



Bouncing

But Not Off the Walls

Robert Simpson* is a 29-year-old with moderate mental retardation, Tourette's syndrome, and a home life scarred by abuse and destitution. Broad-shouldered, brawny, 6 foot 2, he is a class clown whose face darkens when he feels like he's done something wrong. Robert is one of the most intimidating participants ever enrolled in Brooklyn Day Habilitation (BDH), an experiential learning program for adults with developmental disabilities. Within his first few weeks at BDH he alarms the staff during a group excursion when he acts like he's going to rush headlong into traffic; on a boat tour of Manhattan when he dangles a leg off the dock, arms flailing as if he's about to topple overboard; and in the middle of a Tourette's outburst in the subway when he leans over to a friend and mutters, "I want to cut your throat."

The staff tenses every time he makes a scene ("What if he acts on that? What if he pulls out a knife?") and soon no one wants to include Robert on their outings. But BDH employee Gabriel Pietrzak, a soft-spoken, gentle devotee of Sri Mahayogi of Japan, wasn't afraid of him. "I knew that Robert would never hurt anyone," he says. "The antics and the threats were a game for him. He was like a child testing the limits, watching and laughing at people's reactions."

a yoga success story

BY SHANNON SEXTON



*Names of program participants have been changed. None of the participants are pictured in this article.

At the time of Robert's entrance into the program, Gabriel and his coworker Jud Parker, a fellow hatha teacher, were brainstorming ways to teach yoga to the 55 participants there. They knew that Robert's behavioral problems were a symptom of a larger problem: BDH's morning routine was chaotic, and because people with developmental disabilities are extraordinarily sensitive to their environment, the lack of structure at the beginning of the day was triggering some of the participants' behavioral problems, and they were spinning out of control.



"The whole program needed an overhaul," says Gabriel.

The problem was that the participants were bursting at the seams when they arrived in the morning. Because they spent up to two hours on a bus trip to get there, hyperactivity was a constant problem. While many participants remained calm, others were running laps around the narrow halls, darting in and out of offices, laughing and screaming and teasing each other.

"They were literally bouncing off the walls," says Jud.

Meanwhile, the staff had a mere 45 minutes to calm everyone down, gather supplies and their group of participants, review the curriculum with them, and march off to their daily activities at local recreational and volunteer sites, where participants learned basic life skills and participated in job training. And while people with developmental disabilities thrive on routine and predictability, BDH was (and still is) a program rich with change—staff turnover is on the rise, and participants go out in different groups to different activities every day. Most participants (two-thirds are male and African American) have secondary diagnoses—ADHD, anxiety disorders, autism, Tourette's syndrome—on top of the mental retardation that qualifies them for the program.

"They really struggled in such an unstructured environment," Gabriel explains. "Their disabilities became more pronounced, and behavioral problems escalated."

As a result, participants were frequently unable to adjust to change and cope with their emotions. And because their verbal skills are limited, they sometimes expressed themselves by getting into fistfights, throwing chairs, slamming doors, or bursting into tears.

Jud and Gabriel knew that yoga had transformed their own lives, and they had a feeling that it could help the participants at BDH too. It could provide much-needed structure for the mornings and help them focus on one particular task. Perhaps it would reduce hyperactivity, they reasoned, and give participants behavioral coping tools so they could handle their emotions instead of being controlled by them.

So Jud and Gabriel approached the director, Mike Kaplan, and proposed a way to incorporate yoga into the program. With his encouragement they began to design and implement a morning asana routine. They cleared the clutter from their two small classrooms, turned out the lights, and let the city sun swell in through the windows. They split the 55 participants into the two rooms and led each group through a 45-minute yoga session.

Gabriel had just returned from a two-month trip to India to attend a yoga-for-disabilities teachers' training program, and he used his training to tailor the

asanas to each individual's needs. Jud used his charisma to rally support and excitement among the staff and students. They began teaching Mahayogi's series of 12 asanas—mostly floor poses with an emphasis on breathing, relaxation, holding and deepening each pose. And because the learning curve of the class was high, Jud and Gabriel involved all of the staff—the direct careworkers, supervisors, and director—as assistants and taught them how to guide individuals in and out of the poses, correct mistakes, and keep everyone on task.

Yoga gives participants behavioral coping tools so they can handle their emotions instead of being controlled by them.

“The morning yoga class transformed the program,” says Gabriel. “Within a week they were getting off the buses, coming into the program, taking their mats out, putting them on the floor, taking their shoes off, and getting ready to practice their asanas without any prompting or guidance from the staff. And even though they often couldn't articulate that they wanted sanity and calm in the program, when it was there it was obvious that they preferred and enjoyed it.”

