

PERSPECTIVES

Malcom's Tiles

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In this issue, Perspectives is showcasing Malcolm, Dr. Corley's son, and his very original and interesting tile painting business. Through the interview with Dr. Corley, we follow Malcolm's steps that led him to a place where he developed the skill sets necessary to create and successfully operate such a unique business that represents one of his passions.

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Franca: Dr. Maria Thompson Corley describes Malcolm, her 16-year-old son who was diagnosed with autism, as a sweet, funny, friendly, loving young man. She is also quick to add that, "although his challenges are great, his gifts far outnumber them."

Dr. Corley: Thirteen years ago, at the age of three, Malcolm received the diagnosis of PDD-NOS. His particular individual aspects of this condition dictate that expressive language is difficult, although receptive is very good. Malcolm reads fluently, but answers questions best in multiple choice format. He is given to self-talk, typically reciting passages from his favorite videos. He often stims with his hands, or through happy, high-pitched squeals. He demonstrates some proficiency at self-care tasks, but almost always needs a prompt.

Franca: How much involvement did you personally have in Malcolm's development and his love for the arts?

Dr. Corley: I have always exposed my children to music, even in utero, because of my love of music as a classical pianist. I taught Malcolm piano for a while, took him to violin lessons and



music therapy. He still takes voice lessons, and sings occasionally in church (he auditioned for and got into the high school variety show and will be singing Can You Feel the Love Tonight!). He plays the drums in church sometimes and after his dad told me how much he enjoyed playing the video game Rock Band, I sent him for lessons. He is exposed to and hears rehearsals and piano lessons at my house so basically he has to go out of his way to escape music! As for the visual arts, when he was very small — perhaps as young as three or maybe even younger — he drew things that I came to recognize as the clues he'd seen on the tv show Blues Clues, and I would draw things for him to color by number. He also drew some of

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the Dr. Seuss characters so many times, he can still do them from memory (Aunt Annie's Alligator, for example).

As far as Malcolm's behaviors, I had to get to a point where I really believed he could control his meltdowns. It was very stressful, because I wasn't always sure I could get him to stop his temper tantrums. At a younger age, when frustrated, he would scream repeatedly - not just at me, but also at his sister, and sometimes in class. He would also throw objects and trash his room. So, I decided to use a firm approach: using a no-nonsense voice, standing my ground even if he was really pushing the limits, I would say, and still do, "if you want that, you need to do this." He could trash his room, scream, whatever, but he had to clean it up. He was smaller then--now he's 6 feet tall, so I'm glad I nipped that in the bud! And, of course, he would also get hugs after he cleaned.



Because Malcolm had difficulty speaking to express the reason for his anger, I would offer him what my best guesses were as to what I thought he was angry about and thus give him the opportunity to let me know the source of his anger or frustration. I want to add that all children are different, so I'm not suggesting that my strategies would work for everyone. This was my attempt at not letting his bad behaviors overshadow his good nature and talents.

Franca: Your dedication and perseverance are commendable! As you say, let's focus on Malcolm's strengths. I'm assuming that the idea of starting a business of decorating tiles for Malcolm started from his love of the visual arts.

Dr. Corley: Yes, it did. Malcolm started decorating tiles in 9th grade, at the request of his learning support teacher. His creations, often custom made, were relatively simple cartoons which were very popular when sold at local bazaars to benefit the classroom. I mentioned to a friend that I thought it would be nice if he could create tiles for his own benefit. Having seen examples of his artwork, she expressed an interest in buying five of them, promising to supply designs later. Prior to all this coming to pass, his grandmother commissioned him to decorate tiles with Celtic crosses as souvenirs for her friends back in Canada. We found a public domain Celtic cross on the Internet and he customized the

color schemes. His attention to detail and amazing fine-motor control are the key factors. What he does freehand is astounding. I know because I tried to touch up a spot where the marker had skipped a bit, and had to call him in to repair the damage I made! Soon after, his aunt created a website for him (www.malcolmstiles.com) and his fledgling business was launched.

Franca: So, does this mean that because he loves drawing so much he is self-motivated to decorate tiles as his primary daily activity?

Dr. Corley: Malcolm loves art, but, like many of us, he needs a strong incentive to work hard. For the moment, the driving force behind his mini-business is his desire to earn money to travel to an amusement park in Amsterdam he'd seen on Youtube, Julianatoren. Malcolm loves amusement parks, but there's something about this one that fascinates him to the point of near-obsession. I'm grateful for his focus. However seemingly trivial a trip to an amusement park may seem, in the process, he is learning about bank accounts, delayed

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gratification, and being an entrepreneur - the latter a stretch for me, too. Together we are growing.

Franca: Has Malcolm had any form of therapy or has he received any services that you think have been crucial in his development? If so, which ones and how?

Dr. Corley: Malcolm started receiving ABA in preschool and he's had a number of wonderful Therapeutic Support Staff and Behavioral Specialist Consultants. He has had speech therapy since he was three and used to have OT mainly for self-care. I always made sure Malcolm spent at least part of the day with neurotypical children. His progress has been gradual. I think the biggest breakthrough came when there was a family emergency and a friend had to watch him. She discovered how much Malcolm wanted to be told he was a good boy. The discovery of his desire to be praised has made a huge difference in motivating him. Alternatively, he can always be reinforced with the promise of McDonald's french fries - I wish broccoli did the job!!

Franca: Do you have any advice for other parents/caregivers of young adults with autism who are thinking about their future?

Dr. Corley: My foremost advice is find out what your child is interested in. I always try to let Malcolm do the things that interest him. I also don't assume he can't do something until he's tried. There are so many things he COULD do, but I don't have the time or skills to explore all of

them. It's just a matter of finding people interested in giving him a chance, and there are more of those out there than one might think. My son is very loving and even-tempered, but he used to have meltdowns. I have no way of knowing if his creative outlets have helped him in this regard, but I suspect that they have. What surprises me is that people are impressed that I do my best to find outlets for Malcolm. I say, "Why wouldn't I?" So, my second piece of advice to parents is focus on your child's strengths. For me, the most important part of all of this is finding a way to validate Malcolm's gifts, even in a world where academic-based pursuits are the Holy Grail. It is my hope and prayer that even though artistic fields are an uncertain way to earn an income (something that, as a musician, I know first-hand), Malcolm's art may provide a key to a future for him doing something he truly loves.

I don't want to pretend I have it all figured out — I have very real concerns about how he will get along after I'm gone and I pray with him and for him every day. Nothing about this journey is easy. But there's nothing better than seeing my son wanting to do his very best, and then doing it.

Franca: Thank you, Dr. Corley, for sharing your very personal experiences regarding Malcolm's journey to become the young man he is today and the unique business he has created. To learn more about Malcolm's Tiles, go to <http://malcolmstiles.com>.

Dr. Maria Thompson Corley lives in Pennsylvania with Malcolm and his sister, Kiana.

