

Magazine

Reaching an Autistic Teenager

By MELISSA FAY GREENE OCT. 17, 2008

On a typical Monday morning at an atypical high school, teenage boys yanked open the glass doors to the First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga. Half-awake, iPod wires curling from their ears, their backpacks unbuckled and their jeans baggy, the guys headed for the elevator. Arriving at Morning Meeting in the third-floor conference room, Stephen, his face hidden under long black bangs, dropped into a chair, sprawled across the table and went back to sleep. The Community School, or T.C.S., is a small private school for teenage boys with autism or related disorders. Sleep disturbances are common in this student body of 10, so a boy's staggering need for sleep is respected. Nick Boswell, a tall fellow with thick sideburns, arrived and began his usual pacing along the windows that overlook the church parking lot and baseball diamond. Edwick, with spiky brown hair and a few black whiskers, tumbled backward with a splat into a beanbag chair on the floor.

"O.K., guys, let's talk about your spring schedules," said Dave Nelson, the 45-year-old founding director. He wore a green polo shirt, cargo shorts and sneakers and had a buzz haircut and an open, suntanned face. After his son Graham, 19, was given a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (A.S.D.) as a young child, Nelson left the business world and went into teaching and clinical and counseling work. On that Monday, he was instantly interrupted.

"I had a very bad night!" Edwick yelled from the floor. "Nightmares all

night!”

“What was disturbing you, Edwick?” Nelson asked.

“What do you think?” Edwick cried in exasperation. “It’s St. Patrick’s Day!”

“What’s upsetting about that?” Nelson asked.

Edwick dropped his shoulders to relay how tiring it was to have to explain every little thing. “Leprechauns,” he yelled.

“Oh,” Nelson said. “I thought maybe it was the tornado that hit downtown on Friday night.”

“No, not the tornado!” Edwick yelled.

Nick stopped pacing to comment: “Edwick’s not scared of tornados; he’s scared of leprechauns.” I burst out laughing and so did the faculty members, while Nelson seemed to relish the interruption rather than find it a hindrance to the morning routine. His hidden agenda was precisely to entertain outbursts like Edwick’s, while making room for a sardonic intelligence like Nick’s. No matter the stated purpose of Morning Meeting, the true purposes were always the same: conversation, debate, negotiation, compromise and the building of relationships. T.C.S.’s only serious admissions requirements are that a boy should have at least some functional language and that there’s a good chance he can become part of the “community” of the school name.

The group turned to registering for spring classes. In addition to biology, algebra 2/trigonometry, English literature and U.S. history, there were the electives: Dragon Lore, Comic Books, How to Shop for Bargains and the History of Snack Food. Past electives included All About Pirates, Spy Technology, Ping-Pong, Dog Obedience, Breaking World Records, Unusual Foods and Taking Things Apart. (“I just wish they’d come up with a second-quarter class, Putting the Things Back Together,” Nelson told me.)

“I knew it!” Edwick complained, mashing about on the beanbag chair. He was disappointed because no one picked the elective he’d proposed: the History of Meat.

What makes the Community School unusual is not its student body — plenty of schools around the country enroll teenagers with an autism spectrum disorder. But, like about only two dozen schools in the country, it employs a relatively new, creative and highly interactive teaching method known as D.I.R./Floortime, which is producing striking results among T.C.S.’s student body. (D.I.R. stands for developmental, individual differences, relationship-based approach.) The method is derived from the work of Stanley Greenspan, a child psychiatrist and professor of psychiatry, behavioral science and pediatrics at George Washington University, and his colleague Dr. Serena Wieder. D.I.R./Floortime can be effective with all kinds of children, whether they have developmental challenges or not. As applied by T.C.S., it is an approach that encourages students to develop their strengths and interests by working closely with one another and with their teachers. The goal for students is neurological progress through real-world engagement.

With the skyrocketing diagnoses of A.S.D.’s in recent years, parents and school systems are challenged as never before to find techniques to keep these teenagers engaged, productive and nondespairing. Boys with A.S.D. (they outnumber girls four to one) who were difficult to console, to teach, to restrain at age 4 or 8 can be nearly impossible for parents and teachers to manage and to steer at 14 and 18. While a 25-pound toddler’s tantrum is wearying, a 150-pound teenager’s tantrum is dangerous. Puberty and young adulthood take many of these young people unawares.

