

## PROFILE: LIVING IN AN AGE OF HOPE



Dr. Firestone poses with Norton Kell after his graduation from pre-school

Barbara Firestone, Ph.D., owes her career to a small boy named Timmy. She met him during her freshman year at Douglass College, the women's college of Rutgers University in New Jersey. She had not yet decided on a major or a profession.

Through a field trip organized by her speech and communications professor, Dr. Firestone spent an hour with Timmy, who was nine years old, at the state institution where he lived. The professor took the class there to better understand how profoundly critical communication is. "Timmy was completely unresponsive to me. At the time, he seemed to me to be in a world of his own with no interest in or even consciousness of the world around him. No matter what I pulled out of my bag of tricks, I could not engage him."

The first time she heard the word "autism" was when a staff member explained to her that autism was the diagnosis for Timmy's condition. "It was one of those 'aha' moments in life. I called my parents and told them about meeting the little boy. The time I spent with Timmy kick started my professional efforts." She majored in speech pathology and then got a master's degree in communicative disorders, followed by a Ph.D. in special education.

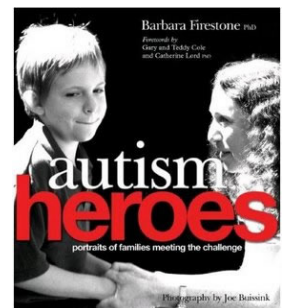
In 1975, she became the executive director of a small speech and hearing center in Los Angeles that provided speech and hearing services for children in the area. As the local school systems developed more and more in-house services, the need for the center's services was decreasing. Dr. Firestone proposed to the Board that the organization start a school that would provide special education for children who had severe communicative disorders that included children with autism.

### Opening Doors

In October of that year, the doors of The Help Group opened to four children. Today, Dr. Firestone still leads The Help Group, which helps more than 5,000 children through six schools and a wide range of programs and offers support and training to parents and professionals as well ([see the story about The Help Group](#)). "The best thing about my job is being able to watch faculty and staff as they help children reach their fullest potential. I can walk on campus or go to graduations and see firsthand the progress the children we work with are making. The children are a constant source of inspiration."

In addition to her work with The Help Group, Dr. Firestone has also been a vocal advocate on behalf of children with disabilities and their families, and currently serves as the vice chair of the California Legislative Blue Ribbon Commission on Autism, which was established by the state legislature in 2005 to close existing gaps in programs, services, and funding in the early diagnosis and early treatment of autism; the education of students with autism and professional development; and the planning that is needed to address the "aging out" of children from California's school system into adulthood.

She recently completed a new book, *Autism Heroes: Portraits of Families Meeting the Challenge*. Her book relates the experiences of 38 families from different walks of life with children, adolescents and young adults with all forms and degrees of autism, with photography by Joe Buissink, a father of two children with autism. The families speak candidly about their experiences and their challenges, triumphs, and hopes. The family narratives are set against the backdrop of Dr. Firestone's essays about the importance of dignity, hope, opportunity, and love in lives of the featured families. Dr. Firestone hopes that the book will offer encouragement to parents who are just starting out on their own journeys with children with autism, and to parents already on the journey.



With more than 30 years of experience of developing programs for children with a wide-range of disabilities, Dr. Firestone says what she hopes people will take away from her experience and those of the professionals on The Help Group staff is that every single child "possesses potential. The programs and services can have a real impact, particularly in the area of early identification and intervention. Autism is no longer the dead end diagnosis that it was once thought to be—a diagnosis can open the door to the opportunities that can make a difference. It is the voices of parents advocating on behalf of their own children and the greater community that led us to this place where I can write a book that is full of hope."

Dr. Firestone illustrates the hope she sees with this story: "As the children at The Help Group's pre-school graduations sing 'If You're Happy and You Know It, Clap Your Hands,' I see their parents with tears on their faces and they are not tears of despair but joy at what their children can accomplish. We are living in an age of hope." You can find out more about Dr. Firestone's book at [www.autismheroes.org](http://www.autismheroes.org).



## SALUTE: EDUCATION GROUNDED IN DIGNITY, HOPE, OPPORTUNITY, AND LOVE

In 1975, two events led to the evolution of the family of agencies known today as The Help Group and created the impetus for The Help Group's position today as the largest nonprofit organization of its kind for children with special needs related to autism, Asperger Disorder, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, mental retardation, abuse, and emotional problems.

The first was the arrival of Barbara Firestone, Ph.D., who became the executive director of a small nonprofit speech and hearing center in the Los Angeles area. She presented a proposal to the Board of Directors to establish special education day school programs for children who had severe disorders of language, that in many cases were secondary to other disabilities like autism. The Board said yes.

The second was the passage in 1975 of the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which legislated the right of every child to a free, appropriate, publicly supported education. This resulted in the proliferation of opportunities within public school settings as well as the development of non-public schools, like The Help Group's schools.

