

Sometimes one story leads to another, and this is one of them. I met Dr James Morton while researching a *Qweekend* feature about cancer survival. The 47-year-old is a respected physician in haematology, oncology and leukaemia, specialising in stem cell transportation. In his office at the Mater Private Hospital in South Brisbane, our initial conversation drifted towards children – the usual icebreaker when parents meet. How many? Girls or boys? How old?

Photos were swapped, the picture of a doe-eyed boy shared – and then came the unexpected story of how one January morning eight years ago, Morton realised that all the medical degrees lining his walls couldn't help him help his own son. He'd been walking down Spring Hill's Wickham Terrace, in central Brisbane, his wife Louise quietly crying by his side. They had just been told by a paediatrician that their beautiful, sweet, wild two-year-old was autistic.

Andy, says Morton, had been "a divine baby". "Then, as is very typical with children with autism, at about 12 months things started to go awry. He didn't develop any language, he became increasingly difficult to deal with, all he wanted to do was watch videos and if you tried to stop him he would have a total meltdown. We took to taking two cars wherever we went socially because we knew that before too long one of us would be taking him home again." Once

James and Louise Morton knew they had to help their autistic son but couldn't find a suitable education facility. What to do but build their own?

they braved a birthday party at McDonald's, then watched in despair as their son, while all the other kids whooped and hollered in the playground, violently banged his head on its perspex wall.

They had him tested for thyroid problems, epilepsy and brain tumours. Then came the diagnosis. "What I remember about that day," says Morton, "is this great surge of love for my son, and this overwhelming feeling of helplessness that I, as a medical man, knew nothing, understood nothing about this 'thing' he had." So he set about learning.

Autism is a neurodevelopment disorder that affects about one in 160 children, with about 350 children diagnosed in Queensland each year. A variety of names can be applied to it: autism spectrum disorder (ASD), high functioning autism (HFA), or Asperger's syndrome. Whatever label it wears, it will affect each child differently, often profoundly.

Dr James Scott, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with the Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research and an autism specialist, says the disorder is largely a mystery. "We know that while each case is different, the areas that are always affected are social interactions and verbal and non-verbal communication. Hence they have difficulties

Unlocking autism ... Louise and James Morton (with son Andy), founders of Queensland's six AEIOU centres.

understanding what's being said to them and expressing their thoughts and feelings to others." The distress and frustration this often causes leads to further problems: tantrums, withdrawal or aggression. Morton likens the disorder to "suddenly waking up in a foreign country. You can't speak the language; you have no way of effectively communicating with the people around you who might have a completely different set of social rules, a completely different culture. I think it's like never having the right passport to get in."

There is no cure for autism, and Scott says that for parents, hope lies not in "fixing" it but reducing the impact it has on their children's lives. In trying to do just that for their son, the Mortons discovered there was a key period, from about two-and-a-half to four years of age, during which an early intervention program could make a profound difference to an autistic child's development. They also found that in Queensland at that time, it was almost impossible to access an EIP in a social setting where an autistic child could be with his or her peers. After nearly two years shuffling their son from one specialist to another, one special education development unit to another, and trying him out in a mainstream childcare centre, they were elated when Andy, along with six other children, was accepted into a full-time EIP being trialled at Annerley in Brisbane's south.

A year later, they wept with frustration when ►

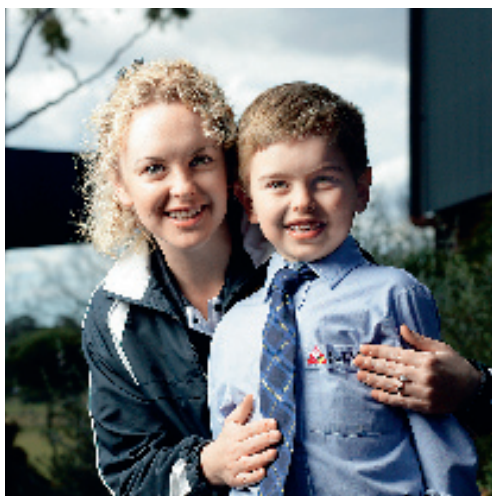
Story Frances Whiting

finishing school

Photography Russell Shakespeare



it was shut down, a victim of state government budget cuts. But they had glimpsed what could be achieved with their son: his speech had started to flow, he could count to 20, play with his siblings, write his name, look his parents in the eye without flinching. For the Mortons, there was no going back. They had to help their son. And so they went on to do something quite remarkable for him, and countless other children with autism. They created AEIOU, the school that Andy built.



“FOUR-HUNDRED AND FORTY-THOUSAND

dollars going once, \$440,000 going twice – come on folks, we’re giving it away – \$440,000 going three times ... sold!” The auctioneer’s hammer fell as the small crowd broke into a smattering of applause. James Morton took a deep breath, smiled at Louise, and on November 15, 2003 became the slightly nervous owner of Saint Mary’s Anglican Church in Moorooka.