“It was a miraculous change,” echoes Mike. “What had been a chaotic, crazy time became a calm, centered, focused period. After the class, the groups would be called out to their activities in the community, and they would quietly get up, get their things, and go.”

Participants were calmer, he says, more relaxed, and they were armed with a kinesthetic experience of simple yoga techniques that could help them cope with their emotions and function more efficiently throughout the day. “Many of their behavioral problems faded away,” says Jud, and the other staff members who worked there through the change—Gabriel, Mike, Stephanie Tyler, Eugene Tseytin, and Heather Gazzaley—agree.

“The participants are more in control of themselves now, and the staff feels that,” says Stephanie, who has worked at BDH for five years. “It's a lot easier for us to work with them. Before the yoga

class we were writing up incident reports all the time, documenting any acts of physical aggression that the participants would do to themselves, their peers, or the staff. Last year, I only remember two.”

Rx: yoga

The staff at BDH wanted the yoga routine to be more than just busywork; they wanted it to become a skill-building component of the program that the participants could apply to real-life situations. As Mike explains, “It's one thing to be calm and relaxed during yoga class with the lights down low, the soothing music playing, the mats on the floor, and the staff leading you through the postures—but then you're out in downtown Brooklyn with cars beeping and people screaming and it's a whole different story.”

With staff assistance, the participants were now practicing yoga five days a week, and eventually the relaxation and breathing techniques became a familiar part of their routine. If they were out in the community and a participant was becoming agitated, a direct careworker could lead that person through a relaxation technique then and there. For example, Keziah* was once standing at a cash register in a corner store, getting frustrated because she didn't have enough money to buy the bag of chips she wanted to eat. But instead of throwing a tantrum she was able to handle her emotions, calm down, and move on to the next scheduled activity.

“Yoga became an integral part of the whole program,” says Gabriel. And Robert—the brawny man who alarmed the staff with his unpredictable behavior—is one of the many participants whose lives have been changed by it. Gabriel goes on to describe how he used a breathing exercise to de-escalate Robert from a violent outburst in the Laundromat one day.



As the coordinator of a hygiene group, Gabriel is teaching Robert and five other participants how to do laundry, using a supply of spare clothes from BDH as practice material. As Gabriel supervises the activity, Robert mimes his every move. There is a loyal bond between them, and Robert has a habit of imitating the young man he so fervently admires. Gabriel turns to Robert and says, “Robert, would you like to wash what you’re wearing?”

Robert flinches.

“I have something else you can put on while you’re waiting,” Gabriel continues, cheerfully. He gestures to the open door of a machine. “We can put your clothes in the washer.”

But suddenly Robert is frozen with fear, with shame, and Gabriel knows he’s said something wrong. The problem is that Robert is starting to look like a homeless man. His clothes, caked with dirt and stains, have not been washed in well over a month, and Robert knows it. His eyes tic around the room—a signal of his agitation, a precursor of outbursts to come.

“It’s okay, Robert,” Gabriel says, changing strategies. “You don’t have to wash your clothes. You’re dressed well and you’re clean.” He uses his most convincing voice. “You look really handsome today.”

But Robert isn’t buying it. He taps the counter with his fingers and starts jittering. Gabriel has an idea about what’s going on in his head right now: Robert lives with a crowd of relatives in a dilapidated building with crumbling walls and no hot water. His family can’t afford to wash their clothes or buy groceries on a regular basis. Robert is tormented about the way he has to live and feels helpless, ashamed. Gabriel’s suggestion that he wash his clothes reminds him that everybody knows he is poor and dirty—everybody knows. Robert stares at the washers, the clothes tumbling madly in mouths of soapy spit. The machines are menacing, and they are shouting at him. He is sick with shame, overwhelmed. He tugs on his shirt, lowers his head.

“Robert,” he says definitively, “is bad.” His eyes, restless, rove around the room. He screams out to anyone who will listen. “Robert’s clothes are dirty!” His hands slice the air with scorn, with shame. “Robert is bad because Robert should...wash his clothes!”

“No, Robert,” Gabriel says calmly, trying to soothe him. He steps forward to touch the man’s elbow, but Robert shrinks away. “I’m not saying you should wash your clothes because you’re dirty. It’s just that I want you to feel comfortable. And if washing your clothes would make you feel better, we could definitely do that.”

“No no no!” he shouts, shaking his head. “Robert is...DIRTY!”

