



# Marathon Runners

photo courtesy of Spokane Guilds School

by Blythe Thimsen

**W**ith fierce determination, a two-year-old boy with golden blond locks falling gently across his forehead furrows his brow, lifting his arms and pulling upward, using his core and abdominal muscles to slowly rise to a sitting position on a small exercise ball.

If this sounds like a hip new trendy toddler yoga class, guess again. Although some of the moves look the same, the work done in this setting will have a lifelong impact on the young boy and his future. He is a student at the Spokane Guilds School and Neuromuscular Center, (SGS&NC), and this is part of the therapy which will change his life.

Spokane Guilds School held its first class on September 29, 1960 and has been going strong ever since. While it has been a staple of the community, and is well

## Spokane Guilds School helps kids run the race



known because of its annual Penny Drive fundraisers, most people, when pressed, can't precisely explain what the Guilds School is or what it does.

Spokane Guilds School is a place where miracles happen, goals are met and lives are changed.

It is the small moves, like the young boy pulling himself up, that make the big differences at Spokane Guilds School.

"Great job!" exclaims Dan Fall, the occupational therapist who was working with the young boy with blond hair. Cheering, Fall holds onto his hands, guiding him the last few inches, to a sitting position, explaining that strengthening the child's core will help him fine tune the muscles he will need for basic tasks, such as getting dressed. After having worked at the Guilds School for 26 years, Fall knows the importance of these therapies on children's futures. They can make the difference between a life with obstacles, or one with hope and opportunity.

Teams of occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language pathologists and certified special

education teachers all work together at Spokane Guilds School to nurture the full potential of families and their children, ages birth to three, with disabilities. They accomplish this through a personalized, comprehensive program of assessment, therapy, education and support.

Though at one point the school worked with children up to the age of 12, as the school notes in its history, "in 1992, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act required public schools to provide educational services to children with developmental disabilities as young as three years of age. This eventually resulted in the Spokane Public Schools contracting with the Guilds' School to provide these services for them. When this contract was canceled in 1981, the school was ultimately forced to limit its enrollment again, this time to children from birth to three years of age."

Students now "graduate" out of the school on their third birthday, which is often a bittersweet moment for the parents. "It will be an emotional process," says Tricia Mason, of what it will be like when her daughter Hayley, turns three and no longer attends Spokane Guilds School. "These are people who have been so willing to enter your life and your child's life," she says. "She has been here for so long, but at the same time, we will be grateful for her experiences when she does graduate."

The children who receive services from Spokane Guilds School cover a broad spectrum of abilities and needs. Children with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, spina bifida, hearing or vision impairments, speech delays, muscular dystrophy, autism, traumatic brain injury (shaken babies) and other forms of developmental delays and rare syndromes, are all served at Spokane Guilds School.

"I thought the Guilds School was only for severely handicapped," says Shannon Dayton of her initial thought of who the Guilds School served. Her daughter, Eily, who just turned one year old, is not severely handicapped; however, she has had some severe delays over the last year. When Eily was born, she couldn't suck, swallow or breathe on her own, so she was put into the NICU for a total of six weeks. When her parents were told she had low muscle tone, it was recommended that they contact the Spokane Guilds School. "I was horrified," says Dayton, who knew very little about the Guilds School, but wanting to provide every resource for her daughter, followed up with them. Within two weeks, Guilds School therapists were at the Dayton home for an in-home assessment and soon started physical and speech therapy.

Envisioning a seven or eight week old participating in physical or speech therapy is difficult to do. Isn't that too young? Wouldn't it be better to have them closer to six months or a year, where they are more interactive, before therapy begins? Quite the opposite!

"Early intervention makes the hugest difference in the foundation of how they will be, and is integral in what they can do," says Wendy Schuller, who is on the Spokane Guilds School Board, and whose son, Brandon, graduated out of Spokane Guilds School. "Part of why it is so key, is because they only get them for three years. All of that early intervention has been huge in unlocking his potential."

Brandon began at Spokane Guilds School when he was seven weeks old. At the time, Schuller had a busy life, between serving as the head Women's Basketball coach at Eastern Washington University and being a mom to three kids. She and her husband were told while she

was pregnant that Brandon would have Down syndrome. It was overwhelming to consider what that meant for their family and for Brandon going forward in life. It was a difficult situation for which to prepare.

"No one is *planning* on having a developmentally delayed child," says Spokane Guilds School Executive Director, Dick Boysen. "Everyone is planning on having the perfect baby. There is *no* way you can get ready for that."

