

# LETTING GO

nsa NATIONAL STUTTERING ASSOCIATION

119 W. 40th Street, 14th Floor, New York, NY 10018 :: 800.WeStutter (937.8888) :: 212.944.4050 :: email: info@WeStutter.org :: www.WeStutter.org



## Q&A with Jason Gray

MANDY FINSTAD

*Editor Mandy Finstad was able to catch up with award-winning Christian recording artist and PWS Jason Gray recently and ask him a few questions about life, music, and how his stuttering has affected both.*

**MF :: You've a knack for finding and highlighting strengths within weaknesses; do you think that this comes from growing up as a person who stutters (PWS)?**

**JG ::** You know, over the years I've come to understand that one of the gifts of my speech impediment is that at a very early age it denied me the chance to practice hiding. Around middle school, I think we start perfecting the art of hiding our weaknesses while trying to appear so strong and competent. And over time we get really good at it! But it's a kind of lying that requires we put up a façade that says to the world, "I'm doing fine, my life is just great." But that's a very lonely way to live and isn't healthy for us or for those around us.

In some ways as a stutterer, I didn't have as much opportunity to develop my hiding skills since every time I opened my mouth it was clear that something about me was broken. I couldn't hide it. Make no mistake, I've still (unfortunately) learned to hide other weaknesses along the way, but in general I think having a speech impediment forced me to reckon with my imperfections in a way I might not have otherwise learned. I had to learn how to make peace with it. People commend me all the time for my "transparency" and "authenticity", and I really believe that this is the fruit of growing up a stutterer. Most stutterers I've met, in

fact, have a transparency about them that is refreshing. I think this can be one of the gifts of being a PWS. I think it's also a gift to others around us. The more at ease we become with our imperfections, the more it helps to set others at ease about their own. Our weaknesses can make us a safe place for others to be weak as well.

**MF :: What sort of adversities did you face as a child because of your speech? And as a young adult? Any particular incidents you would like to share?**

**JG ::** I got teased a good bit, but that wasn't the worst of it. For me the internal trauma of the embarrassment and shame was the worst, as well as the frustration of why – no matter how hard I tried – I couldn't talk right. I felt like a fool and it left me with a deep wound of insecurity. As a young man you want so much to be strong and confident, especially when it comes to social things like dating. It's funny to me now, but one of the hardest parts was how it made me feel around girls. It was often humiliating. The other difficulty was that I really had a lot to say but felt I could never say it. In the classroom I always had the desire to participate in discussion, but instead kept quiet, always afraid of being called on.

Ordering a pizza over the phone was an almost insurmountable challenge. Or in

recent years doing call-in radio interviews when a new record is releasing. With long and awkward pauses I'm a deejay's worst nightmare! For many years I would ask my wife to do my talking for me. This often felt emasculating and painful for the both of us. Sometimes I would even get frustrated with her for not saying things the way that I would have said them myself. Our pain often turns to anger and affects everyone around us.

I felt like my fear of stuttering stole my voice from me, and much of my journey has been about reclaiming it. And more than that: understanding that my stuttering gives me a unique voice – one that, because of my weakness, has a unique potential to be heard and bring healing to others.

**MF :: At what point (either what age or after what event) did you assume your positive attitude of acceptance?**

**JG ::** It was gradual, and some days it's easier to hold on to than others. But my faith played a very important role in this. The more I grew in the Christian understanding of the upside down "Kingdom of God" – that Jesus inaugurated in the sermon on the mount with words like, "blessed are the poor in spirit, for the Kingdom of God belongs to them; blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth..." – the more I was able to see my stuttering as something potentially redemptive and beautiful. The Christian notion of weakness as an opportunity – to reveal a deeper strength, to be led to grace, etc. – reshaped my thinking in profound and exciting ways. I began to think that I would move forward in my life and my work not in

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## Message From Our Chair

SHERYL HUNTER

My favorite book is entitled *How Many People Does it Take to Make a Difference?* It is graphically exquisite, with lots of white space, bold colors, and modern design, giving the quotes and stories a museum-quality canvas. I refer to it often to find inspiration, and did so in advance of writing this message to you. On the page I opened lay this quote by Emily Dickinson: "I felt it shelter to speak to you." Another phrase that caught my eye is "You don't have to be a 'person of influence' to be influential." Both embody my emotions surrounding the NSA and my memories of the 2012 conference, held near my home in Tampa, Florida.

