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For those with autism, documentary offers new hope

By JOHN CURRAN
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MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) -- When Tracy Thresher has something to say, he uses his right index finger - and a special computer that gives voice to what he types. Hunched over the device, he begins.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap, tap....

Autism silences the 43-year-old Vermont man. He doesn't speak. But he has a message for the world about how people should think of people like him. So he taps it out.

"To think intelligence, even if you see wacky, goofy behavior. We are simply intelligence, shown in a different way," comes the robotic voice, broadcast out of his computer.

Thresher and friend Larry Bissonnette, 53, who have been advocates for 10 years for people with autism and the disabled community at large, are about to get a new platform for spreading their can-do message: They're the focus of "Wretches and Jabberers," a documentary film opening next week in 40 cities that makes the point that "disabled" doesn't mean "dumb."

"Wretches" is what they jokingly call themselves after picking up the term from another person with autism. To them, "Jabberers" are people who can speak.

At turns funny, warm and sad, the 90-minute film, which premieres Friday in New York City and then in AMC Theatres nationally a day later, follows Thresher and Bissonnette to Sri Lanka, Japan and Finland on a mission to change people's attitudes about disability, intelligence and communication.

Along the way, they're seen dodging traffic, talking about the meaning of life with a Buddhist monk and bathing in a Finnish sauna.

Directed by Academy Award-winning director Gerardine Wurzburg, it was underwritten by the John P. Hussman Foundation, an Ellicott City, Md., organization that provides aid to people with significant disabilities.

"My motivation is about changing the general public's perception about people with different abilities," says Wurzburg. "That's what this film does. It challenges people's perceptions about autism and it communicates it through the perspective of people labeled by society.

"At the core, it's a human rights and civil rights issue," said Wurzburg, whose other films include Oscar-winning "Educating Peter" (1992) and "Autism is a World" (2005), which was nominated for an Academy Award.

Autism, which has no known single cause, is a developmental disability that affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others.

Thresher and Bissonnette suffered in silence for much of their lives, until the advent of what's known as augmentative or alternative communication devices. Typically, the devices consist of special keyboards equipped with voice output software that turn typed words into spoken ones.

Thresher, who lived at home until he was 21, went to public schools. Bissonnette was institutionalized into his 20s, at the now-closed Brandon Training School and the Vermont State Hospital.

"It was hard growing up," said Thresher's mother, Susan Thresher, 62, of Barre Town. "It was difficult going to school and being shut in a room doing a puzzle, when you've got such intelligence upstairs that he couldn't explain to everybody, just how he knew everything that was going on.

"He would be so upset when he got home, and there was no way I knew how he was upset or from what," she said.

Like Thresher, Bissonnette, who has more speech capability, has flourished by having access to the equipment. When he's not on the road with Thresher, he works as an artist from a home studio in Milton, Vt., where he lives with his mother and sister.

Once "retards" and social outcasts, they've evolved into sought-after speakers at conferences and workshops, stressing the theme of empowerment in the face of severe handicaps.

Wurzberg saw them at an autism conference in California three years ago and got the idea to use their perspectives to tell the story of silent autism patients.

In person, they riff like a pair of show business partners.

Last week, they held forth one afternoon in a cafeteria in Vermont's statehouse, sitting at a table - accompanied by helpers Harvey Lavoy and Pascal Cheng - before a roomful of disability advocates and clients who had come for a screening of "Wretches and Jabberers."

The men had just come from a visit to Syracuse, N.Y.

Hunched over their devices, they pecked away at the keyboards and waited for the words to be converted into sound by voice output software. It takes patience - for them and their listeners. The words come slowly.

"Hello, everyone," came the voice from Thresher's computer. "How are you doing today? I just drove in on the Syracuse express and would like to welcome you to the Larry and Tracy show. We are looking to answer your questions and entertain you at the same time, so here we go..."

Claudia Pringles, 47, the mother of an 11-year-old girl with autism, asked the two what advice they had for parents like her.

"That is easy," replied Thresher. "Believe in their intelligence, presume competence and most of all don't sideline them. Make sure they live a life with dignity, having a purpose in life."

Someone else asked how it felt to be movie stars.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

"It opens up dating possibilities," typed Thresher. "Moving with beautiful people, magazine celebrity status."

Bissonnette pecked at his keyboard. "It keeps me in movie star shape. Lots of fine beer and food," came his answer.

"Does the title of the movie bother you?" they were asked.

"Papers need a good headline, and I need a more weird label," Bissonnette answered. The film's makers are already busy fielding requests for Thresher and Bissonnette to be keynote speakers at conferences.

"It's like Helen Keller changed things. Larry and Tracy are going to change things for people who have autism and don't have normal ways to communicate," Wurzburg said.

Online:

Wretches and Jabberers: <http://www.wretchesandjabberers.org/>

Larry Bissonnette: <http://www.myclassiclifefilm.com/>

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