

For Helen, Finally

by Shirley Morganstein

In 1971, I got something I had long hoped for—a position at the Rusk Institute for Rehabilitation. I had waited for that job for two years, ever since my return from the University of Minnesota, where I had gone because of Hildred Schuell. Through the lens of my memory, I can see her next to a patient in his wheelchair, quietly and methodically repeating together some words and phrases. What I learned at the Minneapolis VA was worth the subzero temperatures and more snow than any New Yorker should ever see.

Back home again, I wrote to Martha Taylor Sarno, whose remarkable aphasia clinic would permit me to move closer to the mystery that had so captured me. There was no position available—not for two years.

On my first day, suffering from a nervous stomach and struggling to appear calm, I met my first patient at Rusk. Her name was Helen, the same as my mother's. I smiled "hello," at which she immediately wailed loudly, bringing a bevy of speech-language pathologists to my door at a run. Helen was upset about many things, global aphasia certainly not the least of them, and having to deal with the new kid on the block was definitely not what she had in mind that day.

Somehow, I convinced her to come inside, and we began to form what became my first real therapeutic relationship with a person with aphasia. Over the next several months, she cried some more, but there also was some laughter, and despite the severity of her language impairment, a true partnership in our work together.

Late one night in my tiny first apartment, I penned a poem to Helen. I never shared it with her. Now, more than 30 years later, I regret that.

Helen: This is for you.

"Good morning."

"Yes."

"How are you?"

"You," with head nod,

And I wheel you in, to begin.

"House. House. House. House."

"Yes?"

"House," again, with reassuring tones.

"You."

And "House. House. House."

Forever, "House."

Until I am sure one of us will scream and strike the other.

So, "House."

And it comes,

"House."

I smile and nod and am pleased in my professionalism because you have said,

"House."

We should go to that house,

Outlined so nicely on plastic-coated card.

Knock on the door.

Have a cup of tea.

Laugh to see the rabbit spread his watch with treacle.

"House."

You smile, pleased that I am pleased, while I turn and begin,

"Sugar. Sugar. Sugar."



Shirley Morganstein was a member of Martha Taylor Sarno's staff at Rusk Institute for Rehabilitation for 16 years. During that time, she published Thematic Language Stimulation and Thematic Picture Stimulation with Marilyn Certner Smith. She recently left her position as assistant director of inpatient rehabilitation at Kessler Institute in West Orange, NJ, and, with Smith, formed a private practice in northern New Jersey—Speaking of Aphasia, LLC. Contact her by e-mail at shirley@speakingofaphasia.com.

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