Members of the NSA are as different as any other diverse gathering of people, yet we are connected because our life journey includes stuttering. The NSA provides a safe haven of understanding and opportunities to deeply influence the lives of others just

through the process of sharing and experiencing moments together. Like the moment you see your child completely at ease among a group of other kids who stutter, throwing a football in the waves of the Florida Gulf. Or the moment that one Dad tells another that he doesn't have to fix this; he just has to love, support and accept his amazing child and listen to her. We each have moments we can bring to mind that influenced us deeply. You cannot get these moments searching the web alone for information; these moments happen when you seek out supportive environments such as those fostered by the NSA.

Another year of these moments is coming to a close, along with my first year chairing the Board of Directors. I invite you to join me in considering how to be more influential and inspirational. Maybe you have a story to write for the newsletter. Perhaps you can bring a friend along to the 2013 conference. You could call that young woman who came only once



Chair Sheryl Hunter with her family at the 2012 Conference

to the chapter meeting to invite her to come again. We need your time and talents to influence the future of your organization.

We close out 2012 as a strong organization with an eye toward the future. In February the Board of Directors will be meeting to map out short- and long-term plans. We'd like to hear from you about your needs and wishes. The Board is responsible for leading the organization, but it is you that we serve. How can we make the NSA even better in the New Year? You might be the one to make a difference, so let your voice be heard!

Thank you for the moments you have given my family and happy holidays to every single one of you! 

## Giving Thanks

TAMMY FLORES



As 2012 comes to a close and we enter into another holiday season, I give thanks that the National Stuttering Association continues to be the strongest advocacy organization for people who stutter. Once again we cracked the 700+ mark in conference attendance, with unforgettable moments shared by all. A highlight for me was when teen **Garrett McDevitt** compared the support he feels from the NSA to the love of his mother, and then asked his peer **Braden Barber** to come up on stage to be thanked for all his efforts in the stuttering community as Braden embarks on his military career, serving our country and making us proud. These two young men have formed a lifelong bond of understanding and support because of the NSA, and for that, I am thankful.

Among the many other memorable speeches was the one delivered with passion and sincerity by our Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors and Chair Nominating Committee, **Kenny Koroll**. Kenny shared how the

NSA has been his cure and yet is available to us all as long as we help to nurture and sustain our own organization through donations and volunteerism. Then there were the heartfelt words of **Andy Habing** who spoke about his wife, **Jaime**, who has come so far in a short amount of time, blossoming into the woman she was meant to be because she no longer is held back by fear and shame related to her speech. You cannot find these life changing and bonding experiences at any other event. That is why I am proud, honored, and thankful to be able to serve as your Executive Director.

As Kenny so passionately expressed in his speech, the NSA relies upon YOU, the stuttering community, for financial support and help with the work of the NSA. We gratefully acknowledge the individuals and organizations that provided financial support to us in 2012. In these trying times, your financial contributions, large and small, are critical to the fulfillment of our mission and our future as an organization. We simply couldn't do it without you.

Nor could we fulfill our mission without the hundreds of people who volunteer their time and talents. To our volunteers – Board and Committee members, Chapter Leaders

and Regional Coordinators, and those who lend a hand whenever they see a need – thank you! We truly appreciate all you do and we encourage others to experience the gift of giving back.

Our NSA family wouldn't be complete without Speech-Language Pathologists who support us during the year, as well at the Annual Conference. Your commitment to discovering how better to serve people who stutter and their families and to share with us your knowledge makes you invaluable partners.

Finally, to the fathers, mothers, spouses, children, teens, and adults who come to us for support, knowledge, and community, thank you for discovering and spreading the word that *"If you stutter, you're not alone."*

Next year, as our conference returns to Scottsdale, Arizona, we are planning a very special celebration, as 2013 will be the 30th anniversary of the National Stuttering Association's conference. It's a huge birthday party, and everyone is invited; it doesn't matter whether you've attended one, or all, whether you're 10 or 90. Our theme will be all about YOU. Together we will give thanks for a lifetime of extraordinary stuttering, and I hope I'll see you there!

Happy Holidays to you and your loved ones, and thank you!

