

Talen's Got Talent

How one boy copes with stuttering—and steals the show

BY JANE BIANCHI

UP CLOSE **Synthesizing** As you read these articles, look for details about what can make speech difficult—and what makes it easier.



LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 7 WORDS IN BOLD

Ten-year-old Talen struts onto a stage in a white button-down shirt and black blazer to the beat of the soul song “Lovely Day.” He smiles at the audience of about 700 people. He’s nervous, but you’d never know it. He performs his dance effortlessly, bobbing his shoulders, sliding on cue, spinning around smoothly, throwing his arms into the air, and smiling at the crowd with a proud twinkle in his eye. When the song ends, he knows—and the audience knows—that he just totally rocked it. He grabs the microphone and introduces himself with ease: “Hi, I’m Talen.”

Not long ago, if you had asked Talen to perform on stage, he’d have looked at you as if you’d asked him to sprout wings and fly to

Mars. In fact, talking to just one person was a big challenge for Talen. That’s because he has a speech problem known as stuttering.

Stuttering is a speech **disorder** that makes it hard to say words out loud. People who stutter often repeat or stretch out words, or become silent in the middle of a sentence. The problem is common among kids ages 2 to 5. Most outgrow it, but a few continue to stutter as they get older. About 3 million Americans—or 1 percent of the population—stutter.

A Puzzling Problem

The causes of stuttering are not well understood. Many experts think stuttering is likely **inherited**. They believe some people are born with a **tendency** to develop stuttering. The source of the problem probably lies in the part of the brain that controls language.

Most people who stutter are no different from you. Visit Talen in his Brooklyn, New York, apartment and you’ll find him watching Spider-Man movies, making clay sculptures,



ALL IMAGES: HEATHER WESTON PHOTOGRAPHS

Talen rehearses his showstopping moves (left). Performing has boosted his confidence on and off the stage.



or eating fried rice with duck sauce with his family. He loves reading and has plenty to tell you about the book he just read about snakes. His mind is filled with fascinating facts he wants to share. (Talen’s fascinating fact of the day: Some female snakes can lay up to 100 eggs at a time.) The problem is that when Talen opens his mouth to talk, sometimes the words don’t come out the way he wants them to. He repeats words or says the same word over and over, such as *like*.

He’s been facing this challenge—and coping with the embarrassment that often comes with it—since he was 5. “When I was little, my cousin drew a picture of me and drew a word bubble next to my face. She wrote in the word bubble, ‘Hi, I’m, I’m, I’m Talen,’” he says. “It hurt my feelings.”

By first grade, the problem bothered him so much that he rarely spoke in class for fear he would be **humiliated**. “I didn’t raise my hand a lot in class. If a teacher asked for a volunteer, I’d duck,” says Talen.

A Big Change

Sometimes people grow impatient when Talen speaks and say, “Spit it out,” or they finish his sentences for him. But that puts pressure on him, and speaking becomes even more challenging. (Talen’s advice: The best thing a listener can do is wait patiently for a person who stutters to finish.) It’s also tough for him to make friends at school because some kids find it easier to avoid Talen than to talk to him.

But Talen’s life began to change two years ago, when he joined SAY: the Stuttering Association for the Young. The group teaches kids who stutter how to sing, dance, act, and recite speeches. The goal is to build kids’ confidence. “We have so much fun,” says Talen.

The founder and president of SAY, Taro Alexander, relates to what Talen has gone through, because he also started stuttering at age 5. “I spent a lot of my life feeling like that kid on the sidelines and wanting really badly to get into the game, but not having the courage to jump in because of fear of being made fun of or teased,” says Alexander.

He gained confidence by becoming a professional actor at age 19 and performing on TV shows and in musical theater

Famous Stutterers

Stuttering didn't limit the success of:



Tiger Woods



Emily Blunt



King George VI



Joe Biden

productions. In 2001, at age 29, he created SAY. “I wanted to show kids that stuttering doesn’t have to hold them back from anything,” he says.

Since performing helped him so much, he thought it would be a great way to engage kids and boost their confidence. “The amazing thing about the arts is that it’s a perfect way to help people express how they feel. It helps kids come out of their shells in a brilliant way,” says Alexander.

