

interaction

As constant as the Northern Star: MESD Nurse Steffannie Gonzalez is there for Ryan, rain or shine

By Mark Skolnick

Over the last five years, a special bond has flourished between MESD Nurse **Steffannie Gonzalez** and nine-year old student **Ryan Gibson**. Beginning with the morning bus ride to Lewelling School in Milwaukie, until the time she rides the bus again and drops him off in the afternoon, they spend over seven very concentrated hours with each other.

But Steffannie is more than Ryan's connection to school. During the day she sustains every aspect of his health and well being: the activities in which he participates; the food he consumes; and perhaps most important, a nursing response to subtle or dramatic changes in his condition.

Ryan's multitude of health issues - cerebral palsy, frequent seizures, a compromised immune system - mean that Steffannie watches and monitors his every move. At this point, Steffannie knows Ryan better than anyone except his parents.

If Ryan makes a delicate change in his hand movements or moves his eyes slightly, she is in tune with the meaning of each, almost imperceptible, motion. If a noise or activity in the classroom has him out of sorts, she knows the exact remedy to return him to a tranquil state.

In an alcove just off the hallway and near the classroom, she has created a special place where Ryan can lie down, maybe listen to music, or just collect himself when the stimulation of the elementary school gets to be too much.

Recognizing Ryan's communication potential

Steffannie is also part of a team helping Ryan improve his ability to communicate.

For many years, Ryan's potential to communicate his needs went undiscovered. He was unable to tell his caregivers or his family when he was hungry, when he was full, what food he liked or when he wanted to sit up or lie down.

It was a puzzle...what could he comprehend? What level of communication could Ryan achieve?

"Ryan is a really neat kid. When I first started working with him years ago, my understanding was that he really doesn't communicate at all. And little by little, I started seeing very subtle hints that he wants something or that he was trying to speak with me," she recalled.

He had learned to use "yes" or "no" pictures. Then one day she was feeding him and she realized, just by his expression, he was communicating a more complex thought: "I don't want to eat anymore."

So Steffannie and her team, along with Ryan's parents, developed an assistive communication device that Ryan could use to express a wider range of needs.

"I cried like a baby when we discovered this. We discovered his food preferences, and that, at times, he wanted to stay sitting up and didn't want to lie down."



Steffannie Gonzalez

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His progress foreshadowed another new development: Now, Steffannie says, Ryan is beginning to verbalize to a greater extent than ever before. These small but significant achievements reflect Steffannie's impact on Ryan.

An adventurous life

Born in Tacoma, Steffannie grew up in Oregon City. As a young adult, her adventurous nature motivated her to explore life outside the northwest. After high school she attended Grambling State University in Louisiana - "it was a culture shock," she said - but she came back and continued at Portland State University. She now has a degree from Warner Pacific University.

Later on she spent a whole summer traveling by Greyhound bus around the US, Mexico and Canada exploring cities and states to get a feel for where she wanted to live her life. "I kept a journal the whole time, hung out with cab drivers. I was really into reggae music at the time so there was a focus for wherever I went."

Eventually, the lure of warm weather took to her to Florida where she got her nursing training in Orlando. Six years in Florida did not diminish her attachment to the Northwest. "There's nothing like Portland," she confided. "It's the place to be."

Represents MESD in North Clackamas School District

With her nursing degree, she had a choice of jobs. "I had no idea that I would end up in a school," she said. "I was looking at mental health since I had worked with people with eating disorders and with adolescents." Eventually, she found her niche at MESD and with Ryan.

She is well aware that as a MESD nurse in a North Clackamas school, she represents the agency wherever she goes.

"I make it known that I am from MESD. The reason is that out here in Clackamas it is important that they know we are available...just to make our agency understood. It's really important to me...I take it really seriously. We are here as nurses, but also as a representatives of MESD."

Humor: a key to dealing with stress

Steffannie's oversight of Ryan can be stressful, especially when he is in transit to and from school. Since Ryan can't take a lot of bright light and loud noises the bus ride can be an adventure.

"You can't tell it right now, but I am a very funny person. A lot of it has to do with humor and I have a good relationship with the teachers and with my supervisor **Christy (Fawcett)**. Christy is fantastic."

