

Learning helped deaf youth span a psychological gap

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Without parents or friends, 14-year-old Joseph McNulty was a frightened, distrustful, angry adolescent when he met Dan Geller, an audiologist at Sunmount Developmental Center in Tupper Lake, N.Y., in the fall of 1976.

The deaf youth had already spent a year in a home where authorities believed he had been sexually abused on a regular basis. Prior to that, McNulty had spent more than seven years in Willowbrook State School, back when the word "Willowbrook" conjured up pictures of children wandering the halls, nude and smeared in their own excrement.

McNulty's fortune, however, changed when he met Geller. For the first time, someone re-evaluated McNulty and arrived at a new conclusion: McNulty might not be mentally retarded.

When Geller met McNulty, "I thought, 'He looks retarded, he acts retarded, he's not learning anything,' but when I read his record there was nothing that told me he was retarded except for psychological records," Geller said.

"Knowing he never got any training as a deaf person left me in doubt, but I wasn't prepared to say he wasn't retarded until after his work habits changed," Geller said.



Joseph McNulty

When Geller first began teaching McNulty sign language, he was self-abusive, impatient, tense and angry. "Any hint of rejection you gave him," Geller said, such as correcting him, "he would cry, throw his fists into the table, hit himself or on a rare occurrence hit me."

"He didn't really know any sign language," Geller said, except "sit down" and "stand up." He could

"label" pictures of objects, he said, "but to say that meant understanding," is wrong. "He was like a blank slate. He had no knowledge of language."

During the first three or four months, he was so defensive he would not say hello to Geller when they passed in the hall. "So many people had been through his life. He had never had a permanent, enduring relationship," Geller said.

"After six or seven months, he started to experience this as something enduring, and he began to relate back," Geller said. McNulty learned to sit still, he learned his name, he relaxed, his attention span increased, he had fewer temper tantrums, became less self-abusive and could answer simple questions.

Finally, "he began to open up and enjoy coming to training sessions," Geller said. And he began learning concepts in one session rather than in many.

The concept of "yours and mine," for example, took ages for McNulty to understand, Geller said. "I thought he would never, ever, get it." But when he finally did, "I got excited. He smiled and got happy that he could now identify an object as his and mine. It was the first time I witnessed getting something across to him."

By the spring of 1978, Geller and his then-fiancee, Deena

Butcher, an occupational therapist at Sunmount, decided to have McNulty move in with them. "I knew he was never going to get what he needed in the center's educational program," Geller said.

The kind of special education McNulty needed was offered through local community programs. To enroll in them, however, McNulty had to be a resident in the community.

"We had no choice. We knew he'd be doomed, period, if you left him in the institution," he said. "The only way for him to get (proper training) was through our house."

"If it were not for Dan Geller and Deena Butcher, Joe McNulty would probably not have any opportunity at all," said Assemblyman Michael Bragman, D-Onondaga County. "He would have been a ward of the state, and very little would have been done for him. It is through their dedication and perseverance that anything has been done for him," he said.

McNulty, now 24, spent eight years, on and off, living with the Gellers as he attended local high schools, schools for the deaf and special camps. Geller, through court-appointed authority, eventually filed three lawsuits against the state on McNulty's behalf. The first of those lawsuits goes to trial next Monday.