

# Chicago Tribune Magazine

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## TRAIN MAN

HOW AN AUTISTIC CHILD FOUND THE RIGHT TRACK

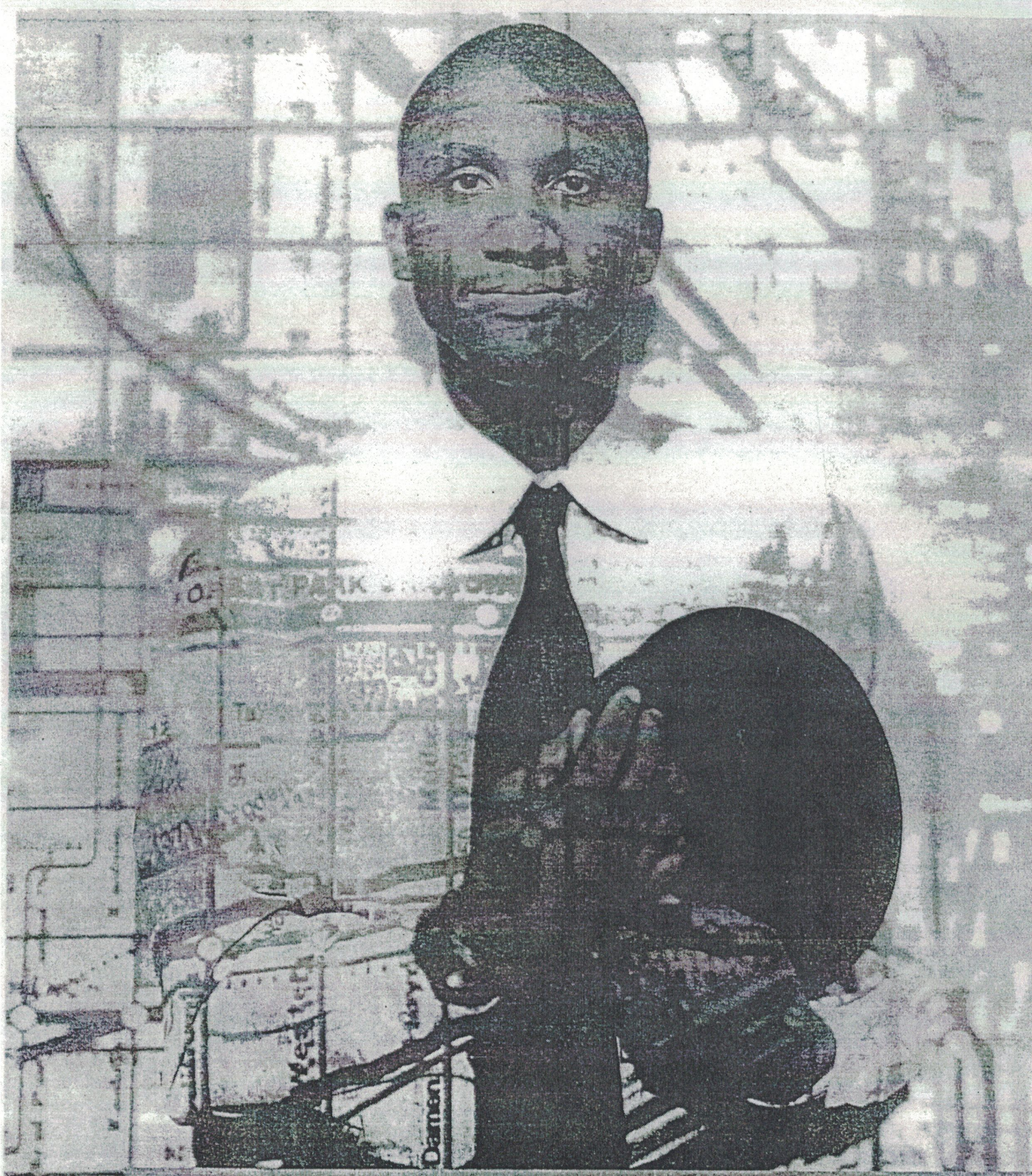




**THE MAN WITH THE MAP IN HIS HEAD**

BY BILL CLEMENTS ■ PHOTOS BY JEFF SCIORTINO





**STANFORD JAMES LOVED TRAINS AND HIS MOTHER LOVED HIM; NOW HE HAS THE JOB OF HIS DREAMS**



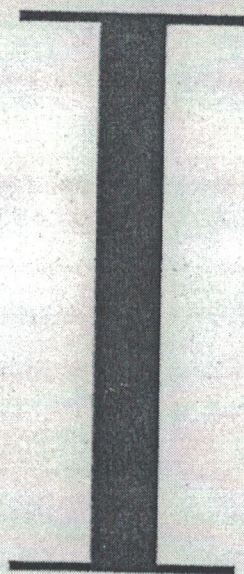
# STANFORD, CAN I HELP YOU?"



