

Outstanding achievement

Autistic teen from South Salem finds his niche in klezmer music

By MEIRA MAIEROVITZ DRAZIN

Until five years ago, no one in the Breslin family had heard of klezmer music, never mind heard it played.

That is, until their autistic teenaged son, Jason, joined a klezmer band, composed a klezmer piece, had it performed by his band, and then won the Autism Society's Most Outstanding Individual With Autism award for 2006 based on his incredible accomplishments.

According to Jason, it all started one night last year when he was improvising melodies in the shower:

"This one little melody stuck out and became the opening piece of 'Oy Gevalt,' which was originally supposed to be a working title because I don't know much Yiddish," Jason said.

When he got out of the shower he immediately whistled the melody into his computer. He later transcribed it into sheet music using Finale (a music notation software), eventually arranging the music for different types of instruments.

Klezmer is part of a secular Ashkenazi or Eastern European Jewish musical tradition, largely of dance and celebration songs,



Photo by Alan Weisman

Jason Breslin dreams of being a musician on Broadway.

that began to develop in the 15th century. In the 1970s, there was a huge revival in the United States and Europe that catapulted klezmer back into the mainstream.

Jason showed his composition to Kenny

Green, musical director of Jason's performance group, the Westchester Klezmer Program.

"Kenny agreed to have the whole band play it and I was blown away when I heard

my piece played by the whole band," Jason said.

According to Mindy Hermann, administrator of the Westchester Klezmer Program, "Jason is a very talented musician, but even so, most kids would not write a piece of music, orchestrate it, print it up and hand it out for the band to play."

In fact, this was the first such case.

The Westchester Klezmer Program (www.klezkids.org) was started in 2001 for youth, teens and adults as a forum to expose them to Jewish music and culture and develop as musicians through improvisation, playing by ear and performance. They currently have five bands — two for younger kids starting in grades 5 or 6, one for middle school students and two for high school students and adults with a total of 65 to 70 musicians from 20 synagogues in Westchester.

"Another great story about Jason," said Hermann, "is when he was about to play with his band for a performance, and there was no band leader. There were seven musicians in the group, mostly adults, but no one was willing to step up. So we asked Jason if he would do it and he did. It would have been amazing for any kid in high school to accept the responsibility and to carry it through so

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seamlessly, let alone one with autism.”

Although his main instrument is guitar, Jason also plays ukulele, banjo, harmonica and “sometimes piano and percussion.”

Now 19 years old, he recently graduated from the John Jay Jr. public high school in the Katonah-Lewisboro school district, and has just begun his first semester at Marshall University in West Virginia where he is majoring in music performance.

According to his father, Peter, Jason, the oldest of three sons (each of whom play an instrument), received a toy guitar when he was 3 years old, around the time he was diagnosed with autism, and he loved to play it. So when he was 5 they decided they would get him a real one and see what would happen.

“We’ve found that Jason is at his most focused when he is with his guitar. Put him to perform in front of 1,500 people and it doesn’t faze him at all,” Peter said.

Even before he was diagnosed, Peter and his wife, Liza (a pianist), noticed something was “off” because Jason “could recite entire videos by heart but couldn’t have a conversation.”

Eventually he was diagnosed as being on the high functioning end of autistic. At points he has been labeled with Asperger’s or Pervasive Development Disorder.

When the Breslins, who live in South Salem, first learned of Jason’s diagnosis they felt “shock and despair” as they had to deal with what kind of support Jason would need in terms of doctors, day care and schooling.

“We weren’t sure what he was going to be capable of,” said Peter. “He was originally diagnosed with ADD. He was quite hyperactive and we didn’t know if that would interfere with his development. As it turns out, Jason is quite intelligent and we have also had great support from the school and medical community. A lot of people have touched him over the years.”

According to his father, Jason’s personal challenges are socialization, to some degree speech (sometimes he has trouble finding the right word), organization, paying attention and staying focused (for this reason his parents decided a driver’s license would be a bad idea.)

But he is self-sufficient with guidance and, unlike many others with autism, he is “pretty adaptable to change, although he can still be susceptible to having a tantrum.”