The Mortons would spend an additional \$210,000 transforming the church in Brisbane’s southern suburbs into a childcare centre called the Autism Early Intervention Outcomes Unit. AEIOU. The acronym was perfect, the vowels also representing the problems autistic children experience with communication. The “A”, they decided, would be pink, the other vowels blue, representing the one girl to every four boys born with the disorder.

The couple began sourcing staff and the long, slow process of gaining a childcare licence. The dream of creating an accredited centre was becoming a reality and it didn’t matter to Morton that it had taken \$650,000 of his own money to do it. It didn’t matter that development approval and renovations took more than a year to complete. It didn’t even matter that when renovations started, not one child was enrolled. If he built it, Morton was sure, they would come.

And they did. Six AEIOUs now operate in Queensland – in Brisbane at Moorooka, Bray Park, Park Ridge and Nathan, and regionally in Toowoomba and Townsville. Until this year, AEIOU centres were the only integrated EIP and childcare centres with on-site speech and occupational therapists in Australia. The federal government is piloting its own EIP centres, modelled on AEIOU, with one centre catering for up to 20 children in each state. So desperate are parents to enrol their children at these centres that they’ll move suburbs, regions and even states to be near one. They’ll throw in jobs, jeopardise promising careers and leave behind any family support they might have to offer their child the option of early intervention.

When I meet Isaac Driessen, I begin to understand why. The six-year-old boy sitting calmly beside me was so out of control a few

years ago, he almost destroyed his family. “Our life was pretty much hell,” says his mother Lisa, 31, who lives in Toowoomba with Isaac, her husband Simon, 34, Joel, 14, and Isabella, 7. “I was so tired of it all, tired of Isaac hurting me, tired of his behaviour when we went out, tired of fighting with Simon over what was wrong with Isaac. I was sad for Joel, who had to cope with Isaac, this boy who dictated everything in our lives – he’d say, ‘I’m so angry, Mum, he can do anything he likes, bite me, attack me, and I can’t do anything about it.’”

Isaac also monopolised the time that Lisa, a swimming instructor at Toowoomba Grammar, felt she should have been spending with Isabella, who has Turner Syndrome and is profoundly deaf. Caused by a chromosome abnormality, the condition affected Isabella’s heart and physical development and required numerous surgeries from birth. Lisa would be torn between sitting by her daughter in hospital and trying to stop Isaac causing mayhem in the ward.

Like Andy, Isaac had been a normal baby, but at about 18 months had started to retreat into his own world. Sometimes he was almost catatonically passive, sometimes out of control, spitting and clawing at his mother’s eyes. Sensing something was wrong, Lisa began compiling a list of the increasingly unusual behaviours she saw in Isaac, who at three years old had no speech whatsoever. She wrote of how he would study a blade of grass for half an hour, how he was obsessed with straight lines, of his almost superhuman hearing, the way he could hear Daddy’s car coming home from streets away. She took the list to a paediatrician. He studied it and her son, then diagnosed Isaac with autism.

Devastated, but relieved that she now had a name for Isaac’s behaviour, Lisa went to her first autism support meeting. There, a woman in red (“that’s all I can remember about her, but I will be indebted to her for the rest of my life”) asked: “Have you heard about this centre that’s opened here? I can’t remember what it’s called, but it’s something to do with the vowels ...”

The Toowoomba branch of AEIOU had opened on November 11, 2007, with four kids



Help at hand ... (from far left) Lisa Driessen with son Isaac, who attends AEIOU Toowoomba; the Mortons; and Fiona Storey with Geoffrey and Anne at AEIOU Nathan.

on its books. On April 14, 2008, four-year-old Isaac became the 11th. Now he sits in a cafe in his Concordia Lutheran College uniform, eyes widening at the arrival of a milkshake. “Thank you very much, Mum,” he smiles, then dives in, blowing out the bubbles in the time-honoured tradition of six-year-olds. Isaac can talk, read, write, count, and SMS like a demon – “Go the Rabbitohs,” he texts his Parramatta supporter father. Once seemingly unable to feel or show any empathy, he now knows when his mother is feeling tired and will ask, “Are you okay?”, often coupled with, she says, a “bit of a smooch”.

While Isaac receives one-on-one tuition in some subjects from a teacher’s aide at Concordia, where he is in Grade One, he has just been promoted to Grade Two maths and English. He doesn’t like the playground much, preferring to stay indoors. But he is happy at his mainstream school – so happy he runs to the car each morning to get there. All of this, Lisa says, is because of AEIOU, the place where a lost Isaac’s passport “finally got stamped”.

THEY SAY AUTISTIC CHILDREN DON’T LIKE being touched. That they can be aggressive. They can’t stand noise. Can’t look you in the eye. Can’t show affection. And then there’s the little boy who comes barrelling behind me, gleefully pushing his face through my knees.

“Gotcha!” he shouts, completely delighted with himself. Then he’s out from my legs and zooming in for a hug, and I realise about five minutes into a visit to AEIOU Nathan that any preconceptions I had about this condition are

about to be obliterated. In the playground, kids are laughing and chasing each other. Inside the centre, tiny pictures are posted on the walls: photos of block building, hand washing, shoelace tying, letter posting. “Children with autism think in pictures a great deal – research says as much as 80 per cent of the time,” says Cate Willing, the centre’s manager and special education teacher. “So we’ll show them a picture of what we’re going to do before we do it. Then we’ll practise the activity again and again, and hopefully they’ll store it in memory.”

