

Lauren Kristensen '07 (left) and Kendall Snyder '07 with a brother and sister who both have autism



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At the Claremont Autism Center, “We teach our students how to work with autistic children, focusing on both treatment and research,” says director Marjorie Charlop-Christy. “Undergrads don’t usually have an opportunity for such hands-on experience in a clinical setting.” Families from all over Southern California are welcomed free of charge.

PIECE OF MIND

Director Marjorie Charlop-Christy and students at the Claremont Autism Center in The Leon Strauss Foundation Autism Clinic help families assemble the autism puzzle.

In February 2007, two months after President Bush signed a bill allocating nearly \$1 billion toward autism research, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention disclosed findings that seemed to affirm the White House’s call for action. New data on children across 14 U.S. states has determined that autism incidences among 8-year-olds are now 1 in 150, higher than what the CDC has reported for the past five years. That same month, MSNBC called autism “America’s fastest growing, serious developmental disability,” while CBS, *Newsweek*, and other magazines and media outlets continue front-page reporting on what has been branded an epidemic.

The headlines and emerging statistics are not lost on the numerous CMC alumni who have committed careers to autism research and care: some have led changes in behavioral treatment and some have tried to invent new tools for earlier diagnosis, while others continue to help schools and clinics, such as the

specialty autism clinic at Stanford University's School of Medicine, refine, broaden, and mend deficits in existing programs. A number of alumni within this contingent express their gratitude to a little facility on CMC's campus—the Claremont Autism Center in The Leon Strauss Foundation Autism Clinic—and, more specifically, to the woman who directs it: Professor Marjorie Charlop-Christy. It was there, they say, that lasting impressions in the field were made, nurtured, and carried into real life, with hopes of reaching diagnosed children and steering families toward effective services.

For 22 years Charlop-Christy has directed the Center, the only one of its kind conducting both clinical therapies and research at a small liberal arts college. The recent attention paid to autism doesn't seem to phase Charlop-Christy, a member of the Professional Advisory Board of the National Autism Center. On a recent, breezy afternoon, she eyes a young brother and sister playing Green Light-Red Light with CMC interns on the lawn outside. The siblings both have autism, and Charlop-Christy notes that researchers are seeing both more children with autism in general and more siblings with autism.

Charlop-Christy also recognizes that it won't be long before many people are touched by autism in some way, either as parents of a child who is diagnosed, or as relatives or friends of families struggling with the disorder.

Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder usually diagnosed in children before age 3. The disorder involves delays in the development of many basic skills, most notably the ability to socialize or form relationships with others, as well as the ability to communicate. While autism manifests differently in each child, the developmental disorder is most

commonly marked by extreme withdrawal, severe language deficits, and repetitive and rigid ritualistic behaviors, adds Charlop-Christy.

At Stanford's autism clinic, housed within the university's Child and Adolescent Psychiatry division, clinical psychologist Mendy Boettcher '98 has seen patients as young as 18 months and as old as 18 years. A dual major in psychology and biology during her CMC years, she is among those whose careers were shaped by fellowship with Charlop-Christy and the experience of working with the Center's young clients. Boettcher, tapped by Stanford 10 months ago to lead autism assessment and treatment, says Charlop-Christy's encouragement was instrumental in finding the right graduate school.

"The more I worked with her, the more I realized the amount of hands-on work that is involved in autism care," Boettcher says. "It wasn't a 10-minute medical exam. It was about meeting the long-term needs of the family. I found that rewarding."

Boettcher was led to the University of California, Santa Barbara's Koegel Autism Center, a behavioral treatment center whose primary interests are in research and training. A clinical internship and postdoctoral fellowship followed at the Child Study Center at Yale University in New Haven, Conn. This collective training means Boettcher can spot early subtleties in a child's social development that might signal autism. For instance, as early as infancy, children use non-verbal communications such as eye contact and expressions to share experiences with adults. "We call it joint attention," Boettcher says. "Children with autism

often don't do that. You can spot some of those subtleties as early as 15 to 18 months of age."

Boettcher leads families in treatment strategies that can be implemented during normal routines and advises on therapies. It's also her job to train other post-doctoral psychologists in treatment methods. Her goals are to expand the training program at the clinic, and to focus research



Christian Wolfgruber '06 coaching a game of Red Light/Green Light

The Center's waiting list is nearly two years. Located in five small rooms in Seaman Hall, the Clinic serves about 15 children each semester. The youngsters, ages 3 to 12, attend intensive, two-hour therapy sessions once a week after school. During visits, children spend several 15- to 20-minute one-on-one applied behavioral analysis therapy sessions with a student counselor.



The new autism bill increases federal funding by 50 percent for the disorder, which afflicts 1.5 million people in the United States. The legislation authorizes \$945 million over five years for autism research, screening, and treatment. CMC alumni who have helped advance treatment and research include Susan Spitzer '90. Spitzer hopes new research will begin to identify which interventions are most effective for which children, make quality services more widely available, and expand services for teens and adults. "I don't think you can work with these children without becoming totally committed to helping them achieve their potential," she says.

findings on what can be done for families today—rather than 20 years from now. "When families get a diagnosis, you know they will have trouble getting treatment," she says. "The more people we can train, the more widespread effect the field can have on the lives of children and families."

Susan Spitzer '90, an occupational therapist in private practice in Pasadena, is another alumna who leads change in services for young children with autism. The Center provided Spitzer's first experience working with children: specifically, children with autism. The basic behavioral-management

approaches she learned proved a stepping-stone for graduate and postdoctoral studies at the University of Southern California.

