



Can-do kid teaches 'I can'

"Everyone's brain is like a light bulb, and everyone's brain works. They all need wires to help them work properly, but some bulbs are wired differently than others - no better, no worse, just different - but they still work."

The explanation sounds simple. But to a 7-year-old with a learning disability, it offers a light bulb moment - the moment of intuitive understanding that 'I'm all right. I may learn differently, but I do learn.'

JMU sophomore Leigh Buckley uses this story to describe learning disabilities to the children that she tutors. Buckley, from Farmington, Conn., understands the loneliness and frustration that they feel. She suffered the same anguish as a child.

And that's why she's working to shatter the long-held stigma of learning disabilities.

This enterprising sophomore is the brains behind JMU's successful Learning Leaders Program, which pairs JMU students with learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder to local elementary schoolchildren with similar learning disabilities. Each semester about 25 JMU students mentor 25 elementary school students one hour or more a week. The program is administered by Sherrita Pender, a graduate student in psychology, and supervised by professors Esther Minskoff and Nancy Glomb under the auspices of the JMU School of Psychology's Human Development Center.

Special education professor Esther Minskoff is president of the Division for Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children and the author of TRACC Workplace Social Skills Program. She has published articles in the Journal of Learning Disabilities and LD Research and has contributed chapters to books on adults with learning disabilities.

JMU's Learning Leaders program is tailored after a similar mentoring program at Brown University - Project Eye to Eye. The program is based on the research of Jonathon Mooney (Ph.D.), whom Leigh Buckley ('04) met at a Learning Disabilities Association of America national conference. "I'd love to do what he does," she says, "travel around and talk about overcoming learning disabilities. He reaches so many people. But, I'm only 19. I've got time."

In 2001, Buckley pitched her Learning Leaders idea to the board of JMU's Baird Center to overwhelming acceptance. Director of the Office of Disability Services Lou Hendrick was contacted to see if students registered with the office would be interested in the program. The next semester, Learning Leaders was up and running.

Elementary school students join the Learning Leaders Program through referrals from those utilizing the clinics of JMU's Human Development Center, or from references from school officials, agencies like Harrisonburg Pediatrics and local psychologists. The HDC has several clinics, including the Shenandoah Valley Child Development Clinic, the Parent Support Group and the Infant Development Program, where JMU provides a range of training, service and research opportunities related to the delivery of mental health, health and education services.

Minskoff says, "We've had extremely positive feedback from the parents of children involved in the program, as well as from JMU students. The children's grades have improved, and our JMU students are

learning real teaching skills."

Once a week, Buckley works with Trisha, a second-grade student, who struggles with written expression. "We do lots of fun exercises like math problems in chalk on the blacktop," says Buckley. "Fun exercises keep children more interested in lessons. To learn spelling words, sometimes I get a student to copy the words, draw a picture for each word, or have the child say the letters before spelling them out on paper. Then she gets a 100, and her self-esteem just soars. It's all in making a connection to each child and finding what helps them learn."

Buckley has that special creative gift that makes a good teacher. One of her favorite lessons is letting Trisha choose two stickers from a big bag and then writing a story about each sticker. "It's a more visual lesson, and I've found that that is how Trisha learns best. It's all in investing time and patience."

Some children need more academic attention and others need more of an emotional connection. The Learning Leaders convene monthly to talk about mentorship methods and what's working and what's not. They also call on professors and refer to texts like *The Don't-Give-Up Kid* and *Learning Outside the Lines*. "Once you get a talking point or a special connection with a child it's easier to find ways to help them learn," Buckley says.

If a JMU Learning Leader has a problem with his or her mentorship, the graduate assistant can observe sessions and offer solutions. This creates a learning community for the elementary, undergraduate and graduate students. The graduate assistant also contacts parents, helps with mentorship pairings, deals with elementary school officials and answers Learning Leaders questions.

Learning Leader Adrienne Gonzalo ('03) is an ISAT major who works with Zachary, a 3rd grader. "When we started the Learning Leaders program, I wasn't sure if college-age students could do anything to make a difference in the lives of young children," she says. "After meeting with Zach for three semesters, I can see how effective spending just an hour a week has been on his progress. This has been one of my most rewarding experiences."

Buckley concurs. "The main reason that I wanted to start this program is that I felt alone," she says. "As a child I felt broken, and I didn't think anyone like me existed. I want young kids to know that they're not alone. They can see us, Learning Leaders, who are just like them, being successful in college."

Buckley's successes have come at lightning speed thus far, according to Minskoff. "Leigh has such talents and creativity and this program funnels those positive energies. Leigh and Sherrita, our graduate assistant, performed like experienced professionals in their presentation at the 2002 Learning Disabilities Association of America national conference in Denver."

Buckley is majoring in interdisciplinary liberal studies, a five-year program from which she will graduate with an undergraduate degree in ILS and a master's degree in special education. But this Learning Leader isn't limiting herself. "As much as I want to teach and help find academic solutions, I'm also interested in researching the emotional side of learning disabilities - how they effect a student's self-esteem and self image. I want to study that in depth," she says.

"Growing up with the LD label, you get your feelings hurt when you get picked on by other kids. You feel like you always have to always prove yourself. It's frustrating."

That frustration is another obstacle Buckley wants to shatter. After speaking at the 2002 Council for Exceptional Children's national conference in New York, Buckley was approached by the mother of a son with a learning disability. The mother thanked her and asked for a copy of her presentation. Buckley did more than offer the paper, she spent the entire afternoon with the young boy giving him hope and reassurance.

"I just want to spend personal time with each kid I meet," she says. "I want to tell them that I was in their shoes. I want them to realize that they can do anything."

That 'can do' attitude may as well be tattooed on Buckley's forehead. She's already brainstorming a second program for children. "I have an idea for in-school seminars for children," she says. "Students and professionals in our field have conferences and seminars all the time, but I think it would be a good experience to bring children with LDs together and speak to them and let them ask questions. They could see successful students and professionals who have overcome the same obstacles they are facing."

No doubt Buckley will have the Baird Center behind this program soon. She's already impressed the philanthropists behind the center, Alvin V. Baird Jr., who with his wife, Nancy Chappellear Baird ('40), gave JMU its largest gift - \$1.5 million for the Attention and Learning Disabilities Center. Baird, who turns 86 in October 2002, suffers from a learning disability affecting analytical reasoning. He was in college before any studies were done on learning disabilities. "I donated this money to help children with ailments similar to mine," he says. "I had a time with math, and teachers just didn't understand back then."

Thanks to young sparks like Leigh Buckley, future teachers will do more than understand. They'll teach 'I can,' regardless of the obstacles.

Story by Michelle Hite ('88)

Photo by Diane Elliott ('00)