



# Journey's end

**Michael Jones** charts the long and often complex journey taken by parents in North Wales who secured state-of-the-art provision for their children with autistic spectrum disorders

**T**his is a story involving children with autism being taught in a near-derelict school, and a parental campaign that has led to the building of two state-of-the-art schools and the setting up of a flagship service for young people with autism in North Wales. By telling this story I hope that parents, schools and providers for children with additional needs will take heart when they see what is possible, with parental determination, powerful allies, fortuitous timing and the political will to make changes happen.

When Sue and Julian Askins' teenage son Joshua was six, in 1995, he was diagnosed with autism. They went to visit the only school in the area that catered

for young people on the autistic spectrum, Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn. At that time, it was housed in a converted country house next to a dairy farm: a rural idyll in summer but isolated and bleak during the rest of the year. It has been described as "a typical 1970's set-up: with children with special needs sent to a big building in the countryside". Sue's abiding memory of her visit was meeting a little girl who flapped her hands in a way typical of many children on the autistic spectrum. Sue thought, "That's what my Joshua does." Not having met any one else with autism it was a relief to know that other children had similar reactions to the world.





At that time, the school catered for boarders and day pupils, and Joshua enjoyed being a day pupil there. However, his parents became very dispirited by the condition of the buildings, which were in a chronic state of disrepair. Sue recalls the day when PE was cancelled because the sports building, or 'shed' as she describes it, had yet again been infested by squirrels and there was serious concern about children being infected. "During wet weather water would run down the light fittings. There was no medical room and no facilities for changing children with continence problems. Consequently, children were changed on the toilet floor."

"The staff were extremely dedicated, and probably brought together by a sense of coping with extreme adversity. However it was very frustrating and disheartening to be constantly told, 'We'd

love to offer Joshua satisfactory lessons in Science, Design & Technology and ICT, but we don't have the facilities'."

Sue joined other parents with the aim of

setting up a group to campaign for better facilities. The group of parents that emerged was very small because the children came from a huge geographical area, including other counties; so, few parents were able to visit or meet regularly. "We called our group ABACUS: Action for Brondyffryn and Autism—Campaigning to save an Under-funded School. One of our first actions was to launch a letter writing campaign to let local councillors know about the appalling state of the building and extreme lack of resources."

"In July 1999 we invited councillors, Welsh Assembly Members and MPs to a meeting at the school, where we described the realities of living with children with autism. Many of the audience were visibly moved by our presentation, and shocked at the state of the school."

Councillors were very sympathetic, but funding was a serious issue, particularly as children attended the school from all over North Wales, and any new building projects would have to be wholly funded by Denbighshire Council. At the time, Denbighshire had a population of 96,000, and consequently had a relatively small education budget.

The parents of ABACUS, which included Debbie Goodsir-Evans, whose son Ruari attended the school, continued lobbying, and writing to anyone who they thought had influence. One person they contacted was Dame Steve Shirley, founder of the Shirley Foundation, parent of a son with autism, and wealthy philanthropist. Sue recalls this as the first



