



RUSH NEUROBEHAVIORAL CENTER

Building on the strengths of children, teens, and young adults

Francisco's Story

When teachers at Lake Forest's Rondout Elementary School discussed Francisco Gonzales with members of the RNBC staff, they were clearly concerned. "He's such a puzzle," one teacher said of the quiet and gentle, dark-haired second grader, whose demeanor in class left teachers wondering if he was understanding the many skills and ideas he was expected to learn. Although Francisco participated in a bilingual Spanish- English program, he rarely communicated in either language. Nor did his face reveal much. "He wasn't talking in class. When directly addressed by the teacher he would often respond with a blank, distant look. His teachers worried that he was experiencing a seizure disorder," explains Adelaide Allen, intake coordinator of RNBC's scholarship program. "Francisco's lack of language, and the fact that he had no real friendships, also made teachers wonder if he had autism." Francisco's teachers knew he needed help, but weren't certain what the cause was of his difficulties. Francisco's large extended family was affectionate and concerned, but they, too, had little success engaging the little boy in their family activities or in "bringing him out of his shell" to laugh and play with his cousins. Francisco often preferred to be alone. Both Francisco's teachers and parents were confident that with a clear understanding of Francisco's strengths and challenges they could create the necessary supports at school and home to foster his language and social development.

Humans are a very social species. Doing well in work and at play, in school and at home, depends on our ability to interact with and engage other people. Francisco's isolation put his emotional health and continued intellectual growth at risk. His family was worried; he seemed distant and joyless. It was urgent that something be done before he fell too far behind academically and socially. The team at RNBC are experts in assessing and treating social-emotional learning (SEL) difficulties like Francisco was experiencing. But the process is expensive and time consuming. Fortunately, the Pearl H. Rieger Scholarship Awards Program was established to provide the resources for assessment and treatment of children in need.

To the joy of his parents, Francisco was selected for a scholarship. In Francisco's case, the assessment was a revelation. Francisco's verbal processing skills—the ability to take in information and respond verbally—were severely impaired. An added difficulty was that his working memory was also in the low-average range. "If you asked him to listen to and complete simple multi-step directions, as you'd expect a second grader to do, he was unable to do it and would instead just sit quietly and wait for the teacher to help," explained Ms. Allen. "Our neuropsychologist and speech and language pathologist discovered Francisco had a receptive and expressive language disorder. In class he was just overwhelmed by the flood of information around him. His difficulty in keeping up with the classroom activities would make him nervous. He'd often freeze up while desperately trying to work out a verbal response." But there were many positives in Francisco's assessment as well. His language and social difficulties were not due to Autism. Also, by doing an EEG (electro-encephalogram) at Rush University Medical



Center, it became apparent that Francisco did not have a seizure disorder. This lifted a considerable worry about Francisco's future from his family's mind.

Another happy surprise was that his visual processing skills—his ability to solve problems that were visually presented—was not just average, it was superior, much better than many children his age. Francisco was a whiz at learning from pictures and images and answering questions when pictures were used. These findings gave the team at RNBC a lot of information to guide their recommendations and ideas for interventions. In particular, Sara Panian, RNBC's speech and language pathologist, developed eleven speech and language goals and made detailed and specific recommendations to accomplish them. Multiple visits to Francisco's school by Dr. Evans-Smith, clinical director, Ms. Allen, and Ms. Panian, resulted in many effective changes. Now, for example, when working with Francisco his teachers include a visual component. They have learned to avoid open-ended questions like "What did you do this summer?" in favor of more specific queries: "Did you go to the beach or to camp this summer?" And, Rondout has him in a great social skills group that works on initiating play and building conversation skills.

Now, two years after RNBC's initial intervention, the change is dramatic. Ms. Allen explains, "This summer Francisco's been running up to his cousins with an enthusiastic, 'You want to play?' He connects with other kids at lunch time. His teacher says his comprehension has really improved. He is using new strategies independently and he is more responsive in the classroom. He is also becoming a leader in the classroom by keeping others on task. He'll say 'we are supposed to line up after we put our books away.' I feel so thankful for the support and donations that allowed us to help this family. Both Rondout and the family are grateful beyond words."

"Every year, through our Scholarship program, RNBC chooses children who have significant academic and social challenges that are not clearly understood. Their schools and families want to help them but don't have the financial means," Dr. Evans-Smith, director of the scholarship program and clinic, explains. "Most of the children that we see through our Scholarship program have been initially identified at school as needing a more comprehensive assessment. The school mentions our service to the child's parents who follow up with a call to our intake coordinator. In a few instances, we have had parents contact us directly seeking services but discover the cost is not manageable. In these cases, through our intake, we assess whether they qualify for support through our Scholarship program." A scholarship award can be as much as \$7,500 per child and covers the cost of a comprehensive neuropsychological assessment, the creation of a treatment plan, additional evaluations as indicated, initial services such as medication, occupational therapy, behavioral, and speech/language consults, and implementation of a plan at the child's school. We especially value the opportunity to work with the schools as a means of enhancing their knowledge of how to best teach and treat children with social-emotional learning difficulties.



pg. 3

In the past, we have solicited donations to the Pearl H. Reiger Scholarship Fund at our Annual Awards Dinner, which takes place this year on October 19th. But some of our supporters have also asked us to make an appeal for our Scholarship fund on our website since there are those who are unable to attend the dinner.

For more information about Pearl H. Reiger Scholarships, [click here](#). To make a donation, [click here](#) and designate your gift for the Scholarship Fund. Your donation can make all the difference to a child like Francisco.