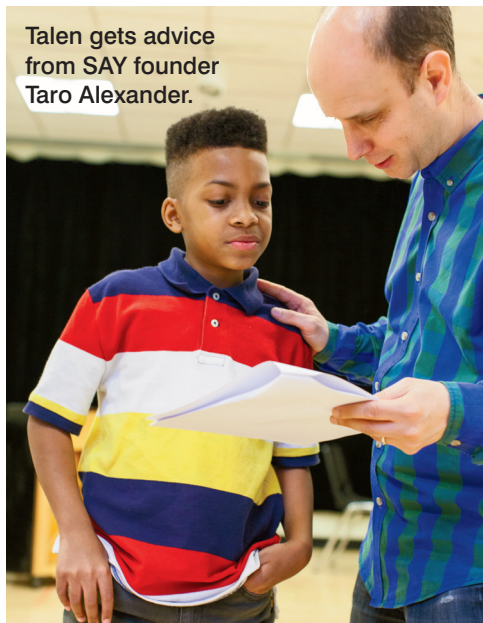
No Longer Alone

Talen goes to SAY for about two hours each week. “I like to dance,” says Talen. “It brings out the inner me.” Singing? Not so much. “I don’t have a good voice. I want to use Auto-Tune,” he jokes. Each spring, all the kids in SAY perform onstage in front of hundreds of parents and other supporters of the organization.

Going to SAY hasn’t solved Talen’s stuttering problem. But it has helped him feel less **self-conscious**. Plus, he’s made friends. Before joining SAY, he knew only two people who

stuttered. Now he has met more than 170, which makes him feel less alone.

The program has helped Talen at school too, since speaking in class is nothing compared with talking in front of hundreds of people. He’s getting better grades, and his teachers have noticed that he speaks up more. “I’m less afraid to raise my hand in class now,” says Talen. “Sometimes I stutter and sometimes I don’t, but I don’t care anymore. I feel like a new person.” 🗣️



TOP TO BOTTOM: SCOTT HALLERAN/GETTY IMAGES; ©2013 TAYLOR HILL/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES; POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES; WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY IMAGES; HEATHER WESTON PHOTOGRAPHS

INFORMATIONAL TEXT

The Incredible Power of Speech

Human beings are amazing creatures. But in terms of awesome powers, nothing beats our ability to talk.

What could be easier than talking?

We chat with our friends, whisper our secrets, scream at our little brothers, and cheer for our favorite teams. By the end of life, the average person will have **uttered** approximately 370 million words.

But the ability to speak—to express thoughts and feelings through different sounds—is a complex human skill.

Key to Survival

All living creatures can communicate in some way. Cobras fan out their hoods to warn their enemies. Fireflies set their tails aglow to attract mates. Sea lion mothers **bellow** to call their babies home. From mighty mammals to tiny insects, being able to communicate in some way is a key to survival.

But communicating is different from speaking. Only humans have the ability to speak.

Speaking might seem

simple. But just uttering three little words like “Hey, what’s up?” is a complicated trick.

A Mysterious Process

Many parts of your body have to work together when you talk. First, your lungs

tongue, lips, jaw, and teeth makes this happen. The whole amazing production is controlled by your brain.

Speech is so complex that scientists have struggled to understand how it works. It’s been difficult to find cures for speech disorders,

like stuttering. But in recent years, scientists have made breakthroughs. In 2013, scientists at the University of California, San Francisco, pinpointed the parts of the brain that control some portions of the speech process.

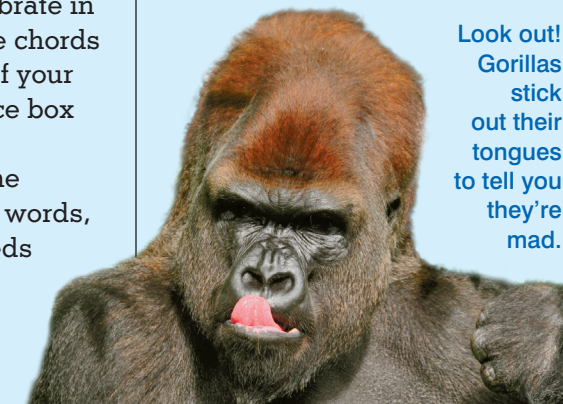
Soon enough, experts agree, the amazing power of speech will no longer be such a mystery. ■



exhale air across your larynx, or voice box, which is in your throat. Inside your larynx are your vocal chords, two rubbery folds that vibrate in the rush of air. These chords produce the sound of your voice, which the voice box makes louder.

And that’s just the beginning. To make words, the vibrating air needs to be broken up into different sounds. A team effort by your

Look out! Gorillas stick out their tongues to tell you they’re mad.



WHAT’S THE CONNECTION?

Imagine you have a friend who stutters. Using details from both texts, write an article for the school newspaper to help your classmates understand the challenges he faces and how they can be helpful.

FIND AN ACTIVITY SHEET ONLINE!