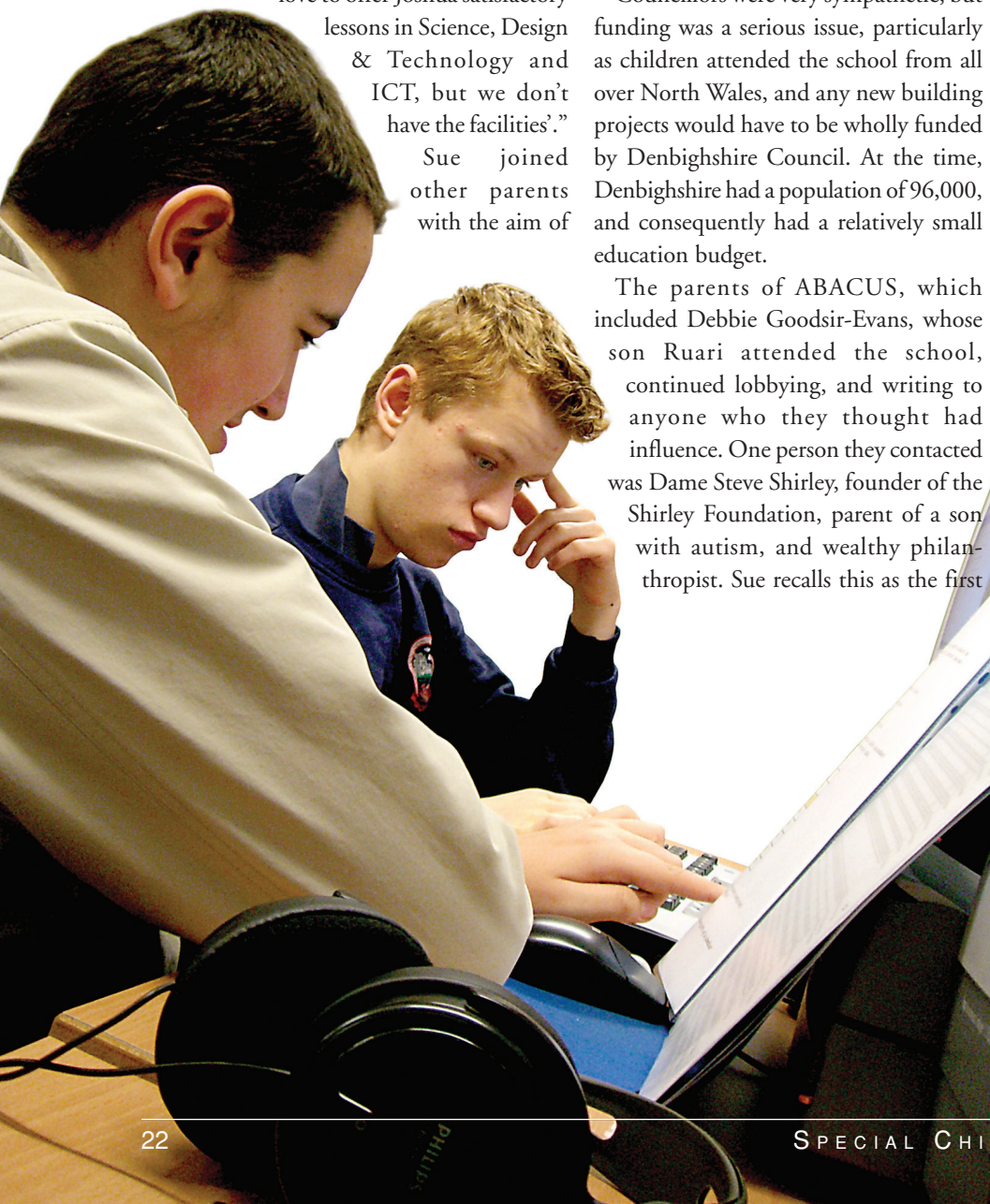
major breakthrough in the campaign.

"Dame Shirley sent two representatives of the Shirley Foundation to meet us, in December 1999, and soon after that we received £10,000 from the Foundation to go towards a feasibility study for improvements. Dame Shirley visited us in June 2000 and I remember her being stunned by the fabric of the building."

ABACUS continued writing to politicians in an attempt to push the Welsh Assembly to fund the school properly. In September 2000, the Shirley Foundation awarded £250,000 towards non-statutory capital projects. Things developed very rapidly after that. In October 2000, Jane Davidson, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, and one of the initial appointees of the newly formed Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), visited the school. She had been inundated by Assembly Members complaining on behalf of the parents.

"That was the turning point in our campaign," Sue told me. "Two weeks later it was announced that the WAG had pledged £2,000,000 for a regional centre for autism to be built at Plas Brondyffryn." This was to include facilities for primary and secondary school children. However, it became clear that this could not be sited at the current school location, or as Sue puts it, "If this grant had not come through the school would have been closed, because it would have been condemned. The parents were also clear that we didn't want our children being taught half way up a hillside in the middle of nowhere".

Building work started on the secondary site in July 2002, and the first students moved into the state-of-the-art facilities adjoining Denbigh High School in November 2004. A primary facility,







adjacent to a local primary school, was opened in September 2005. A major building project on part of the site of what was a large mental hospital has recently been completed. The complex includes a weekly boarding facility for 24 pupils during term time, forming part of Plas Brondyffryn's specialist provision.

The newest development is a children's home and educational base for students with severe autism, who also have communication difficulties and challenging behaviour. The base offers year-round, 24-hour care, working in partnership with parents, families and placing authorities. Plas Brondyffryn also has a post-16 provision, Rock House, in the centre of Denbigh. Rock House can accommodate up to 15 students, some of whom are able to access courses at the nearby college of further education, while those with more complex needs focus on

programmes largely concerned with developing independence and life skills.

