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Saturday, January 19, 2008

**Psychology Professor Lawrence A. Welkowitz works to unlock secrets of Asperger's, autism**

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**Anika Clark**  
Sentinel Staff

From their tiny base at Keene State College, students of Professor Lawrence A. Welkowitz's psychology courses come face-to-face with the field's legends - big names such as famed psychiatrists Laszlo Papp and Jack Gorman.

Such is the power of the Internet, where Welkowitz's students watch interviews between their professor and these noted professionals. And for an avid blogger, who likens himself to trailblazer Daniel Boone in his exploration of the human mind, it opens new worlds.

"Why shouldn't kids in Keene, New Hampshire, be exposed to the top things that are going on in the field?" Welkowitz asked. "Why not?"

For Welkowitz, who brings his digital camera and recorder wherever he travels, "everything is an opportunity to develop a teaching tool."

A trip to a crowded New York shopping center becomes a window through which to explore the dynamics of agoraphobia, a fear characterized by the avoidance of open spaces. And a hike up Mount Monadnock? A chance to talk about overcoming one's fear of heights.

Welkowitz's blog provides a glimpse into the New Jersey native, who likes to go by



MICHAEL MOORE / Sentinel Staff

**Fast facts**

- Name: Lawrence "Larry" A. Welkowitz
- Age: 49.
- Hometown: Born in New York, N.Y.; raised in Metuchen, N.J.
- Current residence: Surry. Moved to the Monadnock Region in 1991.
- Family: Daughter Annika R. Kristiansen, 12.
- Education: Bachelor of Arts in psychology from Middlebury (Vt.) College, 1980; Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Hawaii, 1985.

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"Larry," wears sneakers in his Keene State office and sports a wide, Cheshire Cat smile.

Posted on his site, [Welkowitz.typepad.com](http://Welkowitz.typepad.com), is everything from a picture of a puffy-painted "Professor of the Month" award from Keene State's Phi Sigma Sigma sorority to a piece about the local wiffle ball league in which he participates with other psychologists and doctors.

But the focus of the site - along with much of Welkowitz's career - is Asperger's Syndrome, a neurobiological disorder with similarities to autism.

Like those with autism, people with Asperger's Syndrome are often isolated from peers and have trouble reading social cues, according to the Asperger's Association of New England. But unlike people with autism, those with Asperger's Syndrome are likely to desire the social acceptance they have difficulty finding.

#### **A long-held interest; an academic family**

Welkowitz's broader interest in psychology dates back to his childhood.

By the time he was in 7th grade, when many of his classmates may still have hoped to become rock stars or ballplayers, he'd already become enticed by psychology - thanks to scientist Harry F. Harlow and his monkeys.

In the 1960s, Harlow conducted a series of experiments where he demonstrated the affinity monkeys had for "surrogate" mothers made of terry cloth over those made of wire.

The study "showed that monkeys raised by wire mesh mothers developed stress and ulcers while monkeys raised by warm, cuddly mothers became healthy," Welkowitz said. "It was that whole mind-body connection that I've been interested in since I was a kid."

But psychology also coursed through Welkowitz's blood, courtesy of his own mother, Joan - a do-it-all type who found time to pen a textbook about statistics for behavioral sciences, serve for several years as director of New York University's clinical psychology doctoral program and still get dinner on the table, according to Welkowitz's younger sister, Julie A. Welkowitz.

"She was a feminist at a time when that meant you did everything," Larry Welkowitz said of his mother, with whom

• **Occupation:** Professor of psychology at Keene State College; practicing clinical psychologist; previously taught at Antioch University New England, formerly known as Antioch New England Graduate School, and Columbia University's medical school in New York City.

• **Books:** Co-authored "The Hidden Face of Shyness: Understanding & Overcoming Social Anxiety" with Franklin Schneier, co-edited "Asperger's Syndrome: Intervening in Schools, Clinics, and Communities" with Linda J. Baker.

• **Hobbies:** Blogging, podcasting, wiffle ball, skiing, marathon running.

• **On the impact of Hawaii on his psychology career:** "You change the world to fit the kid," he said, explaining how seeing failed attempts to push Western education onto Hawaiian schoolchildren helped fuel his philosophy about working with children who might not fit into the mainstream.

• **Question:**

Before becoming a blogger, were you always interested in being on the cutting edge of technology?