# MONEY MATTERS

BILL SMITH



We call this article “Money Matters” because it **does**. Money enables the NSA to help people who stutter: through our life-changing Annual Conference, our outreach

to families and teens, our website, and even this issue of LETTING GO. Yet we still reach only a small percentage of people who stutter. The stronger we are as an organization, the more we can expand our outreach to let people who stutter know that *We Are Not Alone!*

The NSA continues on a sound financial basis in the wake of a successful 2012 Annual Conference in St. Petersburg, Florida, and an even larger conference in Fort Worth in 2011. We continue to receive “restricted fund” donations that are mainly used to provide financial assistance to our members and their families who would otherwise not be able to attend our Annual Conferences, providing an extra opportunity to participate in this very special experience.

One measure of the NSA’s sound management is that only 45% of our expense dollars go for fundraising – much less than most non-profit, charitable organizations spend. Nearly 90% of our budget goes toward program services that directly benefit people who stutter and their families – including the Annual Conference and workshops, administration of our more than 100 local chapters, publications like LETTING GO and FAMILY VOICES, our brochures for teachers and educators on childhood stuttering, our website and Facebook pages, and of course, the expense of the personnel who deliver these services. The remaining 6% is categorized as administrative, routine expenses necessary to maintain our efficient organization. Member support helps the NSA to stretch our dollars. As examples, our office space in New York is donated and several hundred volunteers donate their time to our chapters, workshops, and national conference.

Although we receive a few corporate and foundation grants, most of the NSA’s cash support comes from member contributions. If you believe in the NSA’s mission, and especially if you benefit from our programs,

we hope that you will contribute. There are so many ways to do so – we particularly encourage signing up for our **Support Beyond Words** program, where each month an amount you select is donated to NSA through your credit card. I do this, and I can vouch for it as a painless and efficient way to support your favorite charity. This method of support is particularly beneficial to the NSA because a reliable income flow helps us meet our monthly expenses. Please refer to our website for details.

We also have the ability to receive donations of stock – transferring stock which has appreciated in value over the years is very likely your most tax-efficient method of supporting the NSA – and we urge you to consider this form of support. And, while nobody likes to think about it, we would be honored if you could consider the NSA in your estate planning process. We welcome inquires at the NSA office in New York regarding the various ways to support NSA, as well as any requests for additional financial information.

As you can see, we do a lot with relatively little. With additional support we could expand our programs to reach even more people who stutter, so please consider making a donation of any amount now! So easy to do – just visit our website and click on “Donate Now.” It feels good! 🍷

*Bill Smith, a NSA member since 2000, has been a board member and treasurer since 2005. He lives in Riverwoods, Illinois, and is a member of the Chicago Metro North chapter.*



The National Stuttering Association wishes to congratulate **Cathy Olish** and **Ron Maciejewski** on their engagement! Cathy is

a proud native of Michigan and enthusiastic member of the one of the most active NSA chapters, Royal Oak, and is a human resources representative for Ford Motor Co. in Dearborn.

The NSA would also like to congratulate **David Resnick** on his recent marriage to **Dana Friedman**. David and Dana were married on September 2nd in Charleston, SC. They met in NYC just weeks after David attended his first NSA chapter meeting and posted to his online dating profile that he is a person who stutters. Currently living in Los Angeles,



the Resnicks are looking forward to attending the 2013 conference in Scottsdale together! Congratulations, David and Dana!

*(Photo by Corey Brown, Tumbleston Photography)*

Congratulations also to **Justin Matley** and **Erin Fitting** who celebrated their wedding recently. The NSA wishes them the best in their new life together!

Out of thousands of charities across the nation, the National Stuttering Association was chosen to take part in the 2012 **Chase Community Giving** program, which grants \$5 million to over 195 local charities. Thanks to all of your votes, the NSA qualified for a Chase Community Giving grant of \$10K! A sincere ‘thank you’ to all who voted and passed the message along to others. Our votes – and voices – were heard!

# Thanks!

# CHAPTER NEWS

DAVID BLAZINA

## Central NJ

**Hannah Laday** reports that after taking July and August off the Central NJ Chapter resumed regular meetings with six PWS and one mother in attendance. **Bryan** is new to meetings but he has already attended two conferences. He talked about reconnecting and deepening friendships with PWS he met in Fort Worth and St. Petersburg. They also talked about his efforts to keep expanding his comfort zones in the new school year. The group is thrilled to have Bryan as a new member.

