



ANNA KENNEDY

The following piece contains extracts from Anna's book: 'Not Stupid' (John Blake Publishing) available now from www.amazon.co.uk and all good book shops.

Not Stupid

When I take stock of the 100 staff and 85 pupils at Hillingdon Manor School in north London where I work, I can't help but pinch myself. For I am not simply an employee and mother of two of its pupils, I was one of the brains behind creating the school almost ten years ago!

Faced with my two boys being diagnosed with autism and Asperger's Syndrome respectively both my husband and I were at the end of our tethers having had our boys rejected from 26 mainstream and special schools. But, unwilling to relinquish them to what can be described as 'institutionalised special schools', we remortgaged our house and cajoled individuals, local councillors, companies and the media until Hillingdon Council granted us a 30 year lease on a derelict former school that was about to be demolished to have 37 flats built in its place.

My son Patrick, now 18, was four when he was formally diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. However, this was kept from us and we found out by accident when Patrick was 7 at a review meeting at his school. I wanted him to have a proper education that came as close to a mainstream schooling as possible. His younger brother Angelo was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3 and his needs are far more complex.

My husband Sean and I were devastated. I remember sitting in the consultant's room unable to concentrate on anything: "Christ, both my boys have autism", was all I could

think. What had I done wrong? I'd had such a regimented childhood myself that I'd dreamed of a more carefree upbringing for my own children with idyllic days on the beach and picnics in the park. But autism snuffed out all those aspirations. I felt so sad.

Angelo, now 15, is locked into his autism. You can't have a conversation with him and he has no sense of danger. He doesn't sleep either which was terribly difficult when he was young. I'd spend my nights awake with Angelo who would run up and down his bedroom letting out high-pitched screams for hours. It was a struggle to keep him quiet for the sake of Sean and Patrick getting some sleep and I was exhausted. Angelo, even now, has an erratic sleep pattern and I feel that both our body clocks have become adjusted to this pattern of sleep.

Patrick went to mainstream infant school for 18 months and every day he screamed and shouted in the car and at the school gates. I had to endure lots of pitiful looks from other parents and would have to sit with him in the school corridor until he'd calmed down. It was very distressing for both of us and eventually the head teacher told me: "We can't cope with Patrick any more."

Meanwhile Angelo had been to nursery and was having one to one support a lot of the time, but when he was ready to go to school nobody could meet his tutoring needs.

So, for three years I had both boys at home while Sean and I went

“...if there wasn't a school out there that was right for my boys then I'd just have to create one myself... nine years on Hillingdon Manor now has 86 pupils aged 3 to 19 and the school is a Centre of Excellence”.

through the soul destroying process of approaching 26 schools in a ten mile radius and being rejected by every one of them.

Patrick and Angelo were having five hours of tuition each at home to meet their different needs. I remember Angelo's first tutor sitting on the carpet and crying after a few days; she'd never dealt with a severely autistic child before.

In 1997 we turned our garage into a proper classroom where our sons could continue their home tuition in a more school-like environment. Then Sean, a friend and I set up a support group - Hillingdon Autistic Care and Support. It's such a lonely condition that we needed to share our experiences with other parents of autistic kids. We started with six members, now we have 275 families.

During that time I met a chap called Alex who had a grown-up son with Asperger's. He strongly felt that his son had never had the schooling that he'd really needed and it planted an idea in my mind: if there wasn't a school out there that was right for my boys then I'd just have to create one myself.

Having found the derelict school building nearby, Sean, Alex and I and other friends presented a case to the local authority to save it from demolition so it could be a school for autistic kids. We won a unanimous decision from the councillors - we could have a 30 year lease on the building on the condition that we carried out refurbishments estimated at £637,000.

In fact we did the work for a fraction of that cost by setting up our own cottage industry. Amongst the parents of other autistic children there were plumbers, carpenters and decorators. We did a huge amount of the work ourselves and in September 1999 after 18 months of hard graft, Hillingdon Manor School opened for its first term. There were 19 children including Patrick and Angelo and we recruited a Head and teachers by advertising in the Times Educational Supplement.

Nine years on, Hillingdon Manor now has 86 pupils aged three to 19 and the school is a Centre of Excellence. We have also helped set up the Old Vicarage Residence where autistic adults can live with the support of staff and a small Adult College.

Three of our pupils achieved 21 GCSEs between them recently which is terrific. There is a ratio of one teacher to every eight pupils and the Principal specialises in autism, educational psychology and speech and language therapy. We follow the National Curriculum but tailor it to each child's needs and also include lessons in movement and relaxation since autistic kids struggle with both. We even put capable children through the Duke of Edinburgh scheme.

Patrick has grown into a strapping, six feet two inch young man who would like to study drama at mainstream college when he's 19. He socialises with his friends like any normal 18 year old. He loves animals, films and music and I can see him

getting married one day and having a career and a family.

Angelo has made strides but he'll always need one to one care. Eventually I'd like him to go into semi-independent living so that he can experience a degree of independence although I'll want him living close to us.'

While throwing myself into creating a better education and life for my sons and others like them, I have rarely ever had any time just for myself. Sometimes I feel very lonely because Sean also has Asperger's and he, Patrick and Angelo can be so locked into their worlds.

I've got friends with autistic kids and what I call my 'normal' friends. I let off steam by tap dancing on Thursdays. But I haven't had a glass of wine in years as I always need to be alert because Angelo is so erratic. I can't have nice things in the house because Angelo wrecks them and we haven't had a holiday since a disastrous trip to Disneyland Paris years ago: Angelo went walkabout and it took us four frantic hours to find him. He was found without his trousers and socks and caked in mud. Still to this day we don't know where he had been!

But somehow we've managed to have a reasonable life in our own way. Sean and I never used to go out but in the last year my mother-in-law and the children's aunt have babysat so that we could go to the theatre which was great and I hope we'll repeat it again soon.