Stanford James at his office with his mother, Dorothy, who encouraged her autistic son's enthusiasm for trains.



# "RTA TRAVEL; THIS IS



t's a Saturday morning, around 9:30, and Stanford James, a customer service agent on the RTA's help desk, is wearing a headset and sitting in one of some 60 cubicles in this room on the 18th floor of a building at Madison and Wells Streets.

**"CAN YOU TELL ME HOW TO GET FROM LAKE AND PULASKI TO 445 N. WELLS?"**

The woman's voice sounds tired, edgy.

"That's Lake and Pulaski to 445 N. Wells," James says, checking his computer. "OK, ma'am, hold on a minute." But the first route the computer suggests, James doesn't like: "That's too many blocks to walk," he says to a visitor. "We'll have to give her another way. Sometimes I have to use my imagination." He gets more information from the computer and then fills in the blanks.

"OK, ma'am, take the Green Line east and get off at Clark and Lake. Walk through the overhead bridge, the one that goes across the tracks, and switch over to the Brown Line. Take that north one stop to the Merchandise Mart.



Get off, you're going to be at 315 N. Wells. Go down the stairs and walk north a few blocks and there you are at 445 N. Wells." As he's talking to the woman, he's tracing with his finger the route he's explaining on a map pinned to the wall in his cubicle—the same cubicle he sits in each time, No. 39.

"OK, thanks," the woman says, sounding relieved. "You have a good day now."

"OK, you, too," James says, "and thanks for calling RTA Travel."

Overhearing this conversation, it wouldn't occur to you that Stanford James has autism. But James, who is 23, might not have gotten this job if it weren't for his puzzling and sometimes disabling condition. Like some people with autism, he has an exceptional ability that involves a photographic memory. From the time James was a little boy, he has used his gift to focus on trains and maps, specifically the trains and maps of the Chicago-area public transportation system.

"When he was a baby," says his mother, Dorothy James, who is 43, "we were staying with my mother over at 49th and Princeton. And he'd be in the windows just watching and watching those 'L' trains. I don't know what the trains did for him, but they sure got him."

Fortunately for Stanford James, his mom encouraged his ability and obsession with maps and trains, to the point that he now carries a map of the Chicago area in his head. Such close family support, which is considered a key to success for a person with autism, isn't always there for people like James; 20 years ago it was even less common. Though Dorothy James was very young and poor and not well-versed in autism, she knew by instinct how to help her son. Call it, as she does, her "mother-lion coming out."

Stanford James has had this job with the RTA, handling as many as 200 calls during an eight-hour weekday shift, for almost four years. Until the RTA put in the new computer system a few years ago, James had to rely on his "imagination" a lot more.

"First I focus and study the map and then, later, it'll just pop right out of my head," he explains. "Then I congratulate myself in my imagination, saying, 'Stanford, you are the best man

who can do everything!'" James' method of visualizing the map—visual thinking—is a common trait among autistic people with his special ability. Before the new computers, James was able to handle more calls than any other agent in the office, and that earned him Employee of the Year honors in 1997. James will not hesitate to tell you about his achievement, one he hopes to duplicate: "I think I'm doing pretty good this year. I love my friends at work and my supervisors, and they love me."

"Stanford is wonderful," says

"I'll always be there. I don't know why; I didn't talk that way to the others and, obviously, I didn't know about his problem."

Stanford, strong-looking at 6 foot 2 and 175 pounds, is nodding his head in agreement. His tendency to agree with and repeat the last few words of sentences he hears—particularly his mother's—is known as echolalia, a common trait for people with autism. The way he will mimic certain key phrases is also prevalent among autistic people and is considered a coping mechanism.