How best to serve this population remains a subject of debate, because autism is a “final common pathway” diagnosis, meaning children arrive here from different points of origin, are troubled by a wide variety of issues and respond to different strategies. “You meet one child with autism and, well, you’ve met one child with autism,” says Linda Brandenburg, the director of

school autism services at the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Maryland. Given the wide range of expression in autism and related disorders, there is no one-size-fits-all intervention. “We now know that there are several different models that seem to work — some more behavioral, some more developmental, some more eclectic,” Dr. Fred R. Volkmar, director of the Yale Child Study Center, told me. “What we really need to be doing, what the law says, is design programs around the kids rather than force kids into a program.”

The vast majority of programs for autistic youth in the U.S. use an approach called Applied Behavior Analysis, in which teachers and therapists use well-established techniques of reward and punishment to shape a student’s actions toward goals like toilet training, learning vocabulary or completing a puzzle. A typical A.B.A. lesson rewards memorized responses, specific behaviors and compliance to external directives — “Pick up the fork, Jared.” An instructor may move the child’s arm, hand and fingers to model the desired behavior. The child is then rewarded — with praise, with hugs, with a treat — when he performs the act correctly. As the first method to work with profoundly self-absorbed children and to demonstrate that progress could be made, A.B.A. — which came to national prominence in the late 1980s — has been a lifesaver for countless families. Critics worry that the method focuses on modifying the symptoms rather than addressing the underlying disabilities, and many say they fear that A.B.A.-trained children often do not “generalize,” that is, take a behavior learned in one setting and apply it in another. A child may learn to make eye contact in response to “How are you?” and to reply, “Fine, how are you?” But such rote memorization does not give the child the intuition to know when a stranger is to be greeted warmly and when to be avoided, and it does not enable him to meet his grandmother with greater warmth than the grocer.

“All teachers and therapists use elements of behaviorism,” Nelson told me. “As an intervention for autism, the A.B.A. movement was one of the first to suggest how intensive the intervention has to be — maybe 40 hours a week

— to see results. This notion of intensity has been valuable to everyone that followed.”

The Community School — with a teaching staff of 12 and a \$25,000 tuition — employs the intensity but not the methodology of A.B.A. Rather than spend time on a student’s mastery of a skill preselected for him by an adult, the idea is to harness a student’s energy and desire to learn. As a student interacts with peers and teachers, solves problems and expresses his ideas, his behavior should naturally begin to lose its rough edges. The essence of Floortime is that a person learns best when self-motivated, when an inner drive sparks the acquisition of skills and knowledge.

As with A.B.A., achieving D.I.R./Floortime’s far-reaching goals for students requires intense interaction — a wooing of a child from his or her remove — for as many hours of the day as parents and teachers can physically sustain. Dr. Greenspan would like to see an autistic child productively interacting with an adult for most of his waking time, seven days a week. Those drained parents who have the means hire therapists and trained baby sitters to help them approximate that schedule, during either home-schooling days or out-of-school hours.

Because the goal of D.I.R./Floortime is the kindling of a student’s curiosity, intelligence, playfulness and energy, the lessons can take on a spontaneous, electric quality. I have seen sessions with young children during which the child and his or her therapist or parent tumbled across the house, behind the sofa, into closets or onto the porch, picking up balls, puppets, costumes, books and snacks along the way. At T.C.S., classes can look like debates between equals; school days can include board games, sports, plays, science experiments, music, art, ropes courses or rafting trips in which all students and teachers playfully compete, contribute and perform. All the boys at the school probably have average or better intelligence. Onlookers might call a few “high functioning” (though that adjective has no clinical meaning), and T.C.S. is an accredited high school and middle school, offering college

prep and high-school courses to students able to complete a conventionally rigorous course of study. (Other students pursue less-demanding tracks oriented toward getting a G.E.D., attaining job skills or developing independent-living skills.) So it's not all fun and social time. But rote learning is never the goal; the goal is that the students should be able to think, to feel, to communicate and to learn. Most of the kids are making the first friends of their lives here.

T.C.S. does not promise miracles. It does not promise to be a perfect fit for every teenager with an A.S.D. Dave Nelson does not invest great faith in the possibility of leaving the autism spectrum behind, no matter how much parents (like himself) would love to believe it. The breakthroughs at T.C.S. are subtle rather than headline-grabbing, noticeable at first only to the adults closest to the kids and to the students themselves. But for these families, any forward motion can inspire a moment of real hope and happiness, and quite remarkable progress happens every day.