**Bill** talked about his first time attending a conference in St. Petersburg. He gained so much from it that he has already booked his room in Scottsdale! Bill is really taking advantage of so much that the NSA has brought to him and is using it in his life every day. He frequently refers to **Bill Wade's** presentation and has taken on new speaking opportunities, not to mention being a very regular member of the Central NJ Chapter.

The group each did a general check-in since it had been a while since they last met. Some of the topics touched on were anticipatory anxiety, letting go of regrets, and time pressure.

On Monday, Sept. 10th, several members spoke to two SLP graduate classes at Kean. In one class, **George, Hannah, Bill, Clydette, Lesa, and John** spoke. This was the first time doing this for everyone except Hannah and George. In another class the speakers were George, Hannah, Bill, Lesa, and **Leslie**. Based on the e-mails Hannah later received, this was a great experience for everyone.

On Friday, Sept. 14th, several adult PWS from various corners of NJ and Staten Island presented on a career panel for the TWST Chapter. She's thrilled that people stepped up for this event and feels that a wide variety of careers were represented. You can read more about it as she will be posting a report on the Family Chapters' Facebook group.

## Twin Cities, MN

The Twin Cities chapter of the NSA met on Thursday, 9/13, at Bethlehem Baptist Church in downtown Minneapolis. **Linda Hinder-scheit** writes that it was their first regular meeting after a summer with more informal

social outings in June and July and no meeting in August. It was a gorgeous evening, and Minnesotans are known to use those to get outside and 'play while the playing is good' (especially as the days start getting shorter), so they didn't have a large group. There were three co-leaders present (two of whom stutter), three other people who stutter, and three SLP grad students from the U of M. The group used the time to catch up with one another and then to have a discussion about difficult situations and the variability of stuttering. Some members talked about strategies that have worked for them to be more aware of their speech, less judgmental about their speech, and evolving into more effective communicators. The concept of "mindfulness" and how that might be useful when dealing with stuttering in one's life was discussed.

## Madison, WI

**Gloria Klumb** reported that eight people attend their recent meeting, and that it was 'AWESOME! Just Awesome!' Participants included **Matt, Ken, Keith, Erin** and Gloria, as well as three new people (a first to have so many!). **Kayla** (17) and her mom **Trisha** came for the first time, as well as an SLP (**Laura**) from the Madison area. All three found the chapter through the internet and the group was happy to welcome them.

Each of the first timers had a chance to talk. Kayla came because she wanted to meet others who stutter and get some ideas of how to deal with the teasing that she gets in school. She also shared that she hopes to go to college to become an SLP and specialize in stuttering. Her mom blames herself about Kayla feeling so alone. We talked about 'being ready' for support, and that when they found us, the time was right for them.

Laura would like to become Board Certified and talked about traveling to the west coast and taking a course at Washington State. She has spoken with **Erin Dyer** and **Deb Ostman** and is very excited to learn more about stuttering.

Each of our first timers received a first timer's packet including NSA pamphlets, a pen, and a "Stutter Like a Rock Star" bracelet. Something so simple just made their day – they loved them.

In other news, the Madison chapter has been invited to speak at a UW Madison SLP class this month. All of our new people, plus a few other members, have agreed to go.

The group is also hoping that Madison will have a great showing of Wisconsin Cheese Heads at the 2013 Conference.

## Houston, TX

The Houston chapter held their latest meeting with three in attendance - **Charlie, Christian, and Vicki**. Despite the modest turnout, they all felt that it was a very good meeting and that they got a lot out of it. Charlie read the *Welcoming Words* and then Vicki passed out copies of this list:

### 15 Things You Should Give Up to be Happy

1. Give up your need to always be right.
2. Give up your need for control.
3. Give up on blame.
4. Give up your self-defeating self-talk.
5. Give up your limiting beliefs.
6. Give up complaining.
7. Give up the luxury of criticism.
8. Give up your need to impress others.
9. Give up your resistance to change.
10. Give up labels.
11. Give up on your fears.
12. Give up your excuses.
13. Give up the past.
14. Give up attachment.
15. Give up living your life to other people's expectations.

Charlie said he thought all the items on the list were based in fear, and Vicki said she thought that when we place blame, we usually end up blaming ourselves, and that is what we need to give up. Christian said he thought people should give up on criticism unless they know exactly what they're talking about.