In 1979, Boysen, the then-education director for Head Start, was recruited to be the executive director of the Spokane Guilds School, which was looking for someone to provide overarching leadership. "I thought, 'Wow, I could help the Guilds School! I felt like I would be able to do that,'" he says.

Boysen did have that ability, though it may have been difficult to believe it when looking at him. At only 27 years of age, he already had earned two Masters Degrees from Washington State University. One was in Childhood Development and one was in Adult and Continuing Education. He joined the team and has been at the helm for 38 years, putting both degrees to work.

### The "New" School

A few short years after arriving, Boysen saw the school through its move into its "new" building. Though they have been in that same building for 33 years now, they still refer to it as "new."

"Coming to the 'new' school was a success," says Marilyn Henderson, the school program coordinator who, like Boysen, has worked there for 38 years. Other successes were the location and the price. Housed in the old Garland School, the building is leased from Spokane Public Schools for the price of \$1.00 per

Brandon Schuller is a huge Eagles fan, and brings joy to the basketball court at EWU, where he often cheers on the team.



photo courtesy of Wendy Schuller



year. Originally for a 20-year term, the lease has been extended to 2023.

If Boysen, Henderson and innumerable alumni parents, board members and supporters have their way, that lease won't have to be extended for much longer. A vision and goal for the school is to see it move into the university-district on the edge of downtown Spokane, achieving the goal of creating a training and research center. To be located in the heart of Spokane's education center would allow the school more opportunities to work with the students in the higher education programs, to be a part of the research being done there and to make the program's facility more centrally located to all of the residents of Spokane County.

Right now, the Spokane Guilds School cannot serve more than 150 students per month, based on space and staff limitations. Knowing they only serve 25-30 percent of the need in Spokane is one of alumni parent, and Spokane Guilds School Board member Tim Cassels' frustrations, and something he would like to see change. He would like to see as many children in need, in the area, receive the care that his daughter received. "The amazing results we get here make it better later in life by having the therapy now," he says. "You are always playing catch-up, [with a delay] but if you don't have that out of the gate, it sets you back. This is a special place! It's a treasure to Spokane that other places try to emulate."

#### The Work that is Done

Children at the Spokane Guilds' School have access to a registered dietician, which is funded by Spokane Regional Health District's Children with Special Health Care Needs. They also are assessed by a developmental pediatrician, and have access to physical and occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists and certified special education teachers. They may receive individual therapy, attend toddler groups, preschool groups or home-

based services, depending on what is deemed best for them.

"As a parent, you feel a part of the therapy," says Schuller. Watching and participating with the therapists empowered her to feel like she could go home and continue the same work with Brandon that he was doing at school, so he was getting continuous therapy, rather than just once a week.

In reality, the therapists and teachers don't cut off the caring once a child graduates. "They are *still* concerned," says Wendy, of Brandon's therapists, who stop her whenever they see her, wanting to ask

her about how he is doing in school, and how he is progressing. Her answer to their inquiries is a positive one. Today, Brandon loves basketball. He's a big fan of basketball at EWU, and is often on the court as his mom coaches, interacting with the players and the staff. "He loves the Eagles, and loves to sing and dance,

and Whip/Nae Nae," she says. "He's happy and smiling. He's taught us that every milestone has been worked for so hard. I can still remember when he sat up for the first time, or ate for the first time. He taught us empathy and not to take things for granted. Our family is eternally grateful, and we want to see the school continue its mission."

Shuller also admires the manner in which the school operates. "The Guilds School is the only place that does what they do and is not making money off of it," she says. "This truly is a place about helping kids, in a world with so many ulterior motives. I believe in them so much. Everything has a motive, but they are so selfless, and have empathy and love for the families. There are kids with so many different needs, but it shows what early intervention can do."

Always with a smile on his face, Boysen's love for the children and the joy of seeing them succeed seems to far outweigh the business and finance side of his job. "We would never turn away a kid on a parents' ability to pay," he says. "*Nobody* is

[financially] prepared to have a child with a developmental disability." His heart seems to be for the children first and the details later.

#### In the Classrooms

One of the ways the Guilds School is unique is that it uses the team approach to classrooms. That means each class has a special education teacher, an occupational therapist, a physical therapist and a speech pathologist all in the same room, rather than being in individual parts of the building. "We make the classrooms into team rooms," says Henderson.

