

# Speaking out on stuttering

Long Islanders share the impact on their lives and the support they've found in overcoming the disorder

BY LISA SCHIFFMAN  
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It might take them a little longer to get their words out, but members of the Long Island stuttering community want you to know that what they say matters. And they have much to say about their experience.

Amy Robin, 18, of New Hyde Park remembers making a class presentation in fifth grade. "I couldn't get the 'the' word out," she says and recalls the cruel laughter from her classmates as she struggled, crying, to get through her speech.

Growing up was so painful, says Robin, that when she was 14 and 15, as her stutter was worsening, she wouldn't talk to anyone other than her family and two close friends. "I looked forward to sleeping, because I knew I didn't have to speak," she recalls.

Stuttering affects about 3 million Americans — 1 percent of the population, according to The Stuttering Foundation of America, and four times as many males as females. Ordinary conversation — answering the phone, ordering food in a restaurant, speaking in class, even saying one's name — can be agonizing.

"Growing up as a stutterer is a misery — really dreadful," says David Seidler, screenwriter of "The King's Speech," the film about the English monarch George VI, who enlisted the aid of a speech therapist to help him overcome a severe stutter. Seidler was unable to control his own stutter until he was 16. "If you can survive a childhood of stuttering, you can survive anything."

Seidler, 73, who moved with his family to Great Neck in the 1940s, recalls listening as a young boy in England to George VI's speeches on the radio: The king had ascended to the throne in 1937 — after his brother Edward VIII's abdication to marry American Wallis Simpson — and was required to address the nation on live radio during World War II.

"He was able to give those wartime speeches that moved everyone — it gave me hope," says Seidler, whose family fled to avoid the German bombing of London and settled on Long Island. He remembers his parents telling him that the king "is a far



Lori Melnitsky, who overcame a painful childhood of stuttering to go on to become a speech therapist, is reflected here in a mirror at her Plainview office. She uses the mirror to help clients see where they hold tension, say in the lips or tongue, and need to focus on release.

# Speaking out on stuttering

STUTTER from G4

worse stutterer than you."

The classroom was a place of torment, he says: "You know you're not stupid, but you can't articulate — you can't get your words out." He would pray that the bell would ring before the teacher called on him.

Members of the Long Island chapter of The National Stuttering Association spoke candidly at their December meeting about the impact stuttering has had on their lives.

"It's a really big problem, because in the fashion industry you have to make presentations," says Robin, a fashion design major at The Art Institute of New York City. She says her speech has improved with intensive speech therapy, but it hasn't eliminated the stutter.

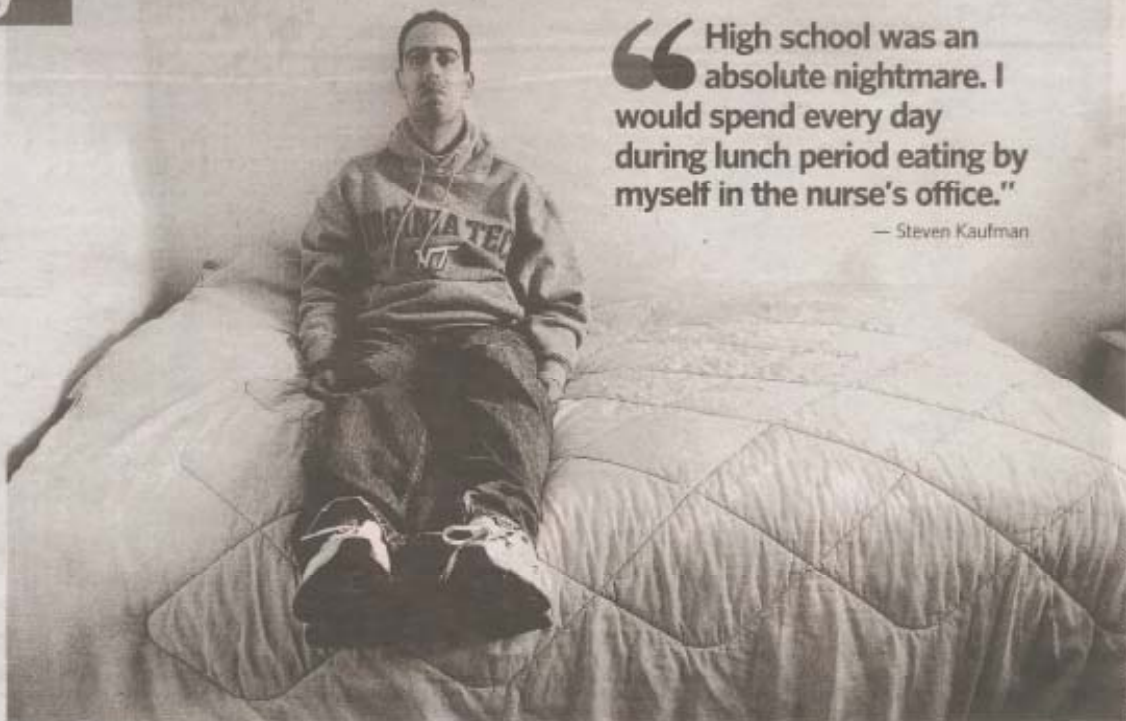
"High school was an absolute nightmare," says Steven Kaufman, 32, of Plainview, co-leader of the chapter. "I would spend every day during lunch period eating by myself in the nurse's office. I struggled a lot socially."

After graduating from college, Kaufman interviewed for a paralegal position. "The associate said, point blank, 'I don't think this job is for you — you have to be fluent with clients, and I don't think you can.'"