Stephen, 17, a solidly built boy with a sweet face under a heavy thatch of bangs, entered T.C.S. in 2005 prone to blowups of alarming power. His parents adore their son and have been whipped about like sailboats by his furies. His first year at school, during group construction of an outdoor marble-run, a boy fumbled and a marble dropped. "I am going to assassinate him," Stephen exploded. "I. Will. Behead. Him." Stephen's academics are top-notch, but the stance of the Community School is not to ignore a student's psychological deficits while skipping ahead to schoolwork or life skills. It doesn't matter that Stephen is at home with algebraic theorems if he is going to react like a toddler when ambushed by a mad or sad feeling.

Ty Martin, 14, is a cute and curly-haired guy who lives in terror of loud or strange noises. The faux thunderstorm in the produce aisles at the grocery store makes it difficult to take him shopping. A classmate's coughing or a siren in the distance distracts him from schoolwork. His mother often was obliged to retreat to a windowless basement room at home, hugging and soothing her

son when the outside world — especially lawn crews next door with leaf-blowers — overwhelmed him. “He doesn’t like crows,” Judy Martin told me last spring. “If crows are at a park, he’ll go from happy to berserk in five seconds. If we go to a restaurant, we’re all on edge, praying the bartender doesn’t turn on the blender.”

Sam Gross visited San Francisco with his mother two years ago at age 15. During a tour of Alcatraz, the handsome olive-skinned boy climbed a nearby fence and prepared to dive. Had his mother not spotted him and screamed, Sam would have been injured or killed by falling onto the rocks. But he was not trying to kill himself. He planned, as he explained in his monotone voice, to turn into a merman and swim back to the mainland.

Then he began to deteriorate. For two years, he spent every day in a ball under his blankets, rising only to pound either side of his head with such ferocity that two bald spots bloomed under his fists, then dangerously swelled. He had to be sedated to stop the self-battery. By the time Sam reached the Community School, he was nearly incommunicative. Whenever he began using his head like a punching bag, the teachers asked him to stop, and he did, but otherwise showed no sign that he heard them.

Students arrive at T.C.S. trailing long histories of school failure and humiliation, suspension, expulsion, truncated transcripts, social isolation, victimization, self-loathing, suicidal ideation or years of home-schooling patched together by mothers forced to leave their jobs. “On our first visit with Dave Nelson, Ty started screaming: ‘I hate this place! I want to leave right now!’ ” Judy Martin says. “Most principals don’t want to work with a kid like that. But what I saw on Dave Nelson’s face was ‘I can work with a kid like this.’ ”

Many prospective parents begin to weep during their intake interviews with Nelson. For them and their children, this place represents something of a last chance.

While there is no direct relationship between Dr. Stanley Greenspan and the nation's D.I.R./Floortime schools, other than one of mutual respect, the theoretical underpinning of these schools relies on his argument that human intelligence itself is constructed out of the warm back-and-forth signaling between child and parent, beginning at birth. Jean Piaget located a child's investigation of causality in the material world, for example, with experiments like pulling a string attached to a bell, but Greenspan and his colleague Serena Wieder see these insights occurring in the emotional realm, when a baby learns that his or her smile brings the parent's smile. Brain development is not a solo pursuit but a rich and complex flowering that occurs only in the hothouse of human relationships.

What does this have to do with autism? A child born at risk of an A.S.D. has cognitive and sensitivity issues that inhibit engagement. Pleasures enjoyed by a typical baby can upset him: a mother's face seems too close, so the infant cranes away; the father's tickles may produce fear reflexes rather than laughter. Meanwhile the sunlight is burning his eyes, the diaper scrapes his skin and the baby begins avoiding interaction with people at the cost of normal brain development.

I begin to picture the brain metaphorically as a tangled ball of Christmas lights. When you plug it in, there are strands that light up perfectly and there are dark zones where a single burned-out bulb has caused a line to go out. If the bulb for Exchanging-Smiles-With-Mother doesn't light up, then Empathy won't be kindled farther along the strand, or Playfulness, or Theory of Mind (the insight that other people have different thoughts from yours). The electrical current won't reach the social-skill set, the communication skills, creativity, humor or abstract thinking.

