



WRETCHES & JABBERERS

A FILM BY GERARDINE WURZBURG
wretchesandjabberers.org

A New Film Explodes Myths About Autism

PARADE Joanne Chen
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The new documentary *Wretches & Jabberers* follows the journey of two autistic men—Larry Bissonnette, 52, an artist; Tracy Thresher, 42, an advocate—as they travel the world, attempt to banish the myths about autism, and reveal its global face. PARADE spoke to the pair behind the film—Academy-Award-winning director/producer Gerry Wurzburg and co-producer Douglas Biklen, who is also the dean of the School of Education at Syracuse University and author of *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone*, to find out why and how they made it. ([Wretches and Jabberers opens nationwide in April](#))

Q: How did you become interested in the subject of autism? Wurzburg: Growing up, a family friend had a young son, Gregory, who was autistic. Doctors told her to put the child in an institution; otherwise, he said, it will destroy your marriage and it will destroy you. Until the 1970's, most people who were autistic were thought to have childhood schizophrenia or labeled mentally retarded and were institutionalized. I saw the struggle she went through, and she refused to place her son in an institution. When Gregory was about eight years old, she asked me to help babysit him. The first time I met him, it was like, "Whoa!" He was running around the house, fixating on things—a whirlwind. Gradually, we got to know each other. He was not verbal, but it became clear to me that he was smarter than I was.

Q: Larry and Tracy, the two men in your film, appear at first to be quite impaired, but as we see when they communicate by computer, that they're intelligent and even social. Is this the case with many autistics? Biklen: Nobody can say what percentage of people who are unable to communicate with spoken language are competent, but in every instance where an autistic person has good communication skills, it's because he or she has been treated as competent and been given an opportunity. Larry and Tracy also struggled with speech, but at some point they were taken as competent and given a chance. There was an old statistic from the 1960's which gets repeated a lot—that 75% of autistic people are mentally retarded—and it has no basis in fact whatsoever, but it's a real challenge to debunk that myth.

Q: How did you meet Larry and Tracy? Wurzburg: Larry and Tracy have been activists for about 10 years, and they had a cameo in one of my earlier films, *Autism is a World*. Doug had actually made a short film about Larry a few years ago. Then, Doug



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and I saw them again about three years ago when they were presenting at a conference we attended. They declared, through type, with so much wisdom and humor that they wanted to take their message out to larger audiences, like rock bands do. They called their movement “World Intelligence Magnified.” They were so compelling that I went up to them afterward and said, “We have to talk.” I ended up visiting them in Vermont [where they live] to discuss the idea of a film about their work. It was immediate congruence! Larry and Tracy’s desire to take their message global was really the driving force of the film. So we did research trips to the different countries to discuss the film with each person we wanted to feature, and they all immediately agreed to be part of it. The research phase took about six months, and the journey itself was filmed over the course of a year.

Q: What is the film’s main message? Biklen: Its major theme is that autistic people are feeling, compassionate, thoughtful, and empathetic people. You get to see that in the film. For example, in Sri Lanka, Larry became very upset because he was required to go barefoot at a Buddhist Temple. After we shot the scene at the temple, he and Larry said to Gerry that they wanted to talk about what happened and asked that we film this exchange. That was particularly emotional. They recognized the spirituality of the experience, and in the film you can see how they relate to each other and their great empathy. It was so respectful. Clearly, there’s a desire to be social, even if you’re not getting the visual cues.