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The singing ambassador

Peninsula puts autistic student on course

You can't tell by looking at Edward Gary's face the pride he must feel inside. He sits erect in his chair at Pellissippi State Community College's Magnolia Avenue campus, looks you straight in the eyes and speaks in a deep, deliberate monotone about earning all A's and B's his freshman year. Smiles, if there are any, remain safely tucked away even as he reveals his dream of becoming a classical singer.

But just as his poker face doesn't reveal any hint of pride, those grades don't reveal just how remarkable the journey has been for this 25-year-old Knoxville man, who graduated from high school at age 19 after spending most of his school years in special education classes.

Given a diagnosis at age 9 of Asperger's syndrome, a developmental disorder marked by significant social and non-verbal communication, he has overcome so many obstacles that the staff at Peninsula's Recovery Education Center have dubbed him "The Ambassador of The Lighthouse."

"When we got him here in the Recovery Education Center (REC), he was extremely timid," said Cathy Jerrolds, a job readiness specialist at The Lighthouse on Dowell Springs Boulevard. "Anything could trigger him. We didn't know what it might be – it might be a voice, something that was said, a thought that ran through his mind. Sometimes, he would run out of the classroom to walk and sit under a tree. The anxiety was just so intense!"

"I've always had these 'what if?' moments," said Gary. "When I was around a lot of people, a crowd, I would start thinking, 'What if these people are mean or not friendly?' And I would start to freak out."

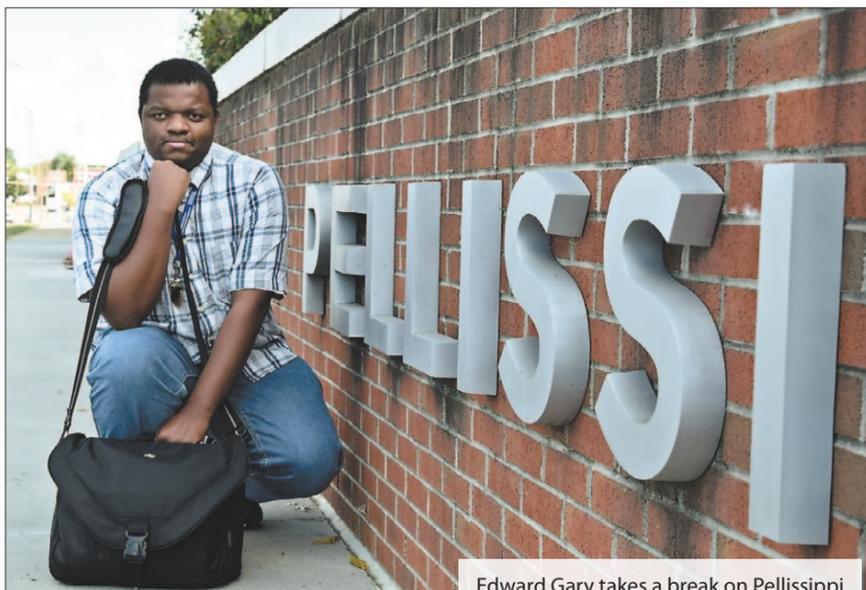
The anxiety he felt is just one of the symptoms of his disorder, which has since been reclassified as Autism Spectrum Disorder, a wide range, or "spectrum," of symptoms, skills and levels of disability that are usually recognized by 2 years of age. For some, the impairment is mild; for others, it's disabling. For Gary, it was the latter.

Poor communication and social skills were accompanied by a strong dislike for being touched or being told what to do by others. He was hyper-focused to the point that he preferred a fixed routine, and refused to make eye contact with others.

"When someone would try to talk with me, I would answer the question but would not make any effort to continue the conversation," he said. "When I talked to people, I would usually have my head in a different direction. People would think that I was ignoring them but I wasn't, I just felt so awkward to just look at them."

That began to change in 2012 when Gary, who had weekly appointments at Peninsula since graduating middle school six years earlier, began attending weekly sessions in the REC program at The Lighthouse. There he was taught four aspects of recovery (physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological) with a goal toward obtaining a job, pursuing an education or volunteering.