According to the D.I.R. perspective, emotion is the power source that lights up the neural switchboard. D.I.R./Floortime's goal is to connect autistic students with other people as a way of fueling their cognitive potential and giving them access to their own feelings, desires and insights. The latest

findings in the field of neuroplasticity support D.I.R.'s faith in the capacity of the human brain to recoup and to compensate for injury and illness. "Early intervention is optimal," Dr. Greenspan told me, "but it's never too late. The areas of the brain that regulate emotions, that sequence ideas and actions and that influence abstract thinking keep growing into a person's 50s and 60s."

T.C.S. students are masters of withdrawal, and for the D.I.R. model to work, each student must be an active partner in his own education. But how do you ignite the enthusiasm of an autistic teenager who has long since walled himself off from the outside world; who uses little language or who screeches in random yelps or vulgarities; who flips out when pried away from his computer game; who speaks to you, if at all, in long monologues on arcane subjects with zero interest in your response? What do you use as a staging ground for a relationship with an increasingly furious and despairing adolescent?

The Floortime technique might be summed up as: "Follow the child's lead and challenge the child." It is most easily visible on the videotapes documenting Dr. Greenspan's 25 years of clinical work with younger children. In each video, the gangly psychiatrist crouches on the floor of his comfortably shabby home office in Bethesda, calling instructions to parents about how to catch the attention of and interact with their remote-seeming children. "I treat everything the child does as having a reason — to feel calmer, for example, or to feel excited," Dr. Greenspan told me. "Often the parents have notions of what the child should be doing, so they're trying to control the child rather than build on the child's natural interests."

In my favorite video, a 30-something husband and wife flank their 4-year-old daughter; the husband, in round horn-rim glasses, sits forward on the sofa; his wife curls up on the floor nearby. Their daughter, with chopped-off blond hair and a doughy face, looks to me like Helen Keller, pre-Anne Sullivan. Seeming almost blind, deaf, mute and mentally retarded, she bounces from sofa to table to wall. She is without affect, her movements ungainly and her

eyes unfocused. She makes slurping sounds, as if she has reached the bottom of a drink with a straw. “We’re going to try to get a continuous flow of back-and-forth going here,” Dr. Greenspan says.

The mother smiles sadly, knowingly. “That would be nice,” she says.

“We’re going to build on what she does,” the doctor says.

The girl is flapping a plastic toy in her hand. “Will she give it to Daddy?” Dr. Greenspan asks.

“Can I see that?” the father asks as the child roams the room. The child seems not to hear him. But then the girl, traveling by, indifferently drops the toy into his outstretched hand. Delighted, the father says: “There’s a star on it! And there’s a triangle!”

“Here you’re losing her, Daddy,” Dr. Greenspan says, and sure enough, the girl escapes and heads for a wall. “If you’re trying to educate her with complicated language that she’s not processing, then you’re going to lose her. You want to change your orientation from educating her to interacting with her.”

The child picks up a bright plastic flowered eyeglass case off a table and twiddles it. “See if she’ll give it to you,” the doctor prompts.

“Can you give it to Mommy?” the mother asks, and surprising everyone, the girl hands it over. “Thank you!” the mother says.

The mother hides the eyeglass case behind her on the floor. The girl treads in place for a moment, swinging her arms and slurping. She begins to laugh a strange, heaving laugh. “Huh-huh-huh!” The mother moves a little to show that she’s sitting on the eyeglass case, and the child dives for it.

“Good, good!” Dr. Greenspan cheers.

“Can I have it back?” the mother asks. The mother hides it inside her own sweater, half-exposed.

“Let her get it! Let her get it! Let her get it!” Dr. Greenspan says in excitement. It is of paramount importance to him that the child initiates her own ideas and motor plans. Every time her parents start to physically turn or steer her, he stops them, crying: “Let her do it! Let her do it!”

The mother next slips the eyeglass case into the bib of her daughter’s pink overalls, and the girl stops in her tracks. Dr. Greenspan is prepared to leap over furniture to block the parents from giving her a clue. Suddenly, slowly, the girl’s gaze drops. . . . She finds the eyeglass case! In her own pants! “Ooh! Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!” she says.

“Make it more complicated!” the psychiatrist pleads.

“Can we go give it to Daddy?” the mother asks.

