

# Qigong (Chee-gong) Sensory Training shows promise, provides relief

*Spirit Mountain Community Fund dollars aid research into alleviating effects of autism*

**Editor's note:** This is the second in a monthly series of stories in 2008 by Smoke Signals that will showcase the real-life effects of Spirit Mountain Community Fund donations. Since its inception in 1997, the Community Fund, the philanthropic arm of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, has donated more than \$40 million to groups in 11 western Oregon counties. These stories focus on the good work those generous Tribal dollars do within nearby communities and the effect they have on people and programs.

By Ron Karten

*Smoke Signals staff writer*

Bryar Eames is 6 years old.

Until he started kindergarten last year, his parents did not have a clue that something might be amiss. Then, his kindergarten teacher reported that he exhibited some of the hallmarks of autism.

"He was comfortable at home," says his mother, Shelli Eames, during a recent Qigong (pronounced chee-gong) massage session for her son at the Qigong Sensory Training Institute in Salem.

The institute houses the work of Dr. Louisa M. T. Silva, who has a master's of public health, in Salem. She is a visiting professor at the Teaching Research Institute of Western Oregon University in Monmouth and a specialist in Chinese medicine.

"He didn't fit the norm (for an autistic child)," Shelli says. As a mother, Shelli earned a bachelor's degree in child and family studies, and has studied autism as part of those studies, so it wasn't like the signs were there and she missed them.

Still, Bryar did have the emotional meltdowns characteristic of autism, along with other characteristics, including weak muscles and poor motor skills. Beyond that, like most children with autism, he was not predisposed to enjoy being touched.

"All the children have sensory problems," Silva says. "Many don't feel pain when they cut themselves or bang their heads against the wall. For others, even light touch seems painful."

The discomfort with touch is what makes the disease so discouraging to parents. It often rules out hugging and pats on the back that most of us enjoy both giving and receiving, and that often serve as an important link for appreciating social interactions.

"Parents are pretty down about this," Silva says. "In the press, they learn that autism might be genetic, that the condition is lifelong."

Children are usually diagnosed in the first three years of life as they fail to develop language and social skills, and exhibit severe sensory and behavioral difficulties, according to the Autism Society of America Web site.

Autism is a complex developmental disability that comes without a known cause and proceeds without a known cure. It is a difficult disease that is often painful for patients and exhausting for parents.

Enter Qigong, one leg of the three-legged stool that has made up Chinese medicine for centuries. Qigong includes a set of techniques that aims to clear "energy channels" in the body. Its history dates back 5,000 years, Silva says.

Three thousand years ago, the Chinese added acupuncture to their medical offerings. Acupuncture uses the same energy channels; only acupuncture inserts small needles at appropriate places within the channels.

And from time immemorial, the Chinese have used herbs for healing.

Qigong has been used to strengthen the body against cancer and osteoporosis, and to help improve strength and longevity, Silva says.

Today, Silva's research, funded by the Spirit Mountain Community Fund, is helping to ease the trauma of autism felt by the Eames family, among many in the area.

The Spirit Mountain Community Fund has taken on support of this small, promising therapy and has funded two \$30,000 studies that are showing the way to make life better for both patients and parents.

The first study showed that professional Qigong Sensory Training works. That is, it reduces "sensory and system impairments," and, at the same time, it enables patients to "fill in" missing motor and living skills, and improve their language, social and cognitive skills, according to the Community Fund report.

"Statistical analyses showed that many of the desired changes were significant," said a Community Fund report.

The second study showed that the techniques can be taught so that professionals, such as early intervention specialists, physical therapists and occupational therapists, can use the therapy successfully, and parents can as well.

Unlike many therapies that are themselves toxic, Qigong Sensory Training uses massage.

Because autistic children resist touching and other sensory information, it can take time for a young person with autism to accept the massage therapy, but in Salem recently young Bryar had made his peace as massage and occupational therapist Linda Poling lightly worked over his arms and hands, his back and legs.

He was patient, if seemingly a little oblivious to the purpose of the massage, and engaged with the



Photo by Ron Karten

**Therapist Linda Poling massages 6-year-old Bryar Eames during a recent Qigong Sensory Training session in Salem. The therapy, funded by Spirit Mountain Community Fund, is making inroads with helping autistic children develop. In background, Bryar's mother, Shelli (sitting) and Dr. Louisa M.T. Silva watch the massage session.**

camera as it recorded him again and again.

The results have been remarkable, according to Silva and Shelli, going beyond improvements in muscle control and strength. Bryar also has become a less picky eater and a better writer.

"When he started," Shelli says, "his poop was bright green."

"That indicated toxins in the body," says therapist Poling.

"At first, we thought it was what he was eating, maybe too many fruit snacks," says Shelli.

Right after starting the Qigong massage, however, Bryar's constipation cleared.

Continuing success reflects two Community Fund projects that have gone well.

"It actually works," says Shelli, who also massages Bryar in the evenings at bedtime. "Seeing is believing."

"Parents want to be involved in their child's treatment," says Silva, "and this is a powerful tool."

"Many parents come to us in a state of exhaustion without much hope for the future of their child. Very little hope is offered with autism."

This research is "the first of its kind in the western world," says Sil-

va. "I don't know if Spirit Mountain knows what they've unleashed."

"He's actually making a face with pictures," Shelli says. "He's writing like a 4-year-old, but that's OK with me — five months ago, he wasn't writing at all."

Signs of progress include Bryar's ability now to sit in a chair and to squat. "He was weak all over. He's not weak anymore," Shelli says.

The Qigong also helped in "the finger dexterity area," Shelli says.

"I want to go home," says Bryar.

Silva moved forward with the study because, as a public health physician, she was looking for "the most effective, least invasive, least expensive method to address this problem."

"Autistic kids have parents and early intervention programs to work with," Silva says, "so we're using the two best resources that every (autistic) child has."

Although children with autism do not often play "pretend," Bryar has started.

Asked about the Qigong, he says that he wants to go to Hawaii and see "the hula dancers, coconuts, go on a plane," and he's got the pretend plane in his hand and together they fly out of the massage room for new adventures. ■