

SLH Clinic Helps People of All Ages

— BY KIMBERLY SAUNDERS —

At age 32, Dan Heffley had a blood vessel burst in his brain. To stem the massive bleeding and swelling, neurosurgeons removed more than half of his brain's left hemisphere, the seat of language and logic. Although the radical surgery saved his life, Heffley lost the ability to walk, speak, understand language and recognize loved ones.

That life-changing event happened in 2003. Over the past six years, the former Army Ranger from Ben Avon, Pa., has made remarkable progress battling back from his stroke, the result of intense physical, occupational and speech-language therapy that began within months of his surgery—and continues today. Although his right arm and leg remain weak, he can now walk. And ongoing speech and language therapy from Duquesne's Speech-Language-Hearing (SLH) Clinic has helped him develop new language centers in the right side of his brain, enabling him to communicate once again.

Heffley is just one of the estimated 100 clients who turn to the University SLH Clinic each year for outpatient assessment and treatment of their communication disorders. Established in 1998 as part of the University's Department of Speech-Language Pathology, the clinic serves a dual purpose, says founding director Dr. Gary Rentschler: treating patients and educating students.

It provides fourth-year students a hands-on laboratory where they can integrate classroom theory with practice and also offers direct, affordable care to people of all ages from the Pittsburgh area. Under direct supervision of licensed, nationally certified faculty, graduate students treat individuals with the following communications disorders:

- Stuttering
- Communication difficulties after stroke and other neurological damage
- Voice disorders or vocal strain for those in teaching and singing professions
- Difficulty with listening, understanding, remembering and responding to verbal information (auditory processing)
- Difficulty with phonics and sound awareness
- Problems pronouncing certain sounds or being understood
- Difficulty developing language skills in childhood

"The clinic is a happy environment in which grad students can grow in their profession and knowledge. This creates a rich environment that complements Dan working towards conquering the language handicaps that are before him," says Jim Heffley, Dan's father.



Rachel Gasior, a first-year graduate student, works with a diverse client population at Duquesne's Speech-Language-Hearing Clinic, earning 80 to 100 hours of supervised clinical experience.

"The on-site clinic is a definite advantage to this program. We receive clinical experience under the direct supervision of practicing speech-language pathologists in an intimate setting," says speech-language pathology student David Ford.

The facility's eight treatment rooms are equipped with state-of-the-art digital video and audio equipment to record therapy sessions so that students can critique themselves, as well as document their client's progress. Each room is adjacent to an observation room with a see-through mirror, allowing members of clients' families to watch sessions and incorporate therapy techniques at home.

David Ricketts, who began a stuttering therapy program several years ago, recalls first feeling strange at having to change the way he spoke, but now describes the atmosphere as "comfortable."

Referred to Duquesne's SLH Clinic by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, the 25-year-old attends two sessions a week. "In group therapy I get to see different points of view and can relate to others with the same problem. In individual therapy, I can enjoy the personal attention from the therapist, who shows me activities that are relevant to everyday life," he says.

There is no standard timetable for treating communication disorders, says Rentschler, as clients can push themselves or protect themselves. "Our job is to set goals and help our clients learn how to put stuttering in perspective. When they find avenues where they can improve their speech and language skills, that gives them hope."

For more information about Duquesne University's Speech-Language-Hearing Clinic, call 412.396.4200. ■