The mother walks over to the father, who hides the eyeglass case in his shirt. The girl freezes in confusion. The psychiatrist loves a moment like this and tries to prolong it. He sees momentary frustration as a vitally creative occasion. He urges parents to be “playfully obstructive.” He’s not after results; he wants to see a child thinking. “She can do this,” he advises them.

The girl slowly looks down, plucking at her overalls. For a moment it seems they have lost her. But — no — she’s looking inside the bib, where she last found the eyeglass case. It’s not there. Again she freezes. She must be thinking, “Mommy went to Daddy. . . .” Slowly she turns toward her father.

The expression on the father’s face, when his daughter plucks the eyeglass case from his shirt, is of heartbreaking gratitude. A moment later, he pitches the eyeglass case over her head to his wife. The girl turns and beholds her beaming mother holding the eyeglass case. “Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!” she says. Mom pitches the case back to Dad, and when the child turns to run to her father, she

skips in her delight, her face radiant, making a hoarse sound of laughter.

Children with autism — especially Asperger's — are famous for all-consuming interests in Matchbox cars, bus maps, train schedules, oscillating fans, Civil War battles, baseball statistics, black holes, dinosaurs, chess or Star Wars. While most programs try to discourage these obsessions, D.I.R./Floortime argues that they can offer openings into relationships. Does this work? Parents of T.C.S. students say that it does. Most speak in glowing terms about the school's lifesaving impact on their families. Outside experts are more cautious, reluctant to give any one approach a gold medal when there are so many variables, including the profiles of the students admitted to T.C.S. in the first place. "Stanley Greenspan is an engaged and enthusiastic clinician," Dr. Volkmar says. "People are attracted to Floortime because it is respectful of the child and the child's wishes. He wants to follow the child's lead. I would imagine that more able children do produce leads that are worth following — I've seen kids with Asperger's do well in Montessori programs too — but what if the child isn't doing much that you'd want to follow? I wonder if following the lead of a child who's doing nothing but body rocking results in a roomful of people all body rocking with him."

Dave Nelson says: "T.C.S. is a school, so I'd argue that our success should be measured by how well we educate our students. The boys have far better attendance rates than at their previous schools. They have far better emotional regulation — many could not attend school before due to their outbursts; while here, emotional regulation is core curriculum. Many were depressed to the point of suicidal ideation at their previous schools; that's not happening here. Some were victims of bullying, some were aggressors at their previous schools; not here. All our parents report that their children are functioning better, are happier and are better communicators, thinkers and learners."

Judy Martin says: "My son Ty's progress has been monumental. He doesn't cry in dark basements anymore. He isn't entirely focused on himself; he is learning real empathy. He never liked school, and now he loves it. Every

day this past summer he asked me when he could be with Dave Nelson. This is a child who never cared about teachers or friends. Now he tells me he loves them. I chatted with Stephen the other day by the vending machine as his money got stuck. He was problem-solving rather than blowing up. We rode the elevator together, chatting about the problem, while he decided to go find a teacher to help him.”

One morning at school, the fire alarm went off. My first thought — like everyone’s — was, Oh, my God —Ty! We descended the stairs to the parking lot. Ty was within a circle of T.C.S. teachers. “It was Elana!” he yelled to everyone about one of the teachers, who had been trying to prepare a snack for her class. “Elana burnt the popcorn in the microwave!” Poor Elana Himmelfarb, covering her face, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, said again and again, “I am just so, so, so, so sorry, Ty.”

He was trying to forgive her, but he kept asking, “Elana, why did you make the fire alarm go off?” His face was red, his curls were plastered back with perspiration and he was rocking a bit, long after the alarm had been silenced. Back upstairs, when the smoke cleared, Ty huddled in a beanbag chair with Rebecca Richter, one of the teachers, beside him.

“I hate that noise,” Ty said. “That’s a bad noise. That has a witch’s voice.”

“You really didn’t like that noise,” she agreed.

“This can NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN,” he sobbed, demanding that Rebecca promise him. “This will never happen again, will it? This can never happen!”

“I need you to call my mom,” he said, weeping. “I’m having a very bad day. Will you call my mom? I need her to come get me.” I imagine a region of Ty’s brain blinking hard, a fistful of tiny red lights setting one another off: Panic! Panic!

“If we can keep Ty engaged with us, it means that he is harnessing and

organizing his energies in order to interact,” Nelson told me later. “By keeping him connected, we won’t let him be kidnapped by random fragmented thoughts. If you aren’t engaged with other people, then you are completely at the mercy of your own regulatory system. Think about a situation where you were overcome with distress and how being able to tell someone helped you avoid becoming uncontrollably distraught.”

