

## Son's Challenges Lead Mom to New Calling



For Kristel Thomas, getting to know her son Louie has been a journey. Noticing that he wasn't reaching developmental milestones like his older brothers did, Thomas brought her concerns to the attention of her son's pediatrician when Louie was a year old.

Perhaps because Louie was her third child, she sensed early on that something was amiss, said Thomas, a Plain Township resident. He didn't engage with her or mirror her expressions like babies typically do. His gross motor skills were also delayed, she said.

The pediatrician referred Louie, now 11, to a neurologist at Akron Children's Hospital for further evaluation. After several tests and blood work, Thomas learned that Louie's issues were not genetic, nor were they metabolic. They began years of therapy – physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy – as Thomas watched her son struggle with language delay, sensory-processing difficulties and social and behavioral

challenges.

"It was a tough couple of years," Thomas said. "We didn't go out to eat (as a family) ever. We didn't go on vacation... We isolated ourselves from the rest of the world."

Thomas enrolled him in a preschool, which had wonderful staff. But Louie needed more support. He was evaluated by Plain Local Schools, the Thomas' school district, and he was placed in a cross-categorical program with children with a variety of disabilities.

"They did an amazing job, but he needed full-time attention getting him through the day," she said. He was assigned a full-time aide during the school day.

Despite the school's efforts, Thomas said Louie wasn't progressing developmentally. He was emotionally reactive and couldn't regulate sensory information. Fire drills and loud noises made him anxious. He experienced meltdowns and couldn't communicate his needs.

Thomas immersed herself in reading, trying to figure out the connection between his emotional and physical challenges and seeking alternative options to having her son live a life on medication. When she came across "Disconnected Kids" by Robert Melillo, D.C., founder of Brain Balance Achievement Centers, she said she had an epiphany.

"For the first time, here are how all those things were connected," she said.

She decided to further investigate the centers, telling her husband Greg, "I feel in my heart, I don't know why, but this is really going to help him."

His response, she said, was "If it helps him 20 percent, then I will consider it well worth it."

In May 2010, Thomas packed up Louie, then 7, and her youngest son Gregory, then 4, and moved temporarily to Georgia to enroll Louie in Brain Balance, a supplemental learning program, near Atlanta for three months, while her husband remained at home with their two older sons, John and Bobby. She told the center staff, "I am here 100 percent to do what you tell me."

She was told he would benefit from having no screen time. That meant no television, no computer games and no hand-held games. Louie spent one hour three days a week working with the center's staff. Thomas also spent nine hours a day doing gross motor activities with him.

About six weeks into the program, Thomas noticed a difference. After Gregory had scattered puzzle pieces in the living room of their rented apartment, Thomas laughed as she asked her youngest son what he was doing. Then she noticed Louie's face.

"Louie had an expression on his face," she said. "His eyes were wide. He mimicked my expression. Then he laughed."

That was just the beginning, she said. His running changed; his physical coordination improved and then his language just took off.

"He's 7, and he's talking like a 3-year-old, but he was talking," she said.

Thomas was impressed with the progress Louie had made over the summer and began to think about opening a Brain Balance Achievement Center close to home so she could help families in similar situations.

"I thought, 'this is it for him, and it could be it for other kids,'" she said.

Thomas met with Dr. Melillo to discuss expanding operations to Canton, and in March 2011, Thomas opened her own Brain Balance Center on Hills and Dales Road.

According to Thomas, the center provides supplemental learning to children who have been diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette syndrome and Asperger syndrome and well as children on the "high functioning" autism spectrum.

The center in Canton usually has between 30 and 40 students enrolled in the program at a time, with several students coming from the Cleveland area. Thomas said students work with sensory-motor coaches and cognitive coaches while at the center and are given exercises to do at home.

The center is a provider for the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship and the Autism Scholarship awarded by the Ohio Department of Education for students who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) from their school district of residence and forego their public education.

As for Louie, he is now fully integrated into a regular classroom at Glenwood Intermediate School where he is excelling both socially and academically, even earning a spot on the

honor roll. Although he still has an IEP, it is used to give him extra support in written expression and additional time for test taking.

As for Thomas, she is glad to know her son. "For seven years of his life, we didn't know who he was...to just get to know him and peel all that away and know who he is meant to be.

"He's just a happy kid now."

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