Jason graduated with a regular NY State

regents diploma, “passing all, doing well in some,” and made the honor roll three times in high school. He’s very good at math, music and writing, but challenged when things become more abstract.

And unlike many high school students, he got into first choice of college, Marshall University, where he lives in a dorm by himself. The two main draws at Marshall were a good music program and special support for students with autism.

On his bookshelf stands the plaque he received this summer at a national conference of the Autism Society of America, where he was honored with the Wendy F. Miller Outstanding Individual with Autism award for 2006.

According to Edward M. Shipley, director of Conferences for the Autism Society of America and under whose jurisdiction the awards fall, Jason’s musical talent was one that has never been seen in any submission for this award.

But it was his incredible achievement in creating a musical composition that really spoke to the awards committee.

“Autism has not stopped him from being involved in his Jewish faith or from his musical talent and he helps the general public move beyond any stereotypes by using his talents and skills the way anyone would,” said Shipley.

Even upon accepting the award Jason proved that he is an unflappable performer.

Asked to give a short speech off the cuff, Jason “spoke calmly and with poise in front of 2,000 people,” said Peter.

“When I accepted the award I thanked some people and I thanked my parents for schlepping me to guitar lessons. The word ‘schlep’ got a huge laugh,” recalled Jason. “I wasn’t so nervous to speak in front of people because public speaking isn’t new to me and I have performed several times before. I even enjoyed it and I absolutely love performing music.”

Although he enjoys klezmer and has been involved in other performance groups, including his high school jazz ensemble, Jason said that his real passion is Broadway musicals and that his dream is to be a pit musician.

And as for any more musical compositions?

Right now Jason said that although he has many additional unfinished pieces, he is currently facing a case of “songwriter’s block,” but in the meantime he has started university and “so far so good.”

What is autism?

According to the Autism Society of America Web site (www.autism-society.org), autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in social interaction and communication skills.

Both children and adults with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions and leisure or play activities, but because it is considered a “spectrum

disorder,” it affects each individual differently and at varying degrees.

Autism affects approximately one in 166 births and although it can affect any family, race, ethnicity or socio-economic class, it is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls.

Based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, autism is growing at a rate of 10 to 17 percent per year.

At this rate, the ASA estimates that the prevalence of autism could reach 4 million Americans in the next decade.

Meira Maierovitz Drazin

Gaby’s Real Estate Corner



Top 10 Questions about Co-Ops

- 1 Do you allow sub-leasing?**
That depends on the Co-op. Sub-leasing usually is allowed, it has to be Board approved.
- 2 Do I have to carpet my floors?**
Most Co-ops have an 80% carpet rule.
- 3 How much of a down payment do I need?**
That depends on the Co-op. For the most part, it ranges from 10% to 25%.
- 4 Can I have a washer and dryer?**
Most Co-ops do not allow them.
- 5 Can I have a pet?**
Most Co-ops do not allow dogs at all, and some have restrictions on how much a dog can weigh. Most will allow a cat.
- 6 Do I have to have Board approval?**
In some situations, it may not be necessary. However, most sales are owner sales, in which case you must be approved by the Board.
- 7 Can I buy the unit in my name and have a parent or child live there?**
Not all Co-ops allow this. Ask your real estate agent to find out before you go any further.
- 8 What is the tax deduction?**
You can deduct your interest on your loan for purchasing the unit and you can deduct a portion of your maintenance. The average is between 45% and 55%.
- 9 What are the maintenance fees?**
Make sure you get this information from your agent and while you are asking questions, ask about assessments and if and when the maintenance will go up.
- 10 What is a flip tax?**
Some Co-ops have flip “taxes”. A flip tax is what the seller pays back to the Co-op. As a purchaser, it is important to know what the flip tax is for when you sell the unit.

Buying an apartment in a Co-op is a little different than buying a house or a Condominium. Not all agents know the rules and regulations and pit falls of buying a Co-op. It is important to work with a qualified agent who specializes in this market.

Gaby Weinberger is with Stillman Brokerage, LLC. She has over 20 years of experience in the Condo & Co-op market in Westchester. Ask Gaby anything at gweinberger@stillmanmanagement.com or call her (914) 813-1914.



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