James hopes to repeat his 1997 Employee of the Year honors: "I think I'm doing pretty good this year."

Lanea Oakley, an operations supervisor. "He comes to work no matter the weather and he's polite all the time. He's thorough, and that's what the customers want."

For an autistic man to work with people so well in such a demanding environment is "remarkable," says Margaret Creedon, a nationally recognized expert on autism who provides counseling and does research at Chicago's Easter Seals Therapeutic Day School for autistic children. "One of the biggest issues is that autistic kids don't know how to use their skills, so they end up with the lowest-common-denominator-type jobs," Creedon says.

Dorothy James had a special feeling about Stanford, even when she was pregnant with him.

"I used to talk to my kids before they were born," Dorothy says as Stanford sits between her and her daughter Andrea, 16, on a couch in their small Englewood apartment. "With Stanford I just kept saying, 'Don't you worry now, I'm always going to protect you,

Children tend to start exhibiting signs of autism around age 2: They don't talk until much later than most kids; they don't interact normally with others, even parents; they often experience intense physical discomfort for no apparent reason, which causes them to cry a lot. Some experts compare the behavior of an autistic person to that of someone who is on hallucinogenic drugs.

**D**orothy noticed early on that Stanford, the second of her five children, was "different." He didn't talk much and kept to himself; trains were the only things that got him going. But Dorothy didn't act right away: "I hate to say it, but I didn't admit there was a problem until he got to 1st grade."

That's not unusual, according to autism experts. It was especially true 20 years ago. Even today many people are

reluctant to accept that their child has this strange condition. Scientists and researchers haven't isolated a specific cause or established a definition. Theories about autism abound: Some argue it's caused by vaccinations, others, by the overuse of dairy products. The old, much-discredited notion was that autism was a psychological condition caused by a cold and distant mother.

Five minutes with Dorothy James, and the distant-mother theory is debunked. She talks a lot and laughs at every opportunity, as do her kids, including Stanford. "I try to keep the

good spirits in the house," she explains. She'll call Stanford "the Slickster"; Andrea is "Peezly Q"; and Ariel, who's 7 and has just bounced into the room, Dorothy calls "the Little Wild Girl. But you can't say she's not well-fed!" Ariel, who's a bit pudgy, looks at her mother, smiles, grabs for a nearby open bag of Cheetos and springs out of the room. Dorothy's other children are Charlena, 15, and the oldest, Christina, who's 26 and has two children. "Don't go calling me a grandmother, now," Dorothy pleads.

The Jameses' apartment is too small for Dorothy and the four kids who still live with her. It's definitely a bustling and well-lived-in

place, with neighbors popping in and out every 15 minutes or so. Dozens of multicolored boxes containing puzzle games are piled in different corners. "I love my puzzles," Dorothy says, "and Stanford likes them too." Stanford nods. But the most dominant feature of the place is the many photographs that populate the off-white walls, mostly pictures of Dorothy's children and two grandchildren. "I'm a picture fanatic," Dorothy laughs. "I could cover the whole house in pictures."

Stanford's small room, which he will show you with pride, is unusual for the number of pictures and CTA and RTA maps taped to the walls. They used to be completely covered with his beloved maps—until about six months ago, when pictures of the female soul and hip-hop trio Blaque began to overtake the walls. "I just pray to meet them one day," Stanford says a bit breathlessly.

His obvious excitement, as innocent as it is urgent, would be more appropriate in a 14-year-old than a 23-year-old man. But delayed development,

Bill Clements, a copy editor at *Modern Healthcare* magazine, wrote about barber Pat Calomari in the March 26 Magazine.



social and otherwise, is one hallmark of autism, at least as far as science can describe it now.

What so far is known about autism, Creedon says, is that it is a brain disorder connected with a chemical imbalance that results in developmental disruptions in three areas: relatedness, communication and what Creedon terms "the behavioral repertoire." The repertoire for autistics includes exaggerated or extreme behavior.

The disorder carries a strong genetic link. A person with severe autism will not be able to speak, will only grunt or moan; someone with a moderate case will talk but with pronounced echolalia that results in difficulty communicating; a high-functioning autistic will be able to communicate but "won't always get the drift or the timing of the things we say," says Creedon, who in 1970 was the first director of the day school, which is on the IIT campus and is associated with Michael Reese Hospital. That's one reason Stanford repeats things other people say: to ground himself while he processes the information. Stanford is in the moderate to high-functioning category. He communicates better than many people with autism, perhaps because of the open and communicative atmosphere Dorothy established around him.

