

Autistic Writer Finds Voice, Delivers Message of Hope

Linda Mae Carlstone, Chicago Tribune
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Thomas A. McKean is a poet, a singer-songwriter, an international speaker and a writer with a recently published book.

Yet he suffers from autism, a communication and behavior disorder that often renders its victims unable to use language meaningfully or to process information.

"I did not speak until late," McKean said during a presentation Tuesday to about 85 people at the Vernon Hills Village Hall. "I understood things everyone said and I would want to talk, I just didn't know how to say it."

The presentation was arranged by Lee Werner, president of the Northeast Illinois Chapter of the *Autism Society of America*, who has been friends with McKean for three years.

"I learn so much about my own son from being around Thomas," said Werner, whose 15 year-old son is autistic. "He tells me how to treat Warren and validates that I am doing the right thing."

The 29 year-old McKean, with a Beatles style haircut that falls straight down to his eyes and an engaging speaking manner, kept the audience laughing and also moved them to tears.

His greatest asset, perhaps, is his unusual ability to be in the world of autism, yet possess the communication skills to describe what that world is like. McKean described a place filled with fear and puzzlement.

Many parents in the audience were hungry for clues to help them better understand their own autistic children.

"What could we do to bring them out?" one woman asked.

McKean, who grew up and still lives in Columbus, Ohio, likened his escaping the mute world as a journey across a bridge.

After visits to countless speech therapists and psychiatric experts had failed, "the bridge was built by someone who was willing to come into my world and take me into this one," he said. "Someone who didn't want to reprimand me, but who wanted to be my friend."

He said he has not discovered a miracle cure for the disorder and is quick to note that despite his achievements, he is constantly fighting many of the symptoms. Yet he also offers families hope.

"If my daughter could articulate as well as he does when she grows up, it would please me," said a woman from Woodstock, who, to protect her daughter's privacy, did not want her name used.

The presentation was co-sponsored by the Parent Support Group of Families with Children with Autism.