Heads turn. They swivel and freeze like a flock of startled owls, and focus on Robert’s fury.

In a few swift movements Robert strips off his T-shirt, unbuckles his belt, and pulls off his jeans and boxers. He removes his socks, his shoes, and within seconds he is completely naked, towering at 6 foot 2 in a cramped Laundromat in Brooklyn on a Wednesday afternoon with machines humming and people backing away in horror—and Gabriel, his friend and ally, looking worried, his face full of regret.

The other participants know the protocol for emergencies: they abandon jugs of detergent on the counter, grab their backpacks and slide onto a bench together where Gabriel can see them. Unfazed, they become a crowd of observers, watching and waiting.

But this time it gets worse. Robert pulls the belt from the hooks of his abandoned jeans and stands, a tower of muscle, memory crumbling as he remembers, Gabriel imagines, the crack of his father’s belt against his back as a child—a child. Never mind that he’s almost 30 now, that he could take out a wrestling team. With the memory of that trauma, coupled with his mental disabilities, he is unable to separate past from present, good from bad.

In a powerful backward stroke, Robert whips his own back with the belt, reverses the motion, and lashes his back again. Above the orchestra of rinse and wash and spin, onlookers can hear the belt crack, see it snap against Robert’s recoiling skin.

Gabriel isn’t afraid to approach him because he knows that Robert’s behavior is purely self-punishment. So after he lashes himself for the sixth time and swings the belt back to the front of his body, Gabriel, shorter, thinner, creeps up to Robert from behind, stealthy as a cat, not for an attack but for a hug. He



wraps his arms, with love, over Robert's arms and around his torso before Robert can swing the belt backward again. Gabriel begins to breathe audibly, a powerful inhalation through his throat and nostrils, the way a seashell sounds when you hold its mouth to your ear. He exhales with equal emphasis, a gentle breeze against Robert's cheek, and beyond the rumble of the machines, Robert knows that the body and *ujjayi* breath belong to Gabriel. Robert loves him like a brother, so he mimics the breathing, and his back, miraculously, begins to soften.

Robert has been conditioned to breathe like this every morning in yoga class, so this gentle reminder is all he needs to reprogram his frenzied breathing in a way that will calm and comfort him. They stand this way, these two unlikely friends, for several minutes, playing follow-the-leader with Gabriel's breath until the storm of Robert's emotions subsides. Then Robert twists around in Gabriel's arms and says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"It's *okay*, Robert," Gabriel soothes. "It's no big deal. We don't have to wash your clothes."

But in a slow, cautious drawl Robert says, "I would like to wash my clothes."

"Okay," says Gabriel, "that's great. Here are some other clothes I brought for you. Do you want to put them on?"

Robert nods.

In a few minutes the two men go outside and sit on a bench. Gabriel continues his *ujjayi* breathing, and Robert mimics him until his rattled nervous system is coaxed back into balance.

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Gabriel used this breathing game as an intervention with Robert many times. "If I could do that with him every day of his life," Gabriel says, "in a few years maybe he would be able to move past the internal struggle that causes those behavioral problems. If he

Room to Breathe

Although 90 percent of the 55 participants in the BDH yoga program frequented the morning yoga class, some had behavioral problems that prevented them from attending. And because everyone in the program is constantly bearing a broad spectrum of disabilities, a few were bound to erupt in a fury of fists or tears on any given day when they couldn't find the words to express their mounting frustration.

Gabriel wanted to give these participants the opportunity to practice a yoga-related activity in a relatively isolated area that would lead them to the same calm, centered space that the other participants were reaching through their asana practice, so he created a relaxation room. With the director's support and financial backing, he dragged out the furniture in the staff lounge—a windowless room the size of a walk-in closet, closed off from the rest of the center—and tinted the white, institutional walls with a few coatings of lavender paint. He blanketed the linoleum with plush beige carpet and softened the lighting, creating a tiny, private haven where he could lead individuals and small groups through tailored yoga practices.

"After a while," he recalls, "participants would come to me when they reached their emotional threshold, take my arm, lead me to the relaxation room, and close the door. They would sit in easy pose or lotus and give me a look that said, 'Okay, let's go, let's do whatever we

can do to make me feel better, because I feel really frustrated right now.'"

The relaxation room worked wonders for participants like Richie Jones*, who has mental retardation and ADHD. "He's like Tigger," Gabriel says, "because he never stops. He runs laps around the facility, bounces off the walls, and teases people all the time." Movement perpetually ripples through his body, and even when he's sitting, he's fidgeting with something in his backpack, tapping his feet, making funny faces. Richie couldn't attend the morning yoga class because he'd disrupt everyone, so Gabriel worked with him individually.