Autism can wildly distort how a person processes information. People with the disorder seem to lack a filter that helps others organize the world. An autistic person's senses become jumbled and overloaded easily, leading to intense frustration and screaming tantrums, or the opposite: shut-down emotions and a blank look. For an autistic person, sound might come through as color; smell might be represented through touch.

**I**n her book, "Thinking in Pictures" (Vintage, 1995), Temple Grandin, a high-functioning autistic with a photographic memory—she refers to it as her "video library"—writes about how fear and anxiety controlled her life when she was young. It was so bad that eventually she constructed a "squeeze machine," a device she could stretch out in and control how it gently squeezed her entire body to soothe her constant pain and anxiety. "Gentle touching teaches kindness. . . . I had to feel this physical comfort to feel love," she writes.

"People think that just because autistics lack social skills, normal relatedness skills, that they don't have any feelings for other people," Creedon says. "But that's so wrong; they just have different ways of showing it."

Once Stanford James got into grade school, his mother couldn't ignore his problem anymore. By this time the

family was living in the Ida B. Wells housing project; Stanford was going to a nearby public grade school, but the school wouldn't test him to see what was wrong. So the mother-lion started to roar: "I caused a fuss until he got into Options for Knowledge and got transferred to a school that would do right by him," Dorothy James says. Options is a program that buses disad-

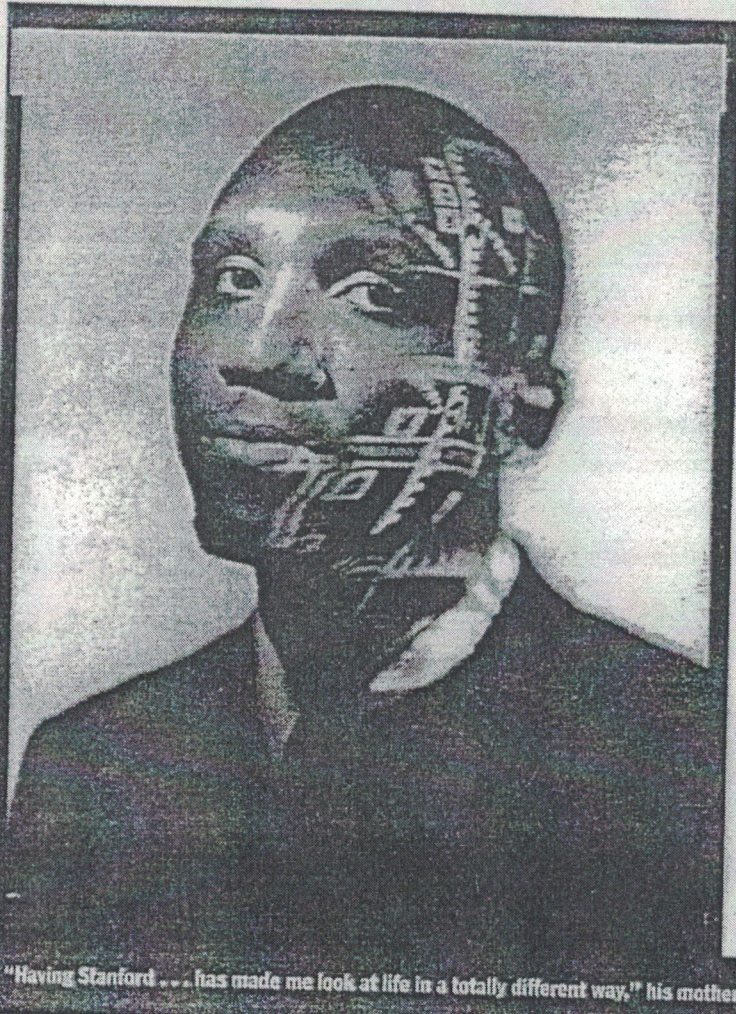
vantaged kids to schools where they can get appropriate help. In Stanford's case, that was John H. Kinzie School on the Southwest Side. "They tested him, told me he had a chemical imbalance and that his problem was autism. That really started the ball rolling."

