

Treffert's Work with 'Extraordinary People' Reaches Global Community

Kendi Parvin, *WMJ* Managing Editor

Curiosity. In a word, that's what has motivated Darold Treffert, MD, throughout his career. A psychiatrist from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, Dr Treffert today is known worldwide as a leading authority on savant syndrome. But he also has been very active around mental health rights, and writes and lectures on both along with the topic of "mellowing."

"I'm a person, at least in the scientific sense, of great curiosity. When I see something I don't understand, it's intriguing to me. That's part of what got me into psychiatry," he said.

Dr Treffert said he chose psychiatry after an encounter with a patient during his internship. "One night a woman came into the emergency department. She had harmed herself and her children. She was full of self-inflicted stab wounds, blatantly psychotic and babbling. It occurred to me that I understand heart attacks a little bit, I understand asthma, but we don't have the foggiest idea really what's happening with this woman," he said. "So the field of psychiatry was of interest to me because of how little we understood. And that's the thing that triggered my interest in savants."

Dr Treffert began his career in 1962 at the Winnebago Mental Health Institute in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where he was asked to start a children's unit. It was there that he met his first savants—4 boys who each had



Darold Treffert, MD

an extraordinary skill. One had memorized the entire bus system for the city of Milwaukee; another could put together a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle flawlessly, picture side down, based on the shape of the pieces; the third was a "walking this-day-in-history almanac;" and the fourth could make basketball free throws with amazing accuracy.

Two years later, Treffert became superintendent at Winnebago, where he spent the next 15 years. During that time, he studied savant syndrome as a hobby, examining the literature and publishing dozens of articles on the subject. "I was really intrigued by that condition," he said. "How is it possible that you can have this kind of disability and yet have these remarkable abilities?"

Then, in June 1980, Dr Treffert met Leslie Lemke, a prodigious savant with extraordinary musical talent who gave a concert in Fond du Lac. The meeting, which Dr Treffert calls "serendipitous," would literally change his life.

"A Green Bay television station taped that concert and wanted to broadcast it but they didn't really believe what they saw," Dr Treffert said. "So they brought the tapes to me as the local mental health expert and said, 'What is this and how do you explain it?' I said, 'Well I know what it is; I'm not sure I know how to explain it.'"

The story was picked up by the wire ser-

vices and aired nationally; then Walter Cronkite used it as his Christmas story. Leslie, his mother May, and Dr Treffert soon were appearing on high-profile TV shows including *Donahue*, the *Today Show*, *Geraldo*, *Joan Rivers*, and *Oprah*.

Public interest in savant syndrome continued to grow, and a few years later, in October 1983, *60 Minutes* aired a program called "Genius," featuring Lemke and two other savants—Alonzo Clemons and George Finn. Dustin Hoffman, who was watching that program and said he 'was moved to tears by Leslie,' decided then to play the savant in the movie *Rain Man*.

Because Dr Treffert also was involved with "Genius," he was asked to review the *Rain Man* script. "The executive producer called me and asked if I would look at the script. I asked 'Why?' He said, 'Well, first of all we want the film to be accurate and secondly, we want it to be sensitively done.'"

There were some significant script changes; some "concocted" scenes were eliminated. "I said, 'you don't have to embellish anything; savant syndrome is spectacular in its own right. Stay with real characters,'" said Dr Treffert. So everything you see in the movie—Judge Wapner at exactly 3 PM, the square root scene, and the toothpick scene—those all are based on actual individuals. The film was inspired by Kim Peek, but it's not Kim Peek's story. It's a composite savant. I think that lent credibility, and it was sensitively done."

Treffert said when it debuted in 1988, *Rain Man* made autistic savant a household word. And actually, I think that movie has done more



Darold Treffert, MD, uses video-editing equipment in his home office in Fond du Lac, Wis. Dr. Treffert, who is known worldwide as a leading expert in savant syndrome, edits video segments for lectures he gives on the topic as well as a website: www.savantsyndrome.org.

to bring autism onto the radar screen nationally. I don't know how you could have had a better public education effort than that movie."

Dr. Treffert has done much throughout his career to educate the public, and medical and scientific communities about savant syndrome and other mental health issues. A past president of the Wisconsin Medical Society and chair of its Board of Directors, Dr. Treffert also was an outspoken advocate for the "fifth standard," Wisconsin legislation passed in 1995 that allows for a patient who may be homicidal, suicidal, or gravely disabled to be placed in treatment before his or her situation deteriorates to imminent dangerousness.