Attending classes five days a week, he began formulating his own Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP®). The personalized plan, developed by Gary himself and taught by co-facilitators who are



Edward Gary takes a break on Pellissippi State Community College's Magnolia Avenue campus.

also in recovery, slowly but surely began to lead him out of his shell. He learned tools for dealing with issues, recognizing "triggers" and how to cope when finding himself in difficult situations.

A friend and former peer at REC taught him how to make eye contact, and before long, the introverted Gary had become something of a social butterfly. He began spending his breaks visiting with Peninsula program directors, staff members and other students.

"We just thought he was walking around the building on his breaks because most of the students do that," said Jerrolds. "But he was going out and talking with other staff here at the building. He knew everybody! And everybody knew him! If he missed a day, everybody would be asking, 'Where's Edward?! Is he OK?'" So that's why we dubbed him the Ambassador of the Lighthouse because everybody knew him. His social life has really, really expanded."

It expanded even more when Edward

took a driver education class, which gave him the motivation to get his state ID and a bus pass. Now, he goes out to restaurants or movies – whenever he wants.

Then, of course, there were his vocal performances. A lover of classical composers like Mozart, Beethoven and Bach, Gary began to show off his baritone singing voice by singing an Italian opera for REC staff and students.

"I've heard him sing many times," said Jerrolds. "For him to get in front of a crowd and sing is just amazing."

While still participating in REC, he surprised staff again by asking to take an intense, 80-hour training to help him further in communicating with others. He scored the second-highest in his group of about 15.

Jerrolds was most amazed by Gary's decision to enroll at Pellissippi State. "When he said, 'I want to go to college,' we're like 'what?'" But he's now a sopho-

more and doing amazingly well. His diagnosis does not affect his intelligence, it just means he thinks in such concrete terms. He takes things at face value."

That's why, even today, his conversations are marked by short sentences, long pauses, closed eyes and mouthing of words before he says them. "He has to process," Jerrolds explained. "You have to give him time to process, but he is very intelligent."

So when he sits poker-faced and tells you that he enrolled at Pellissippi State because he hopes to one day compete on "The Voice" television show, believe him. He believes the same hyper-focus that has given him a good memory and good grades will also one day help him be successful in the music field.

In fact, his goal is to eventually obtain a bachelor's degree in vocal performance, and earn a living as a classical singer like his inspiration, blind tenor Andrea Bocelli. He credits his Pellissippi State guidance counselor with helping him adapt to college life. "My life has changed so much," he added. "I trust people more, I feel more comfortable having a conversation with others and I actually enjoy it!"

He hasn't forgotten his friends at The Lighthouse either, returning every two or three months to visit. "The people there are nice," he said. "They understand. They are not judgmental. They like to see people grow. It's a safe environment, and they can help you find your true calling."

"When he has an appointment with a doctor, he comes in to see everybody," said Jerrolds. "We absolutely love him. Knowing how he was when he first came in here and seeing that enormous change in his life, seeing him grow has just been so monumental. I feel privileged to have witnessed that."

For more information about the programs and services offered at Peninsula, visit www.peninsulabehavioralhealth.org, or call 865-970-9800.

Support groups for ASD

Although children need support and treatment to navigate this confusing and frustrating condition, you too will benefit from a strong network of support. Current guidelines on the diagnosis and classification of mental disorders no longer use the term Asperger syndrome to describe higher-functioning persons with autism spectrum disorder. However, you may still find the following support groups helpful.

■ Autism Speaks

(www.autismspeaks.org) – This nationally recognized organization provides a great deal of information parents of children with recent diagnoses would find useful. This information includes reviews of apps, resources for children with autism, and a unique 100-Day Kit that provides a step-by-step guide and schedule as to what to do in the 100 days following the diagnosis of autism.

■ **Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support Center** (www.aspergersyndrome.org) – The website has a database of support



groups searchable by where you live. Support groups include treatment and therapy groups for children with Asperger syndrome, as well as support groups for parents.

■ **GRASP** (www.grasp.org) – The

Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Partnership was created to improve the lives of adults and teens on the autism spectrum through community outreach, online support, education and advocacy. Membership is free.

Peninsula Hospital

Peninsula Lighthouse

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For more information about Peninsula Behavioral Health, call (865) 970-9800.

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