Answer: "Yeah. I was one of the first people on campus to use PowerPoint back in the '90s" (laughs).

• **Question:**

How do you think you've used your experience as a middle child later in life?

Answer: "You have to learn to negotiate. ... I think that a lot of being an effective psychologist is being a hub of the wheel. It's collecting information from lots of different sources and taking action from the middle."

• **Question:**

Fast forward to when you're ready to retire. ... What is your definition of success?

Answer: "I think success in life for

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he collaborated on some of his studies of anxiety disorders, depression and Asperger's Syndrome.

Joan Welkowitz died in 2006, at age 76, just one week after completing the last edition of her textbook, according to Larry Welkowitz. She was still teaching at New York University, he said, adding that to him, success means never retiring.

"I imagine that (Joan) influenced my brother and I," said Julie Welkowitz, also a clinical psychologist, associate professor and the assistant academic coordinator for a community mental-health program in Burlington, Vt. "My brother Larry was particularly very close (to her)."

Welkowitz's father, Walter Welkowitz, now of Keene, is similarly an academic-type - a professor who started the biomedical engineering program at Rutgers University in New Jersey, an author and a co-inventor of devices that help the heart pump.

And his older brother, David Welkowitz, joins the ranks as a professor at Whittier Law School in Southern California.

"Conversations around the dinner table were about (the) Big Bang Theory, calculus, the war in Vietnam," Larry Welkowitz said, "but mostly I just wanted to go out and play baseball."

Julie Welkowitz said her older brother was an athlete growing up, as well as the editor of his high school literary magazine, and she remembers him as a funny, popular guy.

He carried this into adulthood, according to colleague Linda Baker, who said the easy conversation and similar background she shared with Welkowitz made him quickly feel like a brother.

"Larry's a real connector," said Baker, also a Keene State psychology professor. "He knows hundreds of people in the community."

But it's the children who find wading society's waters more difficult - those with Asperger's Syndrome - who Larry Welkowitz finds fascinating.

"It's that single-mindedness, that ability to focus on particular areas of interest. There's something very pure about Asperger's and autism," Welkowitz said of what intrigues him about the disorders. "They don't play all these social games. You know exactly where they're coming from."

me is not ever retiring. I don't see myself, ever, stopping everything. ... I see work as lifelong. I think work is good. I don't see it as something to stop and just go play golf."

**Taking action locally; following in footsteps**

Professionally, Welkowitz started encountering the disorder long before much was known about it.

"I started to see a lot of kids for whom there was no clear, clinical diagnosis," he said. "I was seeing these wonderful, bright, but socially different kids, and I was struggling to try and figure out what was going on with them, and how to help them."

His interest was also driven by a family member who has Asperger's, he said.

While often struggling with social interaction, people with Asperger's Syndrome are believed to have intelligence quotients ranging from the level of normal to genius, according to the Asperger's Association of New England.

"A colleague of mine once said, 'If it weren't for people with Asperger's and autism, we'd all be living in caves.' And I'm sure that's true," Welkowitz said.

As an example, he cited Albert Einstein - who people have speculated may have had Asperger's - and his capacity to spend several years working on his theory of relativity.

In 1996, two years after Asperger's Syndrome was officially classified as a psychiatric disorder, Welkowitz started a local Asperger's study group with Baker.

With crowds of people so large they couldn't fit in the room, the group expanded to include offshoot projects - such as a parent support group, and a peer-mentoring program which pairs "typical" college kids with students or other children with Asperger's and autism.

Participating in the program helps a child receiving services go from being a "chronic outsider" to functioning within the social scene, according to Welkowitz.

In return, he said, the mentors "find that the more they learn about Asperger's, the more they're learning about themselves - that all of us can relate to sort of that 'inner geek.' ... By being kind to people with Asperger's, they're really learning about the kind of world that they want to live in."

This may represent Welkowitz's stamp on the community, but he's also clearly leaving an impression at home - on daughter Annika, who describes her

father as funny and "another friend."

Like her father, Annika R. Kristiansen enjoys blogging, putting the poetry she writes "out there," into the Internet stratosphere.

At 12 years old, she's about the same age Welkowitz was when he discovered Harlow's monkeys.

And lately, she said, she's been thinking she might want to become a psychologist.

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