

Faced with a rare form of mutism, a young girl is offered hope thanks to the love of her family and the ingenuity of a special teacher

Without a Voice



BY CAROL PENNAMACOR

Then and now – a photo of Betsy in kindergarten (above, left). She brought in a tennis racquet for Show and Tell, but her mother had to speak for her. Betsy at age 11 (above, right) is all smiles during a trip to an amusement park.

Betsy sits at her desk, paying close attention to her third-grade teacher, Mr. Locke. Her teacher finishes his statement then directs a question toward the class. A boy in the back of the room blurts out an answer, but no one raises his or her hand. Mr. Locke asks, "Betsy, do you know?" Betsy remains still, and looks down at her paper. The entire room goes silent for about a minute. Finally, Mr. Locke gives the class the answer, finishes his lesson and excuses the students for recess.

While the 24 other students run out of the classroom, Betsy walks slowly behind, observing those around her. A girl says hello as she runs past her; Betsy does not respond.

The first signs. At age nine, Betsy was diagnosed with a childhood anxiety disorder called

Carol Pennamacoor is Betsy's older sister and also struggled with mutism throughout elementary school.

Selective Mutism (SM) that affects less than one percent of the general population. Normally discovered at a young age, selectively mute children demonstrate a persistent lack of speech in one or more social settings, notably in school, despite their ability to speak comfortably at home.

Although Betsy's three older siblings also displayed shy tendencies, her parents realized that it would be more of a problem with their youngest child. Betsy stopped talking to those outside of the immediate family at 18 months old.

In prekindergarten, teachers expressed concern that Betsy was antisocial since she refused to talk to the other kids in class. After numerous parent-teacher meetings, it was determined that it would be best for Betsy to see a speech therapist. The teachers worried that Betsy might have had a speech impediment and therefore, might be too embarrassed to talk. After years of meeting with a speech teacher, Betsy continued to attend school with nothing more than a cough or a sneeze coming out of her mouth.

A teacher's help. Betsy's lack of social interaction with her peers continued throughout elementary school. As the problem persisted, she became more and more ostracized. Her kindergarten teacher would assign extra homework assignments each night; while the other children only had to color one picture, Betsy had to color three.

It wasn't until she was in the third grade that Betsy received the help she needed. Mr. Locke expressed a desire to help her overcome her mutism. As a first step, he gave Betsy a dry-erase board to use for answering questions in class. He also agreed to meet with Betsy and her father for an hour before school every day.

At the first few meetings, Betsy would take a seat at a desk next to her father. While holding a

book up high, she read to him in her regular voice. Across the room, Mr. Locke would sit at his desk, hiding behind his newspaper and listening in. Betsy knew he was there, but pretended he wasn't.

Since she seemed to be making progress, her father decided to sit down with Betsy one night to prepare her for the meeting the following morning. "Now, Betsy, pretend I am Mr. Locke," he said. "Show me what you will do next time you see him."

Betsy took a deep breath and whispered, "Hi." Her father hugged her as Betsy looked him in the eye and said, "I'm scared."

Small steps. The next morning, Betsy sat in a chair next to her teacher. She took a couple deep breaths and leaned toward her teacher's ear, but no words came out. She slouched back in her chair and looked over at her patient father and teacher as tears flowed down her cheeks.

After about a month, Betsy was soon whispering full sentences. Mr. Locke decided it was time to move forward, suggesting Betsy meet with some of the kids from class during lunch. It started with one friend, and then every week or few days, Betsy would invite another person to join her and Mr. Locke at lunchtime.

With the school year coming to an end, Mr. Locke came up with an idea for Betsy to try to speak in front of the class. For the last week of school, they had planned that Betsy would raise her index and middle finger if she was ready to answer a question during class, but she wasn't yet ready to take that step. Although the plan never worked out, Betsy was on track to move forward as a fourth grader. During the summer she paced herself by having her father invite friends over to her house, where she would speak to them in a whisper.

Making strides. As the fall approached, Betsy's father met with her new teacher, Mrs. Hunt, who promised that she would continue where Mr. Locke had left off. For the entire school year, Betsy spoke one-on-one with a small group of friends during lunchtime. She started out by meeting with one classmate she felt at ease with and continued until she was comfortable enough

speaking in a low voice in front of her entire class. By the last few weeks of school, she was whispering answers in Mrs. Hunt's ear and able to whisper loud enough so that the students around her could hear her.

A bright future. In fifth grade, Betsy was speaking in front of her entire class despite the absence

Betsy interacts with her friends on a daily basis inside and outside of school.

of her actual teacher for the first month. However, she still spoke quietly and rarely, which became a concern as she moved to a bigger school for sixth through eighth grade students.

Although Betsy's grades were high, she was placed in slower-paced classes in middle school and she remained shy around groups. Instead of allowing herself to get down about it, Betsy chose to take advantage of the situation. She asked to be placed in classes with smaller groups of children, where she succeeded. Betsy participated in class, made new friends and received the highest grades among her classmates.

Betsy is now 16 and in the tenth grade. She has continued to obtain high marks in her classes and will be moving into an upper science division in her junior year of high school. Although she is still considered to be one of the more quiet girls in her high school, Betsy interacts with her friends on a daily basis inside and outside of school. Both she and her family consider her Selective Mutism to be a thing of the past. ↓

internet connections

Topic: *Selective Mutism and Shyness*

- 1 **Shykids.com:** www.shykids.com Links to help parents and teachers with strategies and resources for students who demonstrate signs of shyness and selective mutism. Links are categorized by *Kids/Tweens, Teens, Parents and Teachers*. *Chit-Chat* lists conversation starters for school situations.
- 2 **Selected Mutism Organization:** www.selectivemutism.org The website resources help provide information and support for families of children with selected mutism. This organization also holds an annual conference.
- 3 **How Can Teachers Help Shy Students?:** www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr267.shtml Discussion with shyness expert Lynne Kelly, including eight tips and strategies for encouraging interaction from shy students. Education World's related links are also helpful.