After the pizza break Vicki cranked up the computer and they watched the stuttering drill sergeant sketch from *Saturday Night Live*. All three thought it was funny and none had a problem with it. They were impressed with Seth McFarlane's impression of a stutterer and thought he must be pretty well acquainted with one in real life. They also liked the fact that the character was a strong person and was not being made fun of.



### Syracuse, NY

100 degree heat did not keep the Syracuse Chapter of the NSA from setting up at a local flea market to promote the NSA and spread community awareness on August 4th as they handed out pamphlets, flyers, pens, pins and more! Many people stopped by to listen and hear what the organization was about including several speech therapists. One visitor said it best as she took a wristband saying she was going to wear it in support of her son who stutters. Pictured is co-leader David Haas.

### Los Angeles, CA

The Los Angeles Chapter, co-led by **Devin** and **Josh**, met on Wednesday, August 15. There were a total of 15 people in attendance including one newcomer to the chapter (but not new to NSA meetings), one SLP, and one supportive friend.

The topic for the night was less defined than usual. For a long time, the chapter leaders have set out a theme or series of topics for the meeting and then facilitated discussion exclusively around these points. Devin and Josh decided the meeting needed a little more free-flow and spontaneity this time around. More importantly, they wanted to know if any attendees, either long-timers or newbies, had any burning questions that they wanted to pose to the group. As it turns out, they did.

The two most thought-provoking questions of the night came from a long-time chapter member (and TWST chapter leader) who asked the group:

- Do you consider yourself a good communicator?
- Do you consider yourself socially awkward?

Both of these questions instantly filled the room with looks of amusement, consternation, or bewilderment. Diversity of opinion abounded. One response in particular further stimulated the debate. If we as stutterers do sometimes feel socially awkward, what causes it? In other words, what came first, the stuttering or the awkwardness? This is a classic

chicken and the egg question. A definitive answer was not found, but a lot of fun was had discussing it.

The meeting ended with reminders about upcoming activities, e.g. Dodgers baseball night and bowling.

### Royal Oak, MI

**Tanya Banks** writes that the Royal Oak, MI group had ten people in attendance at their most recent meeting. The meeting started with a discussion about goals. **Stu** will be serving as the best man at his friend's upcoming wedding and his goal was to prepare for a speech that he will give during the wedding. Tanya talked about asking for a job application at a clothing store and how she was nervous and had a block. She's going to return the application and will let the group know if she gets an interview. There was also an open mic session. **Tim** wanted feedback on eye contact, rate, and body language, and everyone else who spoke during open mic also wanted some feedback. Participants all agreed that it's a great way to practice speaking in front of an audience. Tanya also noted that she was given a copy of *Self-Therapy for the Stutterer* by Malcolm Frazer which she plans to use in a future meeting.

### Rochester, NY

**Paul Tucci** writes that the Rochester Chapter's latest meeting was held at Nazareth College and that there were six people in attendance: 4 PWS (**Ronald, Jack, Rob,** and Paul), one SLP (co-leader, **Enid**), and one SLP student (**Michelle**) who was attending her first meeting. Their co-leader, **Angela**, is home recovering from surgery and is doing well. The meeting began with a choral reading of the *Welcoming Words*. The bulk of this month's meeting was a discussion concerning the format of their meetings and how they'd like to include more people in leading the group discussions. Many ideas were offered during the conversation and the format will likely evolve over time.

## Saying Goodbye



### Alfred Brown Hastings, Jr.

Beloved husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather and friend, passed away April 27, 2012 at his

home in Palm Desert, CA. He was born on December 2, 1923 in Los Angeles, CA. He attended Beverly Hills High School and graduated from The Webb School and Pomona College, both in Claremont, CA. Until he retired to the desert, he was actively involved in his career and raising his family in the Los Angeles area. He was a successful life insurance agent for forty years with Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company and was co-founder of MassMutual's Agent's Association.

Al was a long time friend and supporter of the NSA, serving on the Board of Directors for the Luella Morey Murphey Foundation, through which hundreds of grants are provided to worthwhile organizations, including our own. Al was also a champion of research in stuttering via his generous support of the UC Irvine Kirkup Center.