The Help Group's first school opened its doors in October 1975 and welcomed four children into its first classroom. Today, 1,300 children and adolescents attend one of six day schools on four campuses in the Los Angeles area. Other Help Group programs offer mental health and therapy services, child abuse, foster family, and residential programs to more than 5,000 children and their families each year. The Help Group also offers graduate and post-graduate professional training programs. Through its public awareness, professional training and parent education programs, and efforts at the state and national levels, The Help Group touches the lives of children with special needs across the country and in other parts of the world.

### Close Attention to Each Child's Potential

"We take the approach that each child is unique and has unique potential and can make progress if he or she is given the opportunity. The foundation of our philosophy is the belief that every child's birthright is dignity, hope, opportunity, and love," says Dr. Firestone. Practically, that approach and philosophy translates into a wide range of services and opportunities for children and their families, not only in Los Angeles but also across the country.

The Help Group offers four schools for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). More than 750 students from the ages of 3 to 22 attend the schools, which include:

- The Young Learners Preschool for Autism, designed for children with ASD and other social communications and developmental delays
- Village Glen School, which provides education for children with social and communicative disabilities, including nonverbal learning disabilities and Asperger syndrome
- Bridgeport School, which integrates an academic curriculum with hands-on life skills training and vocational services for students with mild cognitive delays and challenges in the areas of social communication and/or language development
- Sunrise School for Autism and Developmental Disabilities, dedicated to promoting communicative, behavioral, social, academic, motor, adaptive, and independent living skills

In addition to its day schools, The Help Group offers these programs and services.

- Mental health services programs offer psychiatry; individual, family, and group therapy; case management; early-intervention day treatment services for at-risk preschoolers; after-school enrichment for at-risk children; and vocational services.
- The Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders offers comprehensive assessments using scientifically validated diagnostic tools for children from 18 months to adults. The Help Group also provides therapeutic intervention; family support; therapeutic preschool programs; after-school programs; and summer camp for children with autism, high-functioning autism, and Asperger syndrome.
- The Stepping Stones program offers a therapeutic day treatment program for preschoolers with behavioral and emotional difficulties
- The speech pathology and occupational therapy programs provide comprehensive assessment and intervention services on current research and best practices in individual, small-group, and classroom settings.



Dr. Firestone and California Senator Darrell Steinberg take a break during a meeting of the California Blue Ribbon Legislative Commission on Autism.

- The Help Group-UCLA Autism Research Alliance is dedicated to enhancing and expanding clinical research into ASD education and treatment and to contributing to the development, greater understanding, and use of best practice models by educators and clinicians.
- The Help Group - UCLA Neuropsychology Program is a partnership program that provides neuropsychological assessments and consultations for children, adolescents, and young adults and enriches the field of knowledge through its research and educational endeavors.
- The Child Abuse Prevention and Intervention Programs include child and family counseling, foster family recruitment and placement, family preservation, teen parenting, and family reunification counseling.
- Project Six creates therapeutic living opportunities in nurturing, home-like settings for children, adolescents, and young adults with developmental disabilities. With a full continuum of integrated services, these programs promote personal and interpersonal development, vocational, and independent living skills.

Many of the practices used by The Help Group's educators and therapists have been developed as a result of OAR-sponsored research, says OAR Executive Director Mike Maloney.

### **Supporting Parents and Professionals**

The Help Group also offers training and support for professionals working in the field of special education and parent education and training programs as well as support groups for parents and professionals. The ASD Parent Support Network's monthly meetings are offered at no cost. A team of experts, including parents of children with ASD and members of The Help Group's educational and therapeutic staff, facilitates each group.

The Help Group also offers a Distinguished Lecturer Series and its annual Summit: Advances and Best Practices in Autism, Learning Disabilities and ADHD for parents and professionals. It also publishes the *HelpLetter*, a newsletter that focuses on topics related to autism, Asperger Syndrome, and learning disabilities, with articles written by experts in their respective fields.

The Help Group is also keenly aware of the need to advocate on behalf of people with disabilities. Dr. Firestone serves as vice chair of the California Legislative Blue Ribbon Commission on Autism. In addition, The Help Group has initiated awareness campaigns in English and Spanish to educate parents about the early signs of autism and about the importance of early identification and intervention.

Dr. Firestone says that The Help Group is looking forward to another expansion of its efforts with its Steps to Independence initiative, which will be for young adults with ASD. "We are really concerned about what will happen as young adults age out of the educational system. No matter where they are on the spectrum, they will need to develop skills to live as independently as possible and to succeed in the workplace." The Steps to Independence initiative will include a range of programs to help young adults do just that, she says.

To find out more about The Help Group, visit its Web site at [www.thehelpgroup.org](http://www.thehelpgroup.org).