While working at the Casa Colina Children's Services Center for two years as the director of autism and adaptive learning, Spitzer helped develop an early intervention program for children under the age of 3 with autism. Charlop-Christy and Margaret Bauman, a neurologist with Harvard Medical School's Massachusetts General Hospital, were collaborators in the project, an interdisciplinary program that included behavioral intervention, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and child development. Like Boettcher, Spitzer's seen families struggle with diagnosis.

"Families have difficulties finding the variety, intensity, and quality of services they need for their children, so having so many services in the Inland Empire is a unique opportunity," says Spitzer. "My training in behavioral approaches at CMC allowed me a greater knowledge base for promoting collaboration among professionals and quality service for the children."

Former student therapist and pediatrician Leisha Andersen '93 has worked with Charlop-Christy as well, to find a screening device that could be used by general pediatricians for autism diagnosis. The search is still on, as finding the perfect tool "may be difficult," says Andersen, "given the heterogeneity in the autistic population. However, as this diagnosis becomes more recognized and accepted by the public at large, we will certainly need better diagnostic equipment for general pediatricians. Without frontline guidance, children might be delayed in finding fantastic care such as offered at CMC."

Rich Joslin '83 knows exactly what she means. His twin 6-year-old boys, Dixon and Kendall, have autism. Joslin encounters curious and sometimes rude reactions when his boys throw tantrums in public. For children with autism, changes in routine or a confusing situation can trigger major outbursts.

"You really fight so hard for your kids," Joslin says. "As long as my children aren't hurting anybody or putting themselves in danger, I want them to do as many normal things as possible. It's a daily challenge."

Charlop-Christy says she understands his frustration, having traveled the world to make doctors, parents, and researchers aware that children with autism deserve compassion. She also has published numerous studies and is developing a

non-verbal communication device for children with autism.

Together, Charlop-Christy and her students help families with autistic children cope with communication barriers, attention deficits, and behavioral issues.

Shayna Williams, a sophomore from Tulsa, Okla., says working for four hours at the Clinic each week is a chance to bond with special-needs children and will give her an edge in the post-graduate job market. The neuroscience major plans to research drug therapies for neurological disorders such as autism and schizophrenia.

“It’s good hands-on experience with kids who actually are dealing with some of the issues I want to research, instead of just reading about it in a textbook,” she says. “Having research and clinical therapy experience as an undergrad is priceless.”

While most of the students are psychology majors or minors, Charlop-Christy also sees good opportunities for finance or government majors. The skills learned, such as problem solving, patience, and compromise, are suited to any field. “It builds character and really helps round out our leaders-in-the-making,” she says.

Families who come seeking help, agree.

“Once he started here everything began to click into place,” says Lisa Branch, whose 7-year-old son C.J. visits for a few hours each week. “But it’s not just for the child. I’m able to ask questions. They give us a lot of hints. I feel like I can ask them anything.”

Before coming to the Clinic two years ago, C.J. wasn’t potty-trained. Today, he can use the restroom, wave goodbye, and give high-fives. He’s better at making eye contact and attends an elementary school.

Kathi Calouri ’85 worked at CMC

for three years as an undergraduate and went on to create Project P.A.C.E. (Parent and Child Enrichment), a successful family therapy immersion program in Oregon. “I definitely see my work there as having a domino effect,” Calouri says. “The direct experience with children with autism gave me enough experience to have a fabulous grad school application.”

Project P.A.C.E. (www.paceplaceinc.com) is a home-away-from-home setting for training entire families. Calouri and her husband, Eric Hamblen, started P.A.C.E. after 20 years of providing outpatient therapy in a clinical setting. “Families would learn a lot, but say, ‘My child is a terror during meal time,’” Calouri explains. “I’d make suggestions, but I wasn’t actually seeing the behavior.”

When the first P.A.C.E. Place, opened two years ago, was booked solid for the first nine months, the couple decided to rent another property within two blocks to create P.A.C.E. Place II. Today, the two-bedroom houses—equipped with kitchens, playrooms and dining rooms—attract families from Canada, Japan, and across the United States. Some families, Calouri says, have returned two or three times as their children grow to face new challenges.

Charlop-Christy also appreciates the impact that therapy has on the lives of the families she serves. In addition to the on-site treatment, Charlop-Christy and her students serve as advocates for children at their home schools.

For 9-year-old Faith Butterfield, Charlop-Christy made the difference between a misdiagnosis as mentally

disabled and the best education possible.

“The Center got her school readiness skills together, like learning to sit down and follow directions,” said Faith’s mom, Tammie. Charlop-Christy sent Faith’s school a letter recommending that the girl be included in a regular classroom, where she now thrives.

“We are here for one reason only: we really like these kids. We view them as children first and autistic second,” Charlop-Christy says.

For parents like Joslin, that means hope. “I’ve been able,” he says, “to put perspective on what’s important in life.”



Director Marjorie Charlop-Christy with intern Shea Manning '07 and client

Debra Berry Malmberg, a developmental psychology doctoral candidate now in her fifth year of working at the Clinic, recently traveled to Armenia to help set up an autism clinic there. She and the other therapists encourage the children to make healthy choices and then reward those decisions with a few extra minutes of play time, a pat on the back, or a hug. Helping children express themselves makes the job most rewarding, Malmberg says.