Dr Michael Toman, Head of Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn, is the first to admit that the journey from being pledged £2,000,000 by the Welsh Assembly Government, to the current phase of development, has been long and involved for all concerned.

Further grants had to be match-funded by Denbighshire Council. This was a major commitment of funds from a relatively small authority. Nevertheless, Denbigh, with its population of 9,500 people, now hosts a flagship provision for young people with autism, and is regarded by many as a blueprint for other parts of the UK to emulate.

Michael Toman gave me a whistle-stop tour of all the facilities on a wet and cold morning in December. We began with a quick look at the very forbidding-looking original school building, which is now boarded up. I imagined the squirrels enjoying free reign of the whole building. In dramatic contrast are the new boarding facilities. Though the students had just set off on a day trip, I could feel the positive atmosphere inside the buildings, helped by the colour schemes, quality furnishing and the sense of space. As people with autism respond more to atmosphere than other members of the population, this is clearly important.

Michael was pleased to show me small,

carefully thought-out details. The metal communal urinal in the boys' toilet, for example, is completely out of keeping with the rest of the décor. This was planned, Michael explained, because youngsters with autism often have severe difficulties with coping with public toilets. "If the cubicle is in use, they often panic, and this can lead to severe distress. Using the urinal here helps them learn to cope with small but potentially catastrophic experiences." This is not trivial, but typical of the careful planning that has gone into this project. I was delighted to see that the 52-week boarding facility has a purpose-built room for parents: sending a clear message that parents are welcome and encouraged to stay for visits.

The primary department, with generously equipped classrooms, is literally built onto a local primary school. The secondary department is also physically linked, to Denbigh High School. The needs of the students are very varied, and the curriculum reflects this. The school also provides a dedicated specialist area for students with complex learning difficulties. Again, there has been the same attention to detail in the planning and building

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process. Michael Toman explained that the school was designed to ensure inclusion. "Put simply, 'inclusion' means that our students have the opportunity to share facilities with the High School and other local schools and to take part in activities as part of the local community.

"To promote inclusion we purposely didn't build a hall or a canteen, so our students, with support, have to access the High School's dining room. Their hall is timetabled for our students' use. Likewise we built our ICT suite and Design & Technology room to be larger than we were likely to need, so that students from the High School could share our facilities."



Plas Brondyffryn's development over the past few years has been very rapid, and Michael Toman admits that this can at times be a challenge. "When we started out we didn't have a master plan, but an understanding of what was needed. We have moved away from being a segregated country house school to an environment where inclusion is possible. But inclusion is not cheap, and working within a delegated budget means that you don't always have the funding you would like, for example for music or staff training. But on the whole it continues to be a very positive and exciting experience."

There are plans for further developments in Denbigh, for the benefit



of the region. ABACUS has now become C-SAW: Community Support for Autism in Wales. C-SAW aims, as stated in its mission statement, "to make a real and positive difference to the quality of life for both children and adults on the autistic spectrum by adopting a creative approach and offering a lifelong service to individuals and their families." This has manifested itself in a plan for six new projects, including respite care, a parent/resource centre, holiday facilities and a training and education centre for professionals. They have a worker dedicated to fundraising, and are working on new office space that they have obtained in the town.

I asked Sue Askins and Debbie Goodsir-Evans to finish this article with some words about their hopes and plans for the future.

"When we started the campaign our main aim was to help our autistic children's school have similar facilities to those in mainstream schools. Joshua and Ruari needed more help to make sense of life, but they seemed to have so much less.

Six years later, after a long campaign, things have changed dramatically for the better. Now we have turned our attention to the bigger picture and what will happen when our boys and other young people with autism leave school.

"As founder members and trustees of C-SAW we continue to work towards making life better for people with autism, and their families and carers. C-SAW continues to work with small, achievable projects. We are concentrating on developing a parents' and resource centre, and a befriending and young person's service.

"We look forward as Ruari and Joshua approach adulthood, and the new challenges that life will bring for the boys and our families."

#### **Michael Jones is an Educational Consultant**

For further information about C-SAW visit [www.c-saw.co.uk](http://www.c-saw.co.uk)  
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