clothes out of a dryer, fold them and bring them upstairs. Most children could comprehend all four steps the parent had just asked by simply listening without saying anything back, she said. However, a child with central auditory processing disorder can better understand the request by repeating back each step out loud to a parent. In other words, what can be verbalized is what is understood, she said, because it means the child's brain has made the proper connection between taking in the request and understanding it. Sister Dolce also said that it's important for parents of children with central auditory processing disorder to talk face-to-face with their children since visual stimulation seems to play a crucial role in imparting information.

One mother who's taken such lessons to heart is Tammy Gerstner who now volun-



Fun with Arthur

(Above) Lisa Camillaci, her son, Michael, 5, and Bianca Camillaci, 7, parishioners of St. Lawrence in Greece, enjoy a game Feb. 23 at the Strong Museum in Rochester, which was featuring an Arthur exhibition. (Right) Linda Malone of Geneseo tries to make her son Spencer, 2, laugh at an Arthur doll.



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

teers at the school as a lunchroom monitor. She noted that her son has thrived at the school and felt at home there within his first two weeks. No longer feeling pressured to learn exactly as other children do, she said her son is being well prepared to someday return to a mainstream classroom setting as Hope Hall graduates are trained to do.

"I think he will do well," she said of her son. "We're optimistic."

Slade himself commented that learning tasks he once saw as burdens have become joys. For example, he said, he's become an avid reader. And he recalled the moment when he first could string the words in sentence together without difficulty.

"I was thinking, 'Good! Now I can read books.'"

Gerstner and Sister Dolce both advised parents to ask their pediatricians about central auditory processing disorder if they suspect their child might have it. Sister Dolce pointed out that there are still many educators who are not aware of the disorder, and she noted that she has given

workshops on it to area school administrators.

Sister Dolce also noted that Hope Hall's students are trained to re-enter traditional classrooms by being taught to advocate for themselves. When they enroll in a traditional high school after leaving Hope Hall, her students know how to tell a teacher or administrator about whatever learning disorder they have, and what steps the school must take to help them learn. For example, she said, a student might need to tape record lectures or make regular appointments with teachers to go over classwork.

Most importantly, her students will return to mainstream classrooms emboldened with self-esteem that has been enhanced, not diminished, by their years at Hope Hall, she said.

"The kids don't worry about their learning disorders," she said. "It just means that you learn differently."

EDITORS' NOTE: Hope Hall can be reached by phone at 716/426-0210.

Family Events

Ⓜ MAR. 9-10 — Concert: Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra welcomes fiddler Mark O'Connor; Eastman Theatre; 60 Gibbs St., Rochester; 8 p.m.; \$12-\$44 at RPO Box Office, 108 East Ave., Rochester; 716/454-2100; or any Wegmans Video Dept.

Ⓜ SAT, MAR. 17 — St. Patrick's Day: Celtic Family Fair: Grand Ballroom, 2nd fl., Four Points Sheraton Hotel, 120 Main St. E.; 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; \$1 admission; dancing, music, storytellers, face-painters, clowns, sports mascots, vendors; parade begins 12:30 p.m. at East Ave. & Alexander; 150 possible marching, float units; 716/234-5167.

Ⓜ SAT, MAR. 17 — Science Saturday: "Optics on the Road"; investigate the power of light; Wilson Bridge and Bausch Auditorium, Rochester Museum & Science Center, 657 East Ave., Rochester; 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; free with museum admission; 716/271-4552.

Ⓜ WED, MAR. 21 — Registration deadline: for Learn to Ice Skate class-

es; Scottsville Ice Arena, 1800 Scottsville-Chili Rd., Scottsville; Sundays; 6-week program begins Mar. 25; 2-4 p.m.; \$80; 716/889-1810.

Ⓜ MAR. 21, 28 — Cool Kids on Campus: Mar. 21: Sankofa, drum and dance ensemble; Mar. 28: "Cartoons w/David Boyer"; learn to toon; Fire-side Lounge, Seymour Union, SUNY at Brockport, Residence Dr., Brockport; 7 p.m.; 716/395-5607.

Ⓜ MAR. 24, 25 — Reading program: "Arthur BOOK IT! Weekend"; read-aloud stories by Rochester celebrities; create your own book, bookmark and Arthur glasses; meet Arthur in person; Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester; Sat. 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sun. noon-5 p.m.; adults \$6, seniors \$5, ages 3-17 \$4, under 3 free; 716/263-2700.

Ⓜ SUN, MAR. 25 — Children's show: "The Star Keeper"; story told with puppetry and music; presented by Le Theatre de l'Ceil; Nazareth College Arts Center, 4245 East Ave., Rochester; 2 & 4 p.m.; \$9; 716/389-2170.

THE STAR KEEPER

Le Theatre de l'Ceil

Sunday, March 25

*2:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.

General Admission Tickets \$9

"The Star Keeper" combines expert puppetry and enchanting music - but no words - to tell the story of Pretzel, a kindly worm who goes on an adventure to return a fallen star to the heavens. This magical piece has won rave reviews and is a truly special experience the entire family will enjoy.

*Interpreted for the hearing impaired.

Made possible by a grant from Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts Regional Touring Program.

Box Office: 389-2170 • Groups: 424-2979



Nazareth College
Arts Center

The Callahan Theater, 4245 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14618-3790

