

DISABLED

to

Drum



Drum Therapist Uses Personal Experience to Help Others

BY CHERIE YURCO



■ From watching Pat Gesualdo teach drumming or play drums with his band, Iceland, you would never guess that he was so severely disabled as a child that he had difficulty walking correctly, and in fact, was initially diagnosed with cerebral palsy. When he was nine years old, around the same time that he was finally properly diagnosed as being severely dyslexic, he fell head over heels for drumming.

Progress was slow. The drum instructors didn't understand his disability, which made drumming especially challenging for him, but Gesualdo was determined to learn.

"It took me years and years to be able to develop the coordination to even play a simple beat," he explains. "I had to practice three to four hours every day just to coordinate my right hand and my left hand. For example, with the song 'Kashmir' by Led Zeppelin, it took me one year to coordinate my left hand on the hi-hat and my left foot on the bass drum to come down together in order to do the very first beat."

By a combination of pure determination and his own adaptations to traditional drum instruction, Gesualdo eventually excelled in drumming. And, as his drumming skill improved, he noticed his abilities in other areas of his life improving and he slowly, but totally, overcame his disability.

"By the time I graduated high school I had completely beaten my disability and I made the honor roll," says Gesualdo. "I was the only kid in the district to go from completely special education to completely mainstream."

Recalling a few special teachers who made a difference in his life, Gesualdo decided to study music education in college, and upon graduation, he became a top-notch professional drummer and drum instructor.

Then, something unexpected started to happen. Out of the roughly 100 students he taught each week, he saw more and more children with special needs. Apparently, through word of mouth, he had become the "special needs" drum instructor.

"I personally understand what these kids, and even adults, are going through," he says. "I know what it's like to have a disability. I know the frustration that these kids have."

Gesualdo clearly saw a chain reaction: special drumming methodologies led to success in drumming, which in turn led to success and dramatic improvement in other areas of life, from social skills to physical coordination to overcoming learning difficulties.

He decided to conduct a study to document these results. Working with a professor from Rutgers University, Gesualdo

chronicled dramatic improvements in the children he taught and the results were reported in numerous music magazines and journals.

“Back in the day, I didn’t realize that what I was doing would become known as drum therapy,” he explains. “I was a pioneer in the modalities of drum therapy, which actually helps to develop retention and coordination by retraining the synapse in the brain.”

Following the study, Gesualdo was determined to help as many people as he could. He founded the organization Drums and Disabilities (DAD) (dadprogram.org) and approached New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg with the intention of addressing the needs of city children with a variety of disabilities, including autism, dyslexia, and ADD, among others.

“I wanted the DAD program to be everything that I would want as a kid with special needs and everything I would have wanted my parents to have as resources,” says Gesualdo, who soon began teaching the city children, training the teachers, and offering resources to parents.

Since those early days, DAD has spread around the world, with Gesualdo training teachers from Bosnia to New Zealand, in hospitals, schools, and rehabilitation and community centers.

When asked about the most rewarding part of DAD, Gesualdo points to one-on-one sessions where he makes a real difference in peoples’ lives, like a 56-year-old nonverbal man who learned to count and coordinate his left and right hands after just three months’ training, and a 16-year-old boy whose mom saw him sing for the first time ever, thanks to DAD.

“There are a lot of tears in this program,” Gesualdo says happily.

As busy as he is with DAD, Gesualdo still finds time for playing music. He hopes through the instrumental metal band Iceland, he will help spread his message of encouragement: “Hey, here’s what I can do and this is what you can do too, with a little bit of hard work and determination.” He tells students, “You are always going to hear people tell you things about yourself that you don’t like, but just keep moving ahead with it.”

He also plans to reach more people through a new book and CD set, *Drum Therapy* (Alfred, 2010) designed to help drum instructors, as well as parents, teach drumming to students with special needs.

TO CONTACT **PAT GESUALDO** OR FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT DRUMS AND DISABILITIES WRITE TO INFO@DADPROGRAM.ORG.

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