Gently Richter moved Ty from unreality (“the witch’s voice”) onto solid ground (“I’m having a bad day”). Given the tools to hang on, Ty survived until the end of the school day. And the breakthroughs continued. “When Ty came home that day, we talked through the events, as the school has trained me to lovingly do,” Judy Martin told me recently, “and Ty said, ‘Mom, I feel bad for Elana, because she didn’t mean to do it.’”

“‘Do you think she felt embarrassed?’ I asked him, and he said yes. This moment was huge: Ty has always struggled with seeing the viewpoint of others, and here he was able to take a moment that frightened him and look at it from Elana’s viewpoint. We go to restaurants all the time now, and Ty couldn’t care less about the blenders. Lawn crews arrive next door, and they don’t faze him.”

When Sam Gross, now 17, arrived at T.C.S., he tripped along down the hall on the balls of his feet, rolling his head, thrumming on his chest with his fingers, humming to himself, lost in other worlds. The only points of entry he offered were during serious flights of fancy. “What this school needs,” he murmured in his low, resonant voice one day to a teacher, Lucie Canfield, “is a magic cabinet.”

“What would it do, Sam?” Lucie asked, delighted.

After a long pause he said, “Turn Sam into Samantha.” Sam wanted to travel back in time, he explained, to when he was a little girl; then he changed his mind and wanted to use it for teleporting.

Sam's parents and his psychiatrist were initially less than enthusiastic about the magic cabinet: "Let's not get started with this stuff here," they said. But Lucie had already asked Sam, "What would a magic cabinet look like?"

Sam had replied: "Cow-colored."

Lucie pushed poster board and colored pencils at Sam and said, "Show me."

Dave Nelson agreed. This was the clearest opening they'd had from Sam Gross. Everything Nelson knew about Floortime told him to follow the boy's lead. "Let's see where this goes," he told Sam's parents.

Sam finished several quite beautiful drawings of a tall, rectangular closet. It would have a blue curtain and a bell stand on top, with a chain he would pull when he was finished transforming or teleporting. Nelson brought in a refrigerator box, and Lucie and Sam painted it in a nice Holstein pattern of black on white. "We made a point of always saying to Sam not that we were building a magic cabinet, but that we would pretend with him," Lucie tells me. "I explained that magicians used tricks to make people think they disappeared." T.C.S. would facilitate this exploration, with Sam, of the frontier of fantasy, with the expectation that he would encounter some reality along the way.

The special day arrived, and Sam stepped into the cabinet and drew the curtain. Dave waved a magic wand and read words Sam had written: "Abracadabra-a-whirl. Let Sam turn into a girl."

There was silence inside the box. Then Sam called, "Do it again!" Dave chanted the words again. Silence. Then: "Let Lucie do it!" The teacher took the wand and gave it a try.

Sam peeked out, still male. "This is not the right cabinet for turning into a girl," he said in consternation. "This is the cabinet that turns you into Paul

McCartney.” He exited. At home that night, Sam looked up magicians in the Yellow Pages and booked one to come to school the next day. Dave Nelson canceled. It was time for reality to intervene.

Back at school, Sam spent the week focusing on how to teleport out of the cabinet to surprise folks in the cafeteria on the ground floor. Then one day he made an unusual request of Lucie Canfield: he needed help cutting a back door in the box that would allow him to slip away like a stage magician. It was a striking and brave acknowledgment of the material world.

Sam never staged his trick, as it was real magic that excited him. And he muttered, over the next few weeks, seditious thoughts along the lines of, What kind of school is this that doesn't provide a real magician? The Magic Cabinet still stands in the art room, bell-towered and cow-colored. Many of the students enjoy stepping behind the blue curtain now and then for a moment of quiet remove from the world or to prepare to burst back upon the room in an assumed role. “It's expanded from a product of Sam's fantastic imagination to something of real purpose,” Judy Martin told me. “Kids peek out their heads as characters from books they've been reading, changing their voices and facial expressions.” The Magic Cabinet has come to stand for what the Community School offers these students: the possibility of transformation.

Melissa Fay Greene is the author of “There Is No Me Without You: One Woman's Odyssey to Rescue Her Country's Children.”

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