Even as she started dealing with Stanford's autism, though, Dorothy was feeling guilty: "I was like, 'What did I do wrong? Why am I being punished?' I would say it took me until Stanford graduated out of grade school for me to stop really beating myself up."

Stanford went on to John F. Kennedy High School, also on the Southwest Side, and graduated 93rd out of 275. "When he walked across that stage I

was crying and wailing, they couldn't get me to stop," Dorothy says, beaming at her son next to her on the couch. "I kept saying to myself, 'They lied to me! Look how normal he is!'"

But Stanford isn't normal, as his mother well knows. He may be the main breadwinner for his family—his RTA wages are what enabled them to move out of Ida B. Wells—but he can't



"Having Stanford . . . has made me look at life in a totally different way," his mother says.

handle his own money. He may carry the map of Chicago in his head, but he can't shave himself in the morning. "I'm teaching him how to shave right now," Dorothy says. "And you're doing pretty good, Stanford. Don't worry, we're going to get there."

Anyone who thinks people with autism are emotionless should spend some time with Stanford James and his mom. They share a rapport that many parents would envy. Numerous times during several interviews Dorothy repeated questions for Stanford in different words—either translating them just as he needs to hear them or simply buying him time to process. And several times Stanford said—once with no particular rea-

schizophrenia and exceptionally high intellectual ability.

"It's clear that the genetic traits that can cause severe disabilities can also provide the giftedness that has produced some of the world's greatest art and scientific discoveries," writes Grandin, who is a professor of animal science. "Mild autistic traits can provide the single-mindedness that gets things done." She lists several books that discuss how Albert Einstein, Vincent Van Gogh and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein all exhibited autistic tendencies as young children and retained autistic traits as adults. "The swirls in the sky in [Van Gogh's] 'Starry Night' are similar to the sensory distortions that some people with

son—"I love my mother and I know she loves me." Maybe the timing is bit off" in the way he says it and the voice is a bit flat, but the emotion there. "I swear sometimes I have to tell Stanford not to worry about me and his sisters so much," says Dorothy, who has health problems that often prevent her from working.

Last year Stanford invited his mother to the RTA Christmas party. She looked at my mom and said, 'Mama, you ain't been out in a long time, but you're going out with me,' " Stanford says. "And we had a ball."

"I felt like a teenager again," Dorothy says, squealing with delight. "We even danced. I didn't realize my son could dance."

"Christina taught me," he explains. Stanford's older sister accompanied him to his high school prom. "We danced and danced," he says. "I love dancing."

"He's my big-little brother," says Andrea, a sophomore at Dunbar Vocational Career Academy. She is very protective of Stanford. "There are still a lot of things he doesn't know, that I have to tell him. My friends talk about their big brothers and their cars and girls and jewelry and all that, but Stanford isn't like that. His mind doesn't work that way."

How his mind works is still a mystery. "We don't understand people with unique skills, exceptional brains," Creedon says. "How do they develop these skills? Maybe other parts of their brains are left undeveloped in order for this one part to develop; they have to concentrate so hard to do one thing that other things are left undone."

In "Thinking in Pictures," Grandin discusses studies of autism and its genetic links to manic depression and



autism have," she writes.

When Stanford James was in high school, he got into a Marriott Foundation program called Bridges From School to Work that helps mentally and physically handicapped students get jobs. Nicole Lambert-Bufkin, one of James' counselors from Bridges, says James and his job mesh perfectly.

"A lot of the jobs we find are at grocery stores or in retail," Lambert-Bufkin says. "This was a different situation. It really matched his skills and interests. It stands out because it's so on point."

Michael Webb, operations manager at Gage Marketing Services, which handles the phone customer service for the RTA, agrees: "Stanford is definitely exceptional in this field. Plus, he walks in with a smile on his face, he keeps a smile on his face and leaves with a smile on his face. I wish I had 100 Stanfords, I wouldn't need anyone else."

Sosie Brown, assistant operations manager, looks out for James at his job and is the go-between with the family. Brown recalls with pride the day James got the Employee of the Year Award. "His mother was there, and that was a real proud, proud moment for him. I don't know if he fully understood what it all meant, but he knew the attention was focused on him."

Lambert-Bufkin gives Dorothy

James a lot of credit. "I think his mother taught him not to be fearful of people in the outside world and to be himself. His mom worked very hard to develop a real relationship with him and it shows in his relationships outside the home."