Willing is sitting with three-year-old Dylan, helping him build a block tower. Her fingers arc over his as he adds each piece, her voice a running commentary: “... so now we put this block, and then one of these blocks, now another one – good work!” Unlike other kids who might look at a mate colouring in and think, I’ll have a go at that, autistic children need to be shown and told, repeatedly. “Well done, Dylan,” says Willing, waggling her thumb back and forth. “Tower building is finished.”

The thumb-waggling is part of the Makaton signing system, a non-verbal communication technique developed in Britain in the 1970s to be used with children with developmental delay. All the centre’s 18 part-time and full-time staff use it with the 32 children who come here each day. “Because kids on the spectrum take most of their information in visually,” says Willing, “if you say something to them it’s gone, but if we give them a sign simultaneously it stays longer with them and gives them extra time to think about what is being said.”



AEIOU Nathan, like the other centres, has a ratio of one staff member to two children. There are special education teachers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists and teacher’s aides. Staffing outlays account for 85 per cent of the \$43,000 a year it costs to fund a child at AEIOU. (Fees are slashed via fundraising, an annual state contribution of \$9000 per child, benefits including the childcare rebate and a federal package for autistic children. Thus a family earning less than \$38,000 a year pays about \$2800 in fees, those on more than \$131,000 about \$8800. The Lynn Wright Memorial Fund, set up by Louise Morton in memory of her mother, makes payments up to \$4000 per year available to any family that might be struggling.)

In the motor skills room, staff take the children through obstacle courses. Many children with autism have poor vestibular function, which dictates balance and coordination. Activities are designed to “switch on their vestibular sensors”, Willing says. “If you can’t balance on a chair, you can’t sit and listen to a teacher.”

But even if they can sit still, listening comes with its own challenges. Children with autism have inconsistent hearing: the noise of an air-conditioner can be deafening or loud sounds can be muffled. At AEIOU, the children learn techniques to turn the world down: to cover their ears, or put one finger in an ear. Some autistic children in high school wear iPods with no music on them. If it all gets too much, the children at AEIOU know they can go to the sensory room, where it is cool and dark. It’s a place to relax, spend a bit of time inside your own little world.

Some of the children – like those who are not diagnosed until they’re three or four – will arrive at the centre unable to hold a pen, put their shoes on, sit on a chair properly. But within what seems a remarkably short period of time, transformations take place at AEIOU.

“We moved from Sydney to come,” says Fiona Storey, the softly spoken mother of Geoffrey, 4, and Anne, 2, both of whom have autism. She’s watching them run gloriously amok in the Nathan playground. Storey, 35, says sometimes she arrives early for pick-up “just to look at them”.

She and her husband Morgan moved to Brisbane late last year after hearing about AEIOU from a work colleague based in Tasmania. “They moved here about the same time we did, so their child could attend as well.” Geoffrey had been diagnosed in May last year. Like the Mortons, the Storeys had become frustrated at the lack of services available to their son. They tried various centres and private specialists, eventually becoming convinced an EIP was Geoffrey’s best chance to bloom. When Anne was diagnosed in December, they became determined to find a place that would take both their children. “Like all kids, my two are profoundly different,” Storey says. “Geoffrey’s autism made him more introverted, Anne’s was more temper tantrums, but they have both come so far since being here. In Geoffrey, it’s his happiness – he’s so excited to be alive, and his speech has improved dramatically. After just a couple of weeks here Anne knew the alphabet, she knew how to count, her verbal communication improved dramatically.”

Like most AEIOU parents, Storey hopes her children will one day attend a mainstream school. Lisa Driessen felt the same, and she believes the centre offered her son the best chance. “Putting it bluntly, one day I won’t be here to help Isaac, so I am trying as hard as I can to equip him to handle life with autism.”

Thanks to the Mortons, she says, “he now has the skills to be in a mainstream school, to sit next to and work with and play with kids his age ... Maybe when I’m gone the world won’t be such a scary place for him.”

AFTER ALL HIS PARENTS’ HARD WORK, ANDY Morton attended the AEIOU at Moorooka for four months. By the time the centre was up and running, it was almost time for him to start at Sunnybank State School, which has a Special Education Development Unit.

Andy, who has a 12-year-old sister Annabelle and a younger brother Nick, 9, is now ten years old and in Grade Five at Sunnybank. “Intellectually he does struggle at school and will always,” James says, “but his language has improved dramatically. He may be different, but then again, so are all kids. We’ve learned to accept his differences and just enjoy Andy for the beautiful, happy, loving and sometimes very funny little fellow he is.”

The Mortons knew when they started building that first centre their own son would receive minimal benefit from it. But, says James, it didn’t matter. He smiles the smile of a man who has the very rare privilege of knowing he has walked this Earth and done his bit.

“We didn’t do this just for Andy,” he says. “We did it for all the Andys.” ■