Steffannie also praises MESD Special Needs Nurse **Taya Gunsel**. She and the staff at MESD confer frequently for information, support and advice. "I call her and talk with her and debrief about whatever is necessary."

His rock and steadfast friend

For now, Steffannie is Ryan's rock, his steadfast caregiver and constant school companion. His health is fragile, but his courage is resilient and his potential is unfolding.

Steffannie cares for Ryan's body, but she also tends his mind and spirit with the tender touch of a mother, the calming expertise of a nurse and the concern of a true friend. With an upbeat and positive attitude, Steffannie is looking forward to working with Ryan for the foreseeable future.

"It's a special job to be a one-to-one nurse because there is nothing like that connection and that relationship with one kid and knowing that you are actually making a real difference," she said. 🍌

Keeping up with Arata Creek: Outdoor School, technology and imagination destinations

By Janelle Emery

Arata Creek Teacher Cory Gibson prepares students for Outdoor School

Attending Outdoor School has been a rite of passage for sixth grade students in Multnomah County for over 40 years. Students lucky enough to go can get the memory of a lifetime. Now, thanks to Arata Creek Teacher **Cory Gibson**, four students who will go to Outdoor School this spring are fully prepared to make the most of their opportunity.

"There will be five other schools joining us at the Sandy River site April 25-30 and although I'll be there, I've purposely arranged for my students to bunk in the cabins with students from the other schools, in order to experience complete independence," said Cory.

Arata Creek serves students who have severe emotional disorders. Cory has taught there for five years and includes language arts, social skills and physical education in his teaching responsibilities. He had plenty of support in the preparation of his students.

"With help from Outdoor School's **Kitty Boryer**, who provided me with identical science materials used in Outdoor School, I've been able to prepare my students so they'll be familiar when exploring hands-on science experiments," said Gibson. "I've repeatedly applied Arata Creek's Continuum System concept to ensure my students will comply with the structure, rules and appropriate behaviors while at camp. These four students have proven to move successfully through the levels of the Continuum System and I feel they deserve to go and experience Outdoor School first-hand."



NOTE: Arata Creek's Continuum System concept is the framework in which instructors give students the tools they need to become independent and accomplish tasks on their own such as following rules and directions without arguing, being able to problem-solve, managing anger, respecting the rights of others, completing assignments, participating in activities without distracting others, interacting respectfully, using appropriate language, cooperating and making responsible choices.

Ethan Akre uses his skills in technology to inspire students

If you walk down the halls of Arata Creek School and enter one of Educational Assistant **Ethan Akre's** classes, you might hear terms like "points of symmetry," "zoom level" or "shapes tool." At the same time, you'll most likely hear an outburst from an excited student shouting, "Hey cool! Look at this! I just drew this awesome shape just by using my mouse!"

The subject of the class is technology and students are intently involved in their work. Their assignment: to let their minds run free to create whatever inspires them. The only tools needed are a laptop and their own imagination.

As Ethan walks the classroom, he stops, kneels down and quietly asks, "how's it going over here?" He listens attentively, then stands up and projects his voice louder to say: "What a great question! Does everyone know how the lasso tool works? Well if not, here's the answer..."

Ethan began at Arata Creek this school year and his technology background is a perfect fit. He is currently teaching his students Sumo Paint, one of the many, free, open-source software programs available online.



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Artwork like this can be created in Sumo Paint

“I teach technology to five different groups (six to ten students per group) four days a week,” he said. “All five groups are learning how to design in Sumo Paint, how to understand and create HTML coding and every student has their very own blog page. They’ve all designed their own blog pages, by themselves, and are all proud of what they’ve accomplished. I am too,” he said, smiling at the thought.

Reflecting on his recent career changes Ethan explained: “It’s hard to believe last year I was in the vision-therapy field, which is alternative ophthalmology. Before that, I worked at the Northwest Regional ESD for seven years. I’ve been everything from an educational assistant to a technical liaison to a basketball coach,” laughed Ethan. “I feel like I’m where I belong,” referring to teaching students with emotional disorders. “A lot of these kids get over-looked and I know I’m here for a reason. That reason is to be there for them.”