Today, he is a founding member of the Dorothea Dix Think Tank, a group of psychiatrists around the country who are concerned about and working to reverse the criminalization of mentally ill. "There are more mentally ill people in prisons now than in the hospital, which is a just a tragedy," Dr. Treffert said.

Still, most of Dr. Treffert's work focuses on savant syndrome. He has published two books: *Extraordinary People: Understanding*

Savant Syndrome in 1989 and *Islands of Genius: The Bountiful Mind of the Autistic, Acquired and Sudden Savant* in 2010. Now in its third printing, *Extraordinary People* was updated most recently in 2006 and is available in 10 languages. *Islands of Genius* was published in 2010 and won a gold medal in the Psychology and Mental Health category of the 2011 Independent Publisher Book Awards. It provides an update on well-known savants Dr. Treffert has followed for years and explores new cases, particularly the "acquired savant" in which neurotypical persons demonstrate previously dormant savant skills, sometimes at a prodigious level following head injury or central nervous system disease. It also explores genetic memory—how savants "know things they never learned."

"What started out as kind of a hobby is really full-time," said Dr. Treffert. Following his tenure as superintendent at the Winnebago Mental Health Institute, Treffert spent the next 12 years dividing his time between private practice and as director of the Fond du Lac County Mental Health Center. He "retired" in

1991, and today continues to research, lecture, and write, including a recent manuscript on hyperlexia published in the December 2011 issue of *WMJ*. And although he works out of an office in his home, the audience for his work is truly global.

Not long after "Genius" aired in 1983, the Driscoll Gallery in Denver hosted the world premier of the artwork of Alonzo Clemons, one of the savants featured in the show. The gallery expressed an interest in donating some of the proceeds from the show to a charity or foundation to further research and education about savant syndrome. From that, the Clearinghouse for Information Regarding Savant Syndrome was established at the Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation. Years later, in 1997, the clearinghouse added a website, www.savantsyndrome.org, which is hosted by the Wisconsin Medical Society. The site features a plethora of information about savant syndrome, including profiles, videos, articles, and answers to frequently asked questions.

"The website has just been a gold mine of opportunity for communication both

ways. I get in touch with people or they get in touch with me. I continue to be amazed at the breadth and scope of the site,” said Dr Treffert, who added that the inquiries he receives generally fall into 1 of 4 categories:

- requests from reporters and documentary producers
- students, ranging from fourth graders through PhD candidates, working on papers
- scientific inquiries from other clinicians doing research, looking for references, and networking
- parents or clinicians describing a son or daughter or patient and asking if they might be a savant, and if so, how to proceed

A recent 2-week sampling included media inquiries from CBS New York, magazines from France and Ecuador, and *60 Minutes* Australia; a student in Stockholm, Switzerland; the mother of a savant; 2 parents of hyperlexic children; and a request from UCLA to review a manuscript.

“One of the offshoots of these inquiries is that a number of people write to me and tell me that they want to go into neuroscience,” Dr Treffert said. “That provides a great deal of satisfaction for me because I’m recruiting ‘fresh new explorers.’”

Contacts through the website also have connected Dr Treffert to many “new” savants and have fueled his desire to develop a savant registry. Last summer, through a grant from the Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation, medical student David Rebedew worked with Dr Treffert to create the registry. Currently, it documents 309 savants from 33 countries, ranging from those with splinter skills to prodigious savants. It also separates congenital savants from acquired savants. Once registered, additional, standardized information is gathered from each savant or caregiver, including underlying disability, most common skill, gender, and ethnicity.

Dr Treffert’s long-range goal is to establish a savant institute to encourage multi-disciplinary research and house the work

that’s already been done.

“One of the things that has been so impressive to me is not just how little we know about the brain, but how marvelous and how intricate and how extraordinary the brain is,” said Dr Treffert. “I simply have become more enamored, more fascinated, and more impressed with the brain. That keeps me going.”

For Dr Treffert, it’s not just about the science behind savant syndrome, though. It’s about the people.

“It’s very gratifying. I’ve had the opportunity to meet many savants and their families. They’re just delightful people, and we’ve gotten to be good friends,” he said.

Perhaps his greatest satisfaction, however, lies in the future. When recounting a presentation to a fourth-grade class, Dr Treffert said, “At the end, a boy and a girl came up, and the boy said, ‘I want to be a scientist, and I want to do what you do,’ and the girl said, ‘me too.’ I thought the day they walk across the stage and get their degree in neuroscience, that will be the pay-off.”



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