"I would do some practice beforehand to prepare myself and the atmosphere of the relaxation room. Richie would come into the room with his energy all over the place but it would be met with this calm, quiet atmosphere, and he would start to slow down. The lights were dim, and I'd put on some soft music, and we'd talk in the beginning about things that were coming through his mind. Eventually he would unwind and slip into total silence." Then Gabriel began to teach Richie diaphragmatic breathing and lead him through a systematic relaxation in *shavasana*. At first they worked together three to four times a week, then once a week. But Richie would always go into the room in the morning and follow the routine Gabriel had created for him, "because he liked it." ●

could learn to employ that technique every time his emotions start to build, then maybe he could change. For those moments where he was escalated, the breathing exercise really helped him. It was truly the beginning of a healing process for Robert, because there had been a lot of pain for him."

from students to teachers

Jud and Gabriel introduced yoga to BDH in 1999. And as the program flourished they encouraged participants to explore yoga in other settings, attending hatha classes with non-disabled people at various NYC yoga centers; lending a hand in *karma yoga* (selfless service) projects; and exploring the concepts of vegetarianism and *ahimsa* (non-harming) through a cooking group.

"This was great," says Jud, "because integrat-

ing participants into mainstream society is part of BDH's mission." He and Gabriel also arranged a few retreats at ashrams in upstate New York where participants could immerse themselves in the yogic lifestyle—rising early, eating a *sattvic* diet, walking outdoors, attending *satsanga*, participating in *kirtan* and karma yoga, and interacting with the spiritual community living there.

"Soon we had a core group of five or six participants," recalls Gabriel, "who would come in the morning and tell us how they taught their brother or sister to do asana or how they were practicing on their own. A few became vegetarians. They understood some yoga philosophy and knew the asana routine by heart."

News of BDH's success with yoga spread, and before long, other programs affiliated with BDH's parent agency, the Association of Help for Retarded

Children (AHRC) wanted Jud and Gabriel to help them start their own yoga sessions. So the two teachers empowered their core group of yoga students by taking them to other AHRC sites and encouraging them to teach asana to the staff and participants there.

“They enjoyed the experience of being teachers,” says Mike, “because they were the experts

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for a change.” For most of their lives, people with developmental disabilities are told where they’re going, what they’re doing, when to cross the street, when to eat, when to shop, when to dress, when to shower, when to sleep. Yoga, on the other hand, is an exploration all their own, as well as a gift they can share with others.

But without yoga teachers on staff, other centers couldn’t sustain an asana class. And by 2001, BDH’s own yoga program was beginning to fade—Jud and Gabriel left for other jobs. Mike financed a teacher training for four more employees, and this kept the asana class afloat. But when Mike took another posi-

tion within AHRC, the yoga program took a real hit. As the director of BDH, Mike had been a key supporter of the program, both philosophically and financially. Today, BDH’s two remaining yoga teachers—Stephanie and Eugene—lead the two morning yoga classes with virtually no assistance. New participants have a hard time learning the routine, and almost all the employees

that Jud and Gabriel had trained to assist them have left for other jobs. “If Stephanie and Eugene leave,” says Heather, “no one will be able to fill their shoes.”

hope for the future

Ironically, all over the city, yoga programs are flourishing in upper- and middle-class settings. There’s a center, it seems, on every block, an ad on every corner. Here, on a street in inner-city Brooklyn, in an unexpected program with unexpected students, a yoga program that has transformed lives is losing steam. But Heather, a member of an AHRC curriculum team, isn’t giving up hope. “I realized that we have to get this information down on paper,” she says. “There has to be a way to pass this on.”

With the help of BDH’s past and present yoga teachers, she’s creating a curriculum book with step-by-step instructions for teaching yoga to people with developmental disabilities, complete with safety guidelines. Soon, she’ll present it to AHRC’s main office and invite the agency to publish and distribute it to BDH and other day habilitation programs in the city. Ideally, she hopes AHRC will hire a yoga consultant to lead teacher trainings for interested staff and then travel from program to program helping them implement a tailored asana routine. The curriculum book would then serve as a reference manual for the new teachers. The six original enthusiasts at BDH (the yoga teachers, the supervisor, the former director) are crossing their fingers—both up close and from a distance—hoping that AHRC will carry on the legacy of yoga at BDH, and perhaps, someday, make yoga available at all the agency’s day programs—and beyond. ●

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