He says he registered for the association's 2006 convention on impulse. "When I went to the hotel to register, I heard the sounds of other people . . . trying to say they're here for the conference. . . . I had never met anyone else who stuttered."

Such meetings and support groups are invaluable, says Jason Davidow, assistant professor of speech-language-hearing sciences at Hofstra University, whose research focuses on the neurophysiology of stuttering. "You are around other people and feel relaxed, and you don't have to worry about how people will react," he says.

While 5 percent of children stutter, three-quarters overcome it by late childhood — though the reasons are not well understood. But the no-



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## Facts on the speech disorder — and some help

### Stuttering

"In normal speech, what you say is generated automatically and spontaneously — we don't have to work at that. People who stutter, however, have the same generating of words, but something locks, jamming intermittently."

— Phil Schneider, speech language pathologist and associate professor emeritus of communication disorders, Queens College

### Treatments

Different approaches can treat the physical component of stuttering to increase fluency. "Fluent speech is a

coordination of three systems: breathing, the vocal cords and the movement of the articulating parts of your mouth. Speech therapy entails re-coordinating the movements and keeping articulations loose . . . re-training the body."

— Chamonix Sikora, executive director of The American Institute for Stuttering in New York

### 'I stutter'

Visualization techniques taken from sports psychology, desensitization through public speaking, plus the acknowledgment that an individual stutters have been

shown to be effective tools.

"'I stutter' is a dramatic turnaround for many people who have worked their whole lives to hide their stutter. For many clients, it can be the most liberating strategy they learn."

— Sikora

### Resources

- The Stuttering Foundation of America: [stutteringhelp.org](http://stutteringhelp.org)
- National Stuttering Association: [nsastutter.org](http://nsastutter.org)
- Friends, a Commack-based national support group for children and teens who stutter: [friendswhostutter.org](http://friendswhostutter.org)

— LISA SCHIFFMAN

tion "don't worry, a child will outgrow stuttering" is outdated, says Chamonix Sikora, executive director of the nonprofit American Institute for Stuttering in Manhattan.

Sikora encourages participation in programs like Our Time Theatre Company in Manhattan, which gives young people who stutter the chance to act, direct, and choreograph.

"The stigma of stuttering puts someone into a cage of fear — [participation in] the arts breaks this wall and allows kids to shine in front of their family and

friends," says Taro Alexander, Our Time's founder. "The idea is for them to increase their confidence . . . and to realize that stuttering does not have to hold them back from what they want to do."

Danielle Diesu, 19, of Huntington is a counselor for the program's summer camp. "Our Time' changed my life 100 percent," she says. "For the first time, I finally felt part of a family that was really supportive — people accepted me for who I am."

Lori Melnitsky, 47, of Plain-

view characterized her childhood as "a life of bondage."

"I felt like a failure in speech therapy," says Melnitsky, co-leader of the association's chapter. "I'd get discharged but still stuttered. I could not get the words out, and my head would jerk back — I could never say what I really meant."

She says she "never, ever raised my hand" in class, from elementary through graduate school. "I lived in such fear of being asked my name — I was petrified of

answering the phone."

In college, though interested in the health care field, she majored in accounting, reasoning she would not have to speak much. When she became involved in the association, she says, "they taught me that you can still stutter yet be successful in life." She resolved that she wouldn't give up "until I had achieved a degree of fluency — yet accepted that I might always stutter but it was all right."

Melnitsky decided to pursue a degree in speech language pathology, even after one professor advised that she was wasting her time. She earned a master's degree from Hofstra in 1992 and six years ago started a practice in Plainview, All Island Speech & Stuttering Therapy.

While speech therapy can help, it doesn't always eliminate a stutter. "Acceptance is a hard road for many stutters to cross," Davidow says. "People need to accept that I am somebody who stutters."

Sikora says, "They must realize even if I still stutter, I can become a lawyer, a doctor, or whatever I want — the realization that stuttering is not going to hold them back."

Melnitsky adds: "We want the world to see us as human beings who stutter sometimes: It is what we do — but not who we are."



Danielle Diesu says the Our Time Theater Company changed her life: "For the first time I finally felt part of a family . . . [who] accepted me for who I am."

# He wrote 'The King's Speech' from experience



In the film Colin Firth is George VI, left, the king struggling with stuttering, and Geoffrey Rush is his speech therapist.

**T**he King's Speech" screenwriter David Seidler, who was born in London and moved with his family to Great Neck after the outbreak of World War II, says his stutter began around the age of 3.

"For most stutterers, answering the telephone is an agony — the telephone rings and everything tightens," recalls Seidler, 73, now of Los Angeles. "I had trouble with the 'h' sound — I couldn't pick up the phone and say 'hello.' I would slide into it — 'This is David.'"

"Your stomach tightens, your chest muscles, your jaw gets locked," he says. "You are jammed up into a ball of tension, and it is just awful. You know you are going to stutter. It's a self-perpetuating thing."



Screenwriter David Seidler

When he was 16, he was told his stutter might get worse — and he got angry. The anger became the catalyst necessary to confront his anxiety and fear of speaking.

"If you ask a speech therapist, the mechanical techniques are

invariably useful," he says, "but they don't fix the stutter. They give you the tools so that when the psychological change takes place, [they] can aid speech fluidity."

Seidler says he knew he wanted to write about King George VI from an early age: "He understood the social contract: If you have wealth, power or privilege, you also have obligations . . . he had a job to do, and he had to do it. As the constitutional monarch, he united the nation during wartime.

"Bertie didn't want to be king, he wasn't qualified to be king — he didn't have the voice for it. But he had to do his duty, and he did it. I found it moving how a man against all reason has to step up — and he does it."

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