Creedon, who doesn't know Stanford or Dorothy James, says, "The way a family treats a child with autism can alter the course autism takes in that child." She suggests this is what happened with Stanford, that his communication skills are the result of a strong and supportive relationship with his mother and sisters: "That's a real accomplishment."

When Stanford was little and the family lived at 49th and Princeton, he had one constant request. "I would just be begging my mom, 'Mama, put me on the train!'" he says, a blissful look on his face, eyes fixed forward.

"I used to have to take him all the time," Dorothy says. "It was mostly the Green Line. All the time, 51st to Howard, Howard to 51st, back and forth." She adds, laughing, "The conductors all knew us by name: 'Taking Stanford for a ride today, huh?'"

"I'd just put a smile on my face," Stanford says, smiling wide.

"Christina was once joking on Stanford," Dorothy says. "She was saying, 'Lord, I hope you don't have

any children, because if you do, one will be named Green Line and another Red Line and don't forget the new Orange Line!' Boy, she had us rolling with that one."

"Yeah, she sure got me with that one," Stanford agrees.

"Stanford wants to work for Amtrak," Dorothy announces.

"Yeah," Stanford says, "the big trains. I love the big trains. Big trains are going to save Chicago!"

Dorothy laughs: "All right, Stanford, whatever you say."

Then, a revelation: "Before I started having kids... I used to love riding the trains too," Dorothy says. Stanford is nodding in agreement. "I would just get on the trains and let them take me wherever."

"You know," Dorothy adds, her smile gone, "before I get too rusted to move, I hope I can get my kids moved to a better place, where I know they'll be safe, because this neighborhood is bad." Stanford is nodding his head. "It's real bad," he says.

But Ida B. Welis was worse. One day about eight years ago Stanford was walking near the housing project when he saw a young man murdered in a gang dispute. "It happened right in front of his eyes!" Andrea says in disbelief.

"I ran home screaming, 'Mama,

help me!'" Stanford recalls.

"That really changed him," Dorothy says. "He was always sensitive about violence, but after that it was like you couldn't even raise your voice in front of him. So we try not to yell or argue in front of Stanford; I decided we had to really try and talk things out, so that's what we do."

"I really believe," she adds, "that if you keep positive people in your life, you're going to make it through OK." One of Dorothy's positive people is her son. "Having Stanford has helped me realize that nobody's perfect. It's made me look at life in a totally different way—it's made me more caring."

She pauses. "It's a rough ride at times, I'll tell any parent of an autistic child that. But if you stick with it, you can make it through... I wouldn't trade Stanford for anyone in the world. Nobody. He's just, I don't know, so special. I don't know... I'm sorry, I can't put it into words." Dorothy pauses, near tears; she looks over at Stanford, who looks back at her, his face placid, almost serene.

"Aw, hell," she says, brushing Stanford lightly on his knee, "they may as well just get us two old rocking chairs right now and put them together on a porch somewhere, because we're going to be sitting there together at the end." ■

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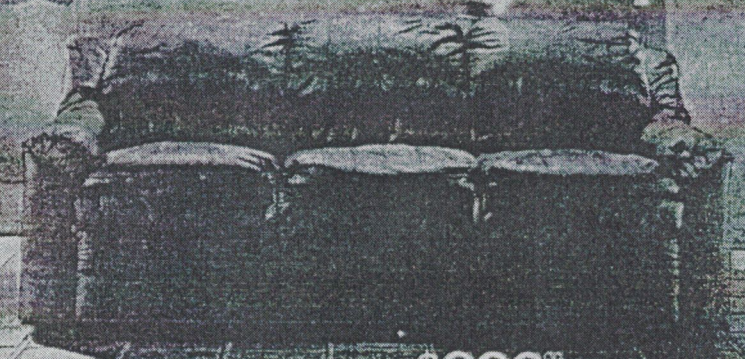


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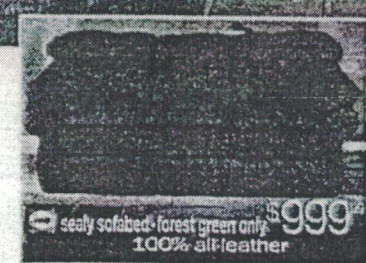
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