He is survived by his wife Liz; his three children, Virginia Hastings, Richard Hastings and Carol Hastings; three step-children, Jim Wolfe, Anne Wolfe and Paki Wolfe Heintz. He was a proud grandfather of seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. A Celebration of Life service will be held November 17, 2012 at 2:00 p.m. at St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Palm Desert. In lieu of flowers, donations are welcome to St. Margaret's Episcopal Church Memorial Fund in memory of Al Hastings. [nsa](http://www.nsa.org)

\*Obituary excerpts taken from <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/thedesertsun>

# Exceeding Expectations!

JIM McCLURE



If you've never been to a NSA conference, the odds are in your favor that attending the conference will help you will meet new friends, improve your self-confidence, and receive support. And you'll have a wonderful time. Just ask the folks who joined us at the 2012 conference in St. Petersburg!

The conference was a hit, according to the 274 people who responded to our post-conference survey. More than eight out of 10 respondents said they were very satisfied with the overall conference experience, and three-quarters said they are certain or very likely to attend next year's conference.

Socializing was the most important reason why adults who stutter attended the conference, and nine out of 10 attendees found it easy to meet people and socialize. More than 95% of adults said the conference met or exceeded their expectations in learning new information about stuttering, helping them feel more self-confident, changing their attitudes toward stuttering, and getting support from other people who stutter.

Adult workshops drew positive comments from adults, and the career and 20-somethings sessions got high marks from survey respondents. First-time attendees were satisfied with the adult and parent orientation sessions, and felt very welcome at the conference.

An overwhelming majority of parents said the conference met or exceeded their expectations in improving their self-confidence as parents, learning from other parents, and meeting successful adults who stutter. They said their children socialized readily with the other kids, participated actively in workshops, changed their attitudes about stuttering, and enjoyed the conference experience overall.

The majority of speech-language pathologists at the conference reported that the continuing education sessions exceeded their expectations in learning about stuttering treatment and research, and in interacting with people who stutter. Two-thirds said the conference was better than most educational opportunities in fluency disorders.

Conference attendees enjoyed conference events and tours, and most were very satisfied with their stay at the Vinoy Renaissance Resort. 

## Q&A WITH JASON GRAY *continued*

spite of my handicap, but rather because of it. The greatest turning point was when I read Henri Nouwen's book, *The Wounded Healer* where he proposes that it is through our own wounds that we bring healing to others. I decided that that's what I wanted to be: a wounded healer.

That doesn't mean it's not still painful in many ways, but now it's meaningful and it has a kind of dignified purpose.

**MF :: Did you ever take part in any sort of speech therapy when you were younger? How do you feel about it now, as an adult? Do you participate in any therapy now?**

**JG ::** I did! I went to a very small rural school and so it was simply Special Ed. I would be taken out of class to meet with a young woman who did not specialize in speech pathology but was very sweet. I remember I enjoyed it. I don't think she much understood the problem, but she was kind and that goes a long way. Later, I married a wonderful woman whose stepmother is also a stutterer and an accomplished speech pathologist in the Pacific Northwest. So, I married into free therapy :-)

She worked with me, though at times because she was family I felt an innate defensiveness that I now regret. I think it was hard for me to always wonder if she was evaluating my speech whenever I spoke. I didn't want to think about it all the time over Christmas dinners and family gatherings. That was all my own insecurity I'm sure, but in spite of my self-consciousness she is great, it was very good, and she helped me to develop techniques to monitor my speech that have served me well and made a big difference in my life.

I'm not in therapy now, but I find that as I get older I'm more and more fluent. I attribute it to being increasingly at peace with all of it. It seems that I stutter the most when I'm the most afraid of stuttering. The less I care about it, the less it troubles me. That's how I interpret it, at least.

**MF :: There is a known genetic link with stuttering; does anyone else in your family stutter, or do any of your own children stutter?**

**JG ::** I was never aware that anyone in my family had an issue, but when my dad struggled with alcoholism for a season in his life, I remember once when I picked him up after he'd had a little too much to drink, he started stuttering. I remember him saying, (imagine slightly slurred speech here) "Dammit, this always happens to me when I've had too much..." It was kind of funny in the moment, but in an odd way helped me. I felt like, "Ah, so maybe that's where it came from!"

I don't blame him for never saying anything to me about it before. As for me, I was terribly afraid that I would pass it on to my kids. Very early on one of my boys began stuttering, but we learned how to help him slow down (thanks to my step-mother-in-law) and monitor his speech. Within a year it went away and he hasn't had a problem since. I'm grateful for his sake. For all of my talk about making peace with my stuttering, it's still a huge relief to me that all my sons are fluent. I figure that each of us in our own way will have to reckon with our own particular weaknesses, so they'll still have plenty of opportunities for that kind of character building without needing a speech impediment.

