PROGRAM GRANT STORY

Finding a Voice

What would it be like to have a need but not be able to communicate it to anyone?

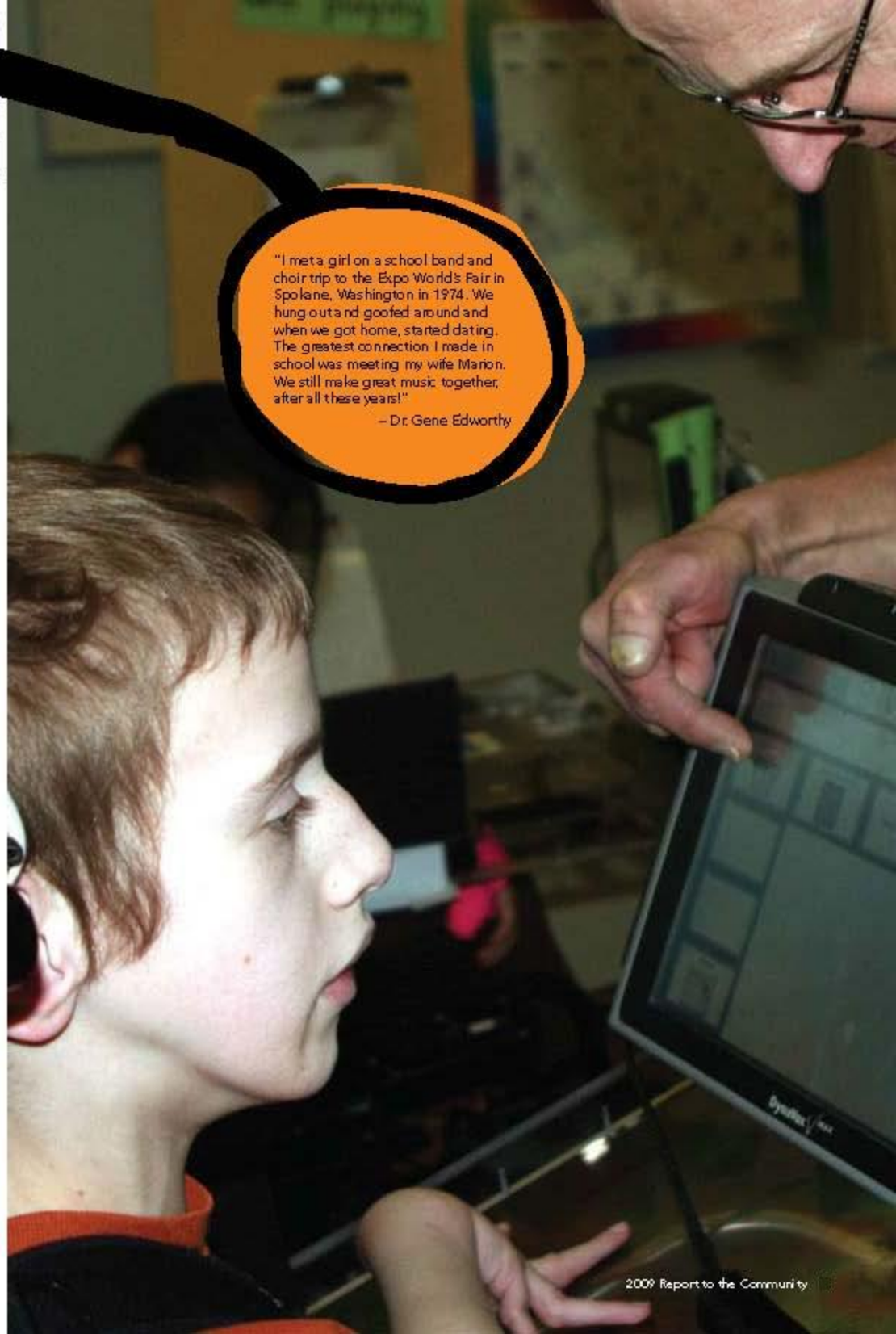
Operation Communication at Emily Follensbee School offers a way for challenged students to vocalize their needs and feelings. Emily Follensbee School serves and teaches young students with multiple disabilities – physical, cognitive, developmental and emotional. Operation Communication is a program that uses a variety of different devices that allow non verbal students to be able to "speak." In Algis Grajauskas's classroom, the students start small and work towards their independence.

"Our goal is to improve the student's ability to communicate," says Algis. Algis and his team first establish a way to communicate "yes" and "no" based on the student's limited movement; for young student Sam, for example, "yes" is a deliberate blink and "no" is a head shake. From there, students move on to hard copy communication books. The books have pages full of symbols that students navigate with the help of an interpreter. With Algis' help, Sam blinks and shakes his way to saying Hannah Montana is his favourite TV show.

Once students have mastered the communication book, they can move on to the Dynavox communication system. Dynavox is a computer with the same symbols and phrases that students can use independently. By clicking the switch at her elbow, student Shanzay was able to introduce herself and ask visitors their favourite colours.

With the grant from EducationMatters to purchase a few Dynavox systems, the school was able to teach their students how to use it, thus qualifying them for future government funding to purchase more of the technology.

"The device doesn't require that someone intervene on behalf of the student," says Algis. "They get to figure out what works best on their own which is so important to their independence and their quality of life."



"I met a girl on a school band and choir trip to the Expo World's Fair in Spokane, Washington in 1974. We hung out and goofed around and when we got home, started dating. The greatest connection I made in school was meeting my wife Marion. We still make great music together, after all these years!"

– Dr. Gene Edworthy