

Maria Cook, Source: The Ottawa Citizen
Page: C3, Edition: Final
Tuesday, January 8, 2002

David's dream comes true: A "savant" who is deaf, blind and developmentally delayed, and yet has composed 132 piano pieces, spent decades moving to one institution after another before finally finding greater independence in a group home

OTTAWA - David Froom "went into the wilderness at age 18," his brother says, "and at 55 he came out."

There is a sense of pride of ownership as David Froom feels his way through a tour of his bedroom in a Nepean bungalow. "This is my desk and this is my new radio. These are my books on the shelf. This is the braille typewriter I use."

Mr. Froom, who is 57, is deaf, blind and developmentally delayed. He also possesses extraordinary gifts in mathematics, memory and music, and is the composer of 132 piano pieces.

The last two years have brought greater independence and joy to Froom's life. After spending 45 years in institutions, he moved to a group home in 1999. That year, he also received a cochlear implant to restore his hearing.

"Living in a group home is a dream come true," says Froom. "The happiest part about it is the tub in the bathroom, and living in a new environment, and having my own way of life, and meeting new people and making new friends. That is a dream, isn't it, Robert?" he asks his younger brother.

"That is a dream," agrees Robert Froom, an Ottawa architect. "That's a good dream."

In medical terms, David Froom is a "savant." Like Dustin Hoffman's Rainman, he can calculate math problems in his head. Tell him your birthday and he'll tell you which day of the week you were born. He'll remember the exact date he last met you. His compositions are not written down, but stored in his head.

Yet, great islands of knowledge are separated by gaps. When the roof leaked one day, he needed an explanation of what a roof was. He is still learning the value of money, and once gave Robert \$1 to buy a piano.

In October 1999, Froom moved from Osgoode Care Centre, a nursing home in Metcalfe, to a five-bedroom group home which he shares with four other people. The house is operated by Therapeutic and Education Living Centres Inc. (TELCI), a non-profit organization that runs three homes in Nepean for 21 visually impaired

residents with psychiatric or developmental disabilities. It is the only such organization in Eastern Ontario.

For Froom, it has been a long road to TELCI.

At age 10, Mr. Froom left his parents' Ottawa home for the Brantford School for the Blind, where he lived until age 18 and achieved Grade 5. When his primary education ended, he was sent to Brockville Psychiatric Hospital where "I cried for long periods of time."

After four years, Froom moved to Casselman Nursing Home, where he lived for 25 years. In 1992, he moved to Osgoode Care Centre, where he was the only deaf-blind person. His frustrations included sharing a room with an elderly resident, a limit of two baths a week, and having no control over laundry.

"The care centre was built with an open-floor plan and there were many wheelchairs in the facility, making it dangerous for me to walk," he says. "One time I was scolded for breaking the laundry routines and I felt very badly about it."

In 1996, the Ottawa Citizen published an article about Froom. His brother believes it helped David get into TELCI by raising his profile. Prior to that, he had been on a waiting list for a group home for seven years.

"I needed a group home before there were group homes," says Froom.

For the first time since the 1950s, Froom has a private room. Among his possessions are a phone, a braille clock, and a collection of CDs by easy-listening artists such as Johnny Mathis, Percy Faith and Andy Williams, and show tunes from My Fair Lady, and The King and I.

"This is the best place I have ever lived," says Froom. "I can take a bath whenever I want to. I can do my own laundry and I can even go to the kitchen. I have my own CD player and my own bookshelves and my own clothes cupboard. I can open my own window."

He pays \$382 a month for room and board, plus \$160 a month for special programs such as a tutor.

Froom suffers from a rare genetic condition that causes blindness at birth, developmental problems and progressive deafness.

The second of four children, he was the only one affected. His three uncles, and likely two great-uncles before them, also had the syndrome. They spent their lives in institutions.

Froom began to go deaf in his late 20s, but over the years retained some hearing; he could hear his own voice, which helped him to speak, and he could hear music

blasted through headphones. He communicated with a TeleBraille machine, a communication device designed for deaf-blind people.

In January 1999, after a cold, Froom said: "I can no longer hear my own voice." Eight months later, in September 1999, he underwent surgery on his right ear for a cochlear implant, a prosthetic replacement for the inner ear.

The implant bypasses damaged parts of the inner ear and electronically stimulates the nerve of hearing. Part of the device is surgically implanted in the skull behind the ear. The other part of the device is external and has a microphone, a speech processor (that converts sound into electrical impulses) and connecting cables.

In November 1999, the cochlear implant was turned on. "Hello, David," said Ottawa Hospital audiologist Christiane Seguin. "I can hear that," he replied. "I felt like I was beginning a new way of life," he recalls. "I began the long journey of teaching myself to hear again."

Most days, he plays his electric piano in the basement recreation room. "Let's see if we can get a story going," he says, settling in at the piano during a visit.

He enjoys playing gentle, romantic songs like Call Me Irresponsible, Lollipops and Roses and Baubles, Bangles and Beads. He composes his own music to remember events in his life -- both happy and sad.

For example, Legend of a Bad Friend is about a teacher at a training workshop who in 1977 teased him about not being able to pour juice into a cup.

A composition called Alexandria Minuet is about a family friend who lived in Alexandria and with whom Froom enjoyed making music many years ago. "It reflects fond memories of life when I was very young," he says.

A piece called Meet Mr. Blaine is about what happened when a man named Blaine brought a new mattress for Froom's bed in 1994. A nurse suggested that he learn to make his own bed, which took about a year. "The song is all about a great lesson that I have come a long way in learning," he says.

Being able to do things for himself is very important to Froom because he is concerned about being a burden.

For example, he delayed getting a cochlear implant because the batteries are changed daily and he didn't want to inconvenience the staff. He has since learned to change the batteries. He has also learned to pour himself a drink from a pitcher, and is learning to do banking, use the microwave, and travel on the ParaTranspo transit system.

"David is doing amazingly well," says TELCI counsellor Tamatha Mallette. "He has all the skills he needs to function in this home happily."

His brother Robert says families cannot provide all the support needed by people like David. At TELCI, he has much more help than at the nursing home.

The home's five staff are the residents' advocates and teach them life skills. Recently, a worker took Froom to Toronto for a weekend to hear the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. "The trip to Toronto was one I will always remember," says Froom.

He has regular visits from an educational tutor, an "intervenor" from the Canadian Institute for the Blind who helps him speak to people, and a volunteer from an agency called Citizen Advocacy, who takes Froom out for meals and shopping.

For example, Froom recently became upset when he broke a shoelace. His Citizen Advocacy friend solved the problem by going out with him to buy a new set of laces.

Froom enjoys playing bingo on Friday nights, reading braille magazines, listening to talking books, and visiting residents in another TELCI home.

"He went into the wilderness at age 18 and at 55 he came out," says Robert. "He now has a normal existence which is a great accomplishment for David. He has a home."

© 2002 Brantford Expositor (ON). All rights reserved.