**MF :: One peculiar tidbit about stuttering is that PWS are typically fluent when they sing, but as someone who is not only a studio recording artist, but who also performs on stage as a part of major tours across the nation, how do you cope with speaking on stage in front of large crowds?**

**JG ::** Once I embraced the idea of the wounded healer, my stuttering became less and less of a liability in my mind and more and more of an asset – an amazing opportunity to engage my audience in a conversation about weakness as a virtue. Since for most of us our weakness is a source of deep shame and anxiety, my stuttering granted me access to a very intimate dialogue with people. If I didn't stutter I don't think I would be as effective as I am in the work I love. The strange turn of events is that I feel like the nights when I'm fluent and barely stutter at all may be more of a liability than when I do! Having experienced the strength that comes

to me in my weakness, I've come to rely on it. I've received so much grace through my speech impediment that it's almost harder to cope without it. However, this just forces me to dig deeper into other areas of weakness, and there's something healthy about that, too. I never want my speech to become a gimmick. That would be making a plaything out of something that is very painful for a lot of people.

**MF :: Your latest single 'Remind Me Who I Am' speaks inspiringly to feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and loss of faith, something that many PWS experience at one time or another in their speech journeys; would you say that much of your songwriting inspiration comes from the hardships you've had in dealing with speech?**

**JG ::** I think my speech has helped me tune into these things. These feelings are always with all of us, I think, but we tend to avoid the questions they raise. Brokenness and imperfection – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual – are very confrontational. They ask us to know certain things about ourselves that we'd rather not. But escapism isn't healthy; it won't make us whole. Deeper engagement will always reward us, and I'm grateful for the ways that my imperfections have forced me to face my limitations, etc. I have a mentor in my life right now that is the wisest man that I know. Recently I said to him, "George, every time you open your mouth you blow my mind! I want to be you when I grow up. How did you become you?" he answered with one word: "Pain."

I think of the ways that my own pain makes me better, wiser, more human, more compassionate, and more loving, and my speech impediment has certainly played an important role in all of that.

**MF :: In addition to your successful career as a Christian recording artist, you're known for your prolific volunteer work with World Vision's Hope Initiative serving AIDS orphans in Africa; what advice/perspective can you give other PWS who might be stuck in a mindset that their stutter is the worst thing in the world?**

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**JG ::** We can be afraid that our imperfections define us in the worst ways possible, but it's important for me to remember that fear only has the power that I give to it. My faith has played a large part in re-orienting my thinking about my speech – in particular the upside down nature of Christianity and it's definition of power and strength: that the weak are the strongest, the least are the most significant, and the last will be first.

I wrote a song for my most recent record called "No Thief Like Fear" with the lyric:

*I know insecurity is the worst of  
 my own enemies  
 He sings his lonely song and I will dance  
 As he robs me blind  
 Right before my eyes...  
 There's no thief like fear  
 There's no thief like fear*

For me that song is a protest song – me trying to serve an eviction notice to the fear in my life. I think that's as good a place as any to start a conversation about the way we think as people who stutter.

I was recently at World Vision's headquarters in Federal Way, WA and someone there told me that their research indicates that usually it's those who have gone through or are in the midst of hardships that sponsor kids. I imagine that this means that their own difficulties have helped them to care about the difficulties of others. This makes me think of the many people who stutter who I've met over the years. They are so often kind, beautiful people with a

great capacity for empathy. It's good to remember this surprise gift that our imperfection gives to us.

**MF :: What's coming up next for you?**

**JG ::** I just wrapped up recording a Christmas record and am getting ready to build a tour around it. I'm pretty excited about it because I've always dreamed of taking my whole family out on tour with me. We've been able to take some of them out some of the time, but this will be the first time we all get to go, and everybody will be a part of the evening, so I'm so grateful and excited about that. Beyond that I'm starting to write songs for my next record and beginning to dream about what this next season of my life and work is going to look like. And I'm trying to lose a few pounds and get healthier :-)

*The NSA would like to extend their most heartfelt thanks to Jason for his time during this interview, as well as to Jordan Greiner of Eaglemont Entertainment for 'making it happen.'*

# Jawbreaker

PETER FERRARONE

“Won’t your jaw get too sore?” my father asks, giving me a gentle pat on the back and sliding a coffee mug across the table towards my plate.