Please visit the Arata Creek Student Blog located online at: <http://aratacreek.edublogs.org>. View the student’s individual blogs by clicking on their name (Listed under the Technology classrooms #102-#106)

Oregon Destination ImagiNation Takes Flight and Lands at Arata Creek

If anyone understands the importance behind the expression “It takes a village to raise a child,” it’s **Susan Hoelzer**, school psychologist at Arata Creek and Donald E. Long schools.

She said she could not have implemented the Oregon Destination ImagiNation (ODI) activity to Arata Creek this year without collaboration from her colleagues.

“It’s help from fellow staff members who volunteer their time as after-school class leaders that makes all the difference,” she said. “It’s Principal **Henry Ramirez** who is always fostering new ideas with a constant open-mindedness. He approached me with the ODI brochure,” Susan said with a smile.

“And, it’s the financial support (\$1,250) we received from the E2 Foundation by way of a Terra Nova Grant that made it possible for us to purchase this powerful program,” she explained.

According to their website, ODI provides an educational program for students to learn and experience creativity, teamwork, and problem solving. Destination ImagiNation is an after-school activity in which students work in teams to solve “mind-bending challenges” and present their solutions at tournaments. Teams are tested to think on their feet, work together, and devise original solutions that satisfy the requirements of the challenges. Participants gain more than just basic knowledge and skills - they learn to unleash their imaginations and take unique approaches to problem solving.

ODI has helped students throughout the United States develop written and verbal communication, presentation skills and team-building skills as well.



Susan adds: “Although the ODI program was only recently launched in January of this year, the students so far have enjoying the cooking and dance classes because they’re fun and creative.”

According to Susan, the best thing so far about the ODI program is that “the staff of Arata Creek are building relationships with our students based on doing something fun. That is the difference it’s making.” 🍌

Hillary Hyde and Julie Schweigert: Establishing relationships that pay dividends for children and families

By Mark Skolnick

The Multnomah Early Childhood Program's (MECP) **Hillary Hyde** and **Julie Schweigert** are a formidable team. And like all good teams, their strengths are complementary and balanced.

Hillary is outgoing, extroverted, comfortable meeting new people and establishing relationships with community agencies. She is an ambassador for MECP as she observes classrooms in community child care centers, teaches and coaches parents and educators, and represents the program in policy and partnership forums.

Julie is the consummate early childhood professional. With 15 years of teaching and evaluating, she is well-respected for her knowledge of policy, documentation and classroom practice. Julie has infinite patience dealing with the nuances of regulatory requirements and Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) documentation. She is also at ease coaching teachers, specialists and partners on systems improvement.

In less than a year together, their tandem skills have realized a singular vision: Improve the EI/ECSE system and ensure every child with a disability receives early intervention and early childhood special education services.

Hillary Hyde: A systems thinker with a social work background

Taking her new position just last year, Hillary found a niche in a job that she says was "made for me." Previously, she worked for MECP (1996-2001) in Gresham as part of the family support team using her background in social work and mediation. Her title now is EI/ECSE Outreach Specialist, but like most official monikers, it doesn't begin to tell the story.

"In essence, I am sort of a liaison, providing education to all the parts of the system on how the other parts work," she said.

Housed at the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) office in southeast Portland, Hillary builds connections that link MECP with the community and with families of children with disabilities. Through CCR&R, the access to the childcare community is invaluable. But it's a two-way street. The agency also benefits from Hillary's perspective and experience.

CCR&R is also a great base of operations for Hillary because they provide training almost every night of the week. As part of the teaching staff, she reaches parents and providers. Her courses cover inclusion, referring, communicating with child care providers and disability law.

ChildsworK: A budding partnership

ChildsworK, is a large child care provider serving 260 children in 17 classrooms in their southeast Portland facility. Last fall, Hillary was invited to form a partnership with the



Michelle Wolf-Volk (L)
of ChildsworK and
Hillary Hyde (R)

organization and eventually observed in all classrooms. She now consults with staff, teaches seminars, and guides parents to evaluate options for their children.

ChildsworK Education Director **Michelle Wolf-Volk** values Hillary's perspective on strategies and resources to help families. Michelle said Hillary blends in seamlessly at ChildsworK because her child-centered outlook is in harmony with their philosophy. "Hillary's expertise and her great communication skills are a great addition here," she said. "She is a great source of information for us about early intervention."