The classrooms are small with between five and 11 students in a group. Much like a mainstream classroom, they start the day by washing their hands and gathering for circle time on the carpet, clustered around their teacher. They find their picture on a bench, and then go to table time, where they work on attending to a task and seeing it through. Therapists will work with them each step of the way.

A peer model, or a student of the same age who is functioning at the level the children should, and from whom students can learn and model the correct behavior, is added into each class. Peer models are often the children or grandchildren of staff.

Children work on big movements, like holding their head up, rolling over and crunching, as well as fine-tuning skills that allow them to be independent in their community and environment, such as managing zippers. "Everything we do here is to make it fun and functional," says Ginette Kerkering, a physical therapist who works with the toddlers and has been at the school for nine years.

Events like snack time allows children to work on essential skills like manners, how to chew and how to swallow. While those might seem like skills that you know rather than learn, they are learned movements that must be conquered before moving on to proper speech and eating abilities.

Janice Young is a speech pathologist who has been working at Spokane Guilds School for 16 years. On a Monday morning, she was seated on the floor, working with an adorable little boy named Bradley, on



photo courtesy of Tricia Mason

Hayley Mason is all smiles while at the Guilds School.

his functional communication skills. "Speech is an overlaid function of feeding," she explains. "Some muscles that you use to eat are the same ones that you use to speak." Without developing the muscles to eat properly, Bradley, or any child, could struggle with speech and communication.

Working on the muscles needed for eating is a common experience for students at Spokane Guilds School. Cassels' daughter came to the school when she was 14 months, after being diagnosed with failure-to-thrive and Williams Syndrome. "She was low on the height and weight scales and she had a heart murmur, so she was sent to a cardiologist. She had never been a hearty eater, and her feeding and subsequent growth needed to improve," he says.

Improve, is exactly what did. "She could barely sit up when she started, and when she graduated, she walked out of here saying, 'Bye,'" says her dad. "The transformation is amazing. The therapists are able to do stuff and get out of them things that the rest of us can't. They have a gift."

That gift of improvement is what Tricia Mason was looking for when she brought her daughter, Hayley, to Spokane Guilds School for an

evaluation. Mason had expressed concerns about her daughter's speech to her doctor and family, but many of her friends and family thought she was overreacting. But at 16 months, she had Hayley evaluated at the Spokane Guilds School, after learning that she could do a self-referral for an evaluation. Therapists at the Guilds School concurred that Hayley had some areas in which she could use some assistance. She was late on her developmental needs, was non-verbal when she started at the school.

"Going from being non-verbal to an articulate communicator is huge," says Mason, as she looks at Hayley today, milling about, chattering away, asking questions. "She was extremely frustrated because she understood, but we didn't know what she wanted," says her mom of Hayley's inability to verbally express herself. "She is extremely intelligent, but we needed to bridge the gap."

Mason is extremely pleased she took the initiative to reach out to the Guilds School, and wants to encourage other parents to do the same if they have a concern for their child. "You have to advocate for your child," she says.

"It was a relief, but because I didn't have support from my family; it was hard," she says. "It took me bringing them here to see her therapy sessions and see that she was having fun. When 'special needs' is mentioned, there is a strong fear behind that, so I was not supported. I felt I was doing what was right for her, but it was a while before I got that reinforced. They (children) can't speak for themselves. If there is not a support system standing behind you, you can find it here."

That support system is something that every parent at the Spokane Guilds School seems to hold in great esteem.

"It is more than therapy; it almost feels like unconditional support," says Dayton of the support she has received at the Guilds School.

Eily didn't bear weight in her legs until she was eight months old, and her upper body was weak because of the trauma from open heart surgery. Over the last year, Spokane Guilds School therapists have worked with her on activities that support crawling. "There are no words to say how amazing they are," says Dayton. "I want people to understand, every time we walk out of here, we know life is getting better, and she is getting stronger and is closer to achieving her goals."

Meeting those goals, and helping these sweet children succeed is what Boysen and his colleagues have devoted almost 40 years to accomplishing.

"Twenty percent of the kids leave here at age three and never show up in a special education room again," says Boysen, "while some of them, we've got to make them marathon runners, not sprinters."

Marathons runners who, slow and steady, finish the race that seemed daunting with that first step. In this case, those marathon runners finish with an incredible group of therapists, teachers, friends and family, cheering them on the whole way. **5**

To learn more about Spokane Guilds School, visit [guildsschool.org](http://guildsschool.org)