

# Author Liane Holliday-Willey shares her life with Asperger's

By Jondi Gumz, Santa Cruz Sentinel

As Liane Holliday-Willey tells it, growing up was not easy. She liked to play with Heidi and Penny, her neighbor's dogs, she wanted to go shirtless the way boys did, she went bra-less and when boys said she was hot, she thought they meant the lack of air conditioning. She said exactly what she thought and she didn't want to be hugged.



Liane Holliday-Willey, George Mellen, Cheryl Bowers and Susan Bookheimer are panelists at the 17th annual Jon Nadherny/Calciano Memorial Youth Symposium at the Cocoanut Grove attended by 350 people Friday.

Today, with a doctorate in psycholinguistics, she's 56, married, with three daughters, owner of an equestrian barn in Michigan and author of "Pretending to Be Normal," one of the first female autobiographies on Asperger's syndrome, the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum. Holliday-Willey was diagnosed at age 35. "I want to fit in when I need to, and I want to be myself," she said. "I like being bilingual." Books helped, showing her things she didn't know were possible, and some teachers played to her strengths, noticing her ability to enunciate and putting a microphone in her hands. She got emotional talking about her father, who got her a pony at age 13, which she said saved her life socially. An enlightening and entertaining speaker, she cautioned against generalizing her experience with Asperger's. "When you've met one of us, you've met one of us," she said. She shared her life Friday at the Cocoanut Grove for the 17th annual Jon Nadherny/Calciano Memorial Youth Symposium, which focused on the autism spectrum. About 350 people attended, according to symposium committee co-chairman George Jarrow. Dr. Freddie Weinstein of Dominican Hospital said he enjoyed the variety of information, learning about treatment modalities, functional studies and Holliday-Willey's "raw and honest" presentation coupled with humor and personality. "Everyone knows somebody with autism or Asperger's," said Marilyn Calciano, whose family organized the symposium to cope with the loss of their son Jon Nadherny, who committed suicide at age 23.

During a discussion, Susan Bookheimer, clinical neuropsychologist and principal investigator of UCLA Autism Center Autism Research and Treatment, said research has found marijuana negatively impacts developing brains but there has been no controlled trial of marijuana involving autism. Bookheimer said signs of autism are subtle, such as not gazing at a parent or not pointing to an object and saying "Look at this mommy." She added, "We're not supposed to do diagnosis before age of 2," but she predicted some interventions would be available in 10-15 years. "We talk about it as if it is something we can cure or treat or remedy," said George Mellen, 24, who has autism. "I am not convinced of this theory. It is deeply disturbing."

He observed efforts to employ low-functioning people with autism but few opportunities for high-functioning people such as himself. "Maybe it's not the problem that people on the spectrum have trouble communicating, maybe people not on the spectrum have trouble understanding," he said to applause. "I ask 'What is it like to be you?' instead of saying 'That

isn't the way it should be done," said Santa Cruz neuropsychologist Cheryl Bowers. Noting funding for services disappears after high school, she asked attendees to email her at [cbowers@mac.com](mailto:cbowers@mac.com) to form a group to lobby legislators. Scotts Valley parent Patricia Schroeck said her 13-year-old son has struggled with a lot of issues. Only recently was she told the reason may be autism. "There's a 12-month wait list at Stanford to get diagnosed," she said. "So many requests but hardly any resources."