By making inroads with community child care centers, Hillary also strengthens MESD's Child Find efforts. Information about early intervention helps identify children who might benefit from a referral.

All care is inclusive

Hillary has a sharp and focused view of how inclusion should work. "All child care is inclusive child care - it's a matter of communication and support. And I really, truly believe that," she said. "If you have a provider who knows child development and has a quality program, you have to work out the communication and supports. If you have a provider who takes only children with special needs, it's no longer inclusive child care. The whole point of inclusive child care... it's supposed to be a typical setting where you have kids with needs come in."

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Hillary is always thinking about ways to make the system work better for children.

"The piece that makes it really doable for me to make stuff happen is administrative support...having **Pat (Moffitt)** know me, and trust my judgment and having **Nancy Anderson**. They know me and trust me so when I come back and say that something needs to happen, they are open to my ideas."

Julie Schweigert: Attention to detail with the greater goal in mind

Julie Schweigert has the heart of teacher, the intuition of a seasoned evaluator and the attention to detail of an accountant. She needs all these attributes to be MECP's Systems Performance Review and Improvement specialist. Her job has two major components. She ensures that MECP meets requirements for recordkeeping and documentation; and she works with Hillary and others on Child Find, establishing a network of identification and referral sources.

Documentation is key to progress

Because very young children change so frequently, Julie says it's important to maintain current and accurate documentation on every child. The IFSP is also a legal document, she said, which stipulates not only the kinds of services, but how much will be provided and who will pay.

For Julie, the logic behind each requirement guides her coaching style. She stresses the underlying reasons for consistency and clarity in language, for straightforward meaning.

"The IFSP and the notes should be written for someone who doesn't know the child," she explained. "Is it understandable to someone who doesn't know the child? Is it understandable by the parents, the child care centers?"

"If you understand what is required, and if you know the logic behind it, like why information has to be so clear, why it has to be written in a certain way, then it's easier for me to coach staff."

Record keeping is so important in the EI/ECSE world that the Oregon Department Education audits each region on a revolving basis. Last year, MESD was audited and now Julie is continuing to be a kind of internal auditor, but always with the greater goal in mind: Every child should receive all the services he/she is entitled to, and the record of progress, milestones and setbacks must be thorough and complete.

According to Julie, MECP staff do a superior job at documenting and filing paperwork, tracking hundreds of children across the program. Most errors she discovers are minor and clerical in nature.

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Julie Schweigert

A new career twist

After a career spent working with children and families, a desk job is an interesting change for Julie. Before coming to MESD, she was a teacher and evaluation team member for Portland Public Schools for eight years. She is now in her seventh year with MECP.

Her new job, she said, has given her a chance to meet staff all through the program, people she never would have encountered in her previous roles. Her status as a peer and not an administrator, she said, adds a comfort level when coaching staff.

"People have been really receptive to me because it's a second set of eyes on paperwork that they do all the time, but when you have 30 kids on a caseload and you are busy and you're just trying to get it done, it's nice just to have a second set of eyes."

For now, Julie is reviewing every single new file that comes in. "I review the ones that are new and eligible. It ebbs and flows. I don't keep track of how many I do in a day...I think I'd probably cry. I have two baskets - east and west - and just do them until they are done. It's pretty efficient because I know what to look for."

While Julie is comfortable with the regulatory scrutiny her job requires, she is still feeling her way on the training and Child Find fronts.

She and Hillary go to preschool and community fairs and to kindergarten round-ups where they present information to parents. They also train staff at Head Start, including Albina Head Start, Knott Head Start and Friendly House in southwest Portland.

She also works on making reconnections with families who have not followed up on the referral process. However, she understands why some may be reluctant to enroll.

"It's very personal, you are talking about their babies in a lot of cases too. Some families are not ready to go there. They think they will just wait until kindergarten. We are trying to get past that hurdle, helping people to understand that the earlier you've identified developmental difficulties, the better the prognosis is. The longer you wait the bigger the developmental gap can become. We want to make sure we are finding kids as early as we can." 