I had just made up my mind to move to San Diego to pursue a certificate in teaching English as a Second Language at San Diego State University. I had never taught before in my life.

“Yes,” I admit.

I know what it feels like to be stuck in the middle of a terrible block. My upper and lower lips stiffen and clap together. The veins in my neck pop out when I contort my face. For some mysterious reason, I often tilt my head towards the ceiling, as if suddenly I was overcome by a desire to look for flies. And when I force the words out, they reverberate off the walls and ceiling above my listener’s head.

But my father wasn’t questioning whether I could speak well enough to effectively communicate the basics of the English language to a group of non-native speakers. He was doing nothing more than observing the physical realities of my stuttering. Throughout my life, he’s watched me struggle to produce speech; and, he figured that my muscles must get tired. And they do! But, they don’t normally get tired. I stutter every day of my life: when I order food at a restaurant and when I go on a date; when I am with my friends and on the phone. My body has become habituated to these situations. It is the rare day that I come home with a sore jaw.

However, there is a specific situation (and two conditions) that often leads to severe pain. I’ll call it the jawbreaker. I’m not referring to the mother of all blocks – although I’ve experienced some tough ones. I am talking about the way that a specific life event – like a relocation, for example – can lead me to feel like I am “on stage” over the course of several days or weeks leading up to the event. Unlike non-stutters, who can probably run the gauntlet of family dinners and parting words without pain, I sometimes suffer because of it.

In my opinion, there are two conditions that have to occur in order for the “Jawbreaker” to lead to pain. If only one of these

is met, I can usually wake up in the morning pain-free. The first condition is pressure to perform. As a person who stutters, my speech gets worse at the exact moment that people are expecting clarity. When my uncle and aunt want to know what led to my decision to look for a new job, I feel the spotlight shift my way. During a class presentation, the audience asks me what steps I took to achieve the results of my science experiment. In these situations, specific information is required. Whereas normally I might avoid certain words or substitute one word for another, I can’t do that here. The result is that my jaw gets sore as I struggle over difficult, but necessary, words.

Repetition is the second condition. Typically, it takes three consecutive days of pressure situations for my muscles to get sore. Somewhere between the second and third day, I suddenly discover that my neck and jaw ache in all the familiar places. My muscles – just like when I lift weights or run – need a day to recover. And when they don’t get that, when they’re used too intensely for too long, they naturally start to get sore.

When these two conditions occur simultaneously, aches and pains are inevitable. And it doesn’t go away immediately. Even after the change of life event is completed, my pain can linger for three to four days of normal, pressure-free, activity, sometimes lasting up to one week. However, I am symptom free when I yawn or eat, or laugh. It’s only when I contort my mouth into the positions necessary for speech production that pain radiates through my jaw and neck.

So, back to my father’s initial question: is my jaw going to hurt if I become a teacher? My answer is simple. Of course! And yet, as I set off on a new chapter in my life, I am excited for the challenge and I have hope for the future. I can push through the pain; and maybe, one day, my muscles will become habituated to teaching and my concerns will fade away. But I’m not counting on it. People who stutter are challenged in unique ways, but we can’t let our obstacles stand in the way of our ultimate goals! 

# NSA

Your friends at the  
National Stuttering Association  
thank you for your support and wish  
you a joyous holiday season and a  
happy New Year!

## Happy Holidays!

On behalf of the NSA Board of Directors

*Sheryl Hunter, Kenny Koroll,  
Barry Liben, Bill Smith, Cathy Olish,  
Mitch Trichon, Stephanie Nicolai,  
Jim McClure, Dr. Gerald Maguire,  
Vivian Sisskin, Miranda Smith,  
Pattie Wood, John Tetnowski*

and our staff

*Tammy Flores, Mandy Finstad,  
Stephanie Coppen, and Melissa Lopez*

**we wish you and your loved ones a  
healthy and happy holiday season!**

## A Stutterer’s World: A Haiku

JIM SARGENT

Tormented by thoughts  
Of saying a simple word  
a stutterer’s world

Constantly dreaming  
Of elusive fluency  
Never to be found

To a ten year old  
Fluency looms at 13  
Surely it is so

To a teenager  
College students don’t stutter  
Fluency for sure!

And so it persists  
From adulthood to old age  
On and on and on

But wisdom brings peace  
And stuttering is OK  
To Hell with them all!

