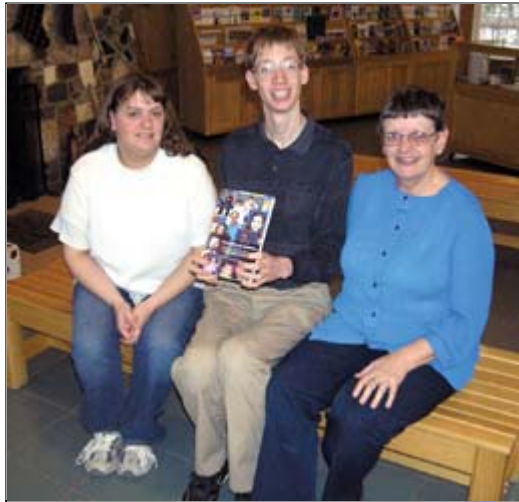




# Pioneer

THE PLACE TO BE FOR BEMIDJI INFORMATION



From left, Stephanie Coyle, her brother, Bradley Olson, and mother, Carol Olson, celebrate the publication of Stephanie's essay about growing up with a sibling with autism. The book was published this month in London. Bradley, 27, was diagnosed with autism when he was 18 months old, the first person in Bemidji to be discovered with the disability.

## Bradley Olson subject of research project, autism essay collection

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By Molly Miron

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Autism used to be a one-in-10,000 disability. In 1980, when 18-month-old Bradley Olson was diagnosed, he was Bemidji's single person with the autism.

Now 27, Bradley is a music and computer expert, a Bemidji High School and Northwest technical College-Bemidji graduate. He works part time at RFC Music Production and is the subject of scientific research and a new book of essays by people with experiences with autism. Bradley is also a public speaker on autism, a mentor to campers with autism at Camp Courage in Lake George and a Count-Me-In puppeteer with his sister, Stephanie Coyle.

He also enjoys being an uncle to Stephanie and her husband Todd's boys, Nathaniel, 10, and Nicholas, 6, and babysitting them.

Stephanie submitted her essay, "Growing Up With Bradley," to "Voices from the Spectrum," edited by Cindy N. Ariel and Robert A. Naseef and published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers of London. The book will be available in the United States in February, but can be ordered at [www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com). The publishers said Stephanie's essay was chosen from more than 100,000 submissions.

Carol Olson, Bradley's mother, said her son was being treated for bowed legs as an infant. When he was being checked at 18 months, the doctors asked Carol if she had any other concerns about the boy.

"I said, 'He doesn't respond very much any more,'" Carol recalled. "Bradley wasn't talking anymore."

Diagnosis

So, they went to the Twin Cities for tests. Bradley took no notice of slammed doors, and when the doctors slid him down a playground slide, he didn't reflexively bend his knees to catch himself at the end.

Although the condition was rarely diagnosed when Bradley was a baby, the rate of autism is one in 160 children now, mainly because the definition has spread to include a range of developmental disabilities.

Because there was no special education for Bradley in Bemidji, he was sent to foster homes, first in Wayzata and then in Duluth, so he could go to school. He came home every fifth weekend, so he would know he had two homes. When he was 7, and progressing well, Jon Huttemier started the special education program in Bemidji schools.

"The (Bemidji) School District hadn't worked with anybody with autism before," Carol said. "He kind of paved the way."

## Family

In her essay, Stephanie said she enjoyed her brother's visits and always wanted her brother to be with the family permanently. When she was in third grade, she wrote a letter to Santa for a Bemidji Pioneer pre-Christmas feature: "All I want for Christmas is for my brother to come home and live with us."

She added that she got her wish a few months later, but "Be careful what you wish for."

Suddenly, the comfortable mother-daughter household included a little boy who was "different."

Stephanie said she and Bradley went to different elementary schools, but they were together when he entered sixth grade.

"Kids at that age are very mean and I didn't expect it," Stephanie said.

She said other students would continually report Bradley's bad behavior or strange words. They would tease her, too.

"They made more fun of me," Bradley said. However, he said he could walk off and let the hurtful words go.

"But I took it personally," Stephanie said. "I really struggled with kids picking on him

through high school."

Sometimes she was embarrassed, sometimes she made excuses for Bradley and sometimes she turned on the tormentors and bullied them back. She avoided inviting friends home because she didn't want to explain about Bradley.

Stephanie said she was also proud of Bradley. In the third grade, she won a \$50 prize in an essay contest writing about Bradley. In sixth grade, she made a prize-winning study of autism for the science fair and used Bradley as an exhibit.

"I thought that was pretty cool," she said. "I can use my brother. But on the peer level, it wasn't good at all."

Her feelings changed as she and her brother became adults. Stephanie coached Bradley in Special Olympics including horseback riding, swimming, bowling and roller skating.

"My best is roller skating," Bradley said. "I went to international competition and won gold, silver and bronze."

"Bradley and I became extremely close during this period," Stephanie said. "I realized it was more me than anything else. I wish we could have been that way in middle school, but we have it now."

Bradley also took part in a study this summer conducted by the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine

Autism Research Project. He was chosen for the project because he is high functioning, and one of the earliest autism diagnoses.

“Bradley doesn’t have any other retardation besides the autism,” Carol said.

Bradley said he enjoyed being a subject of the study, partly because he learned more about himself. For example, his expertise and strong focus on popular music.

“I listen to a lot of everything except I can’t stand rap and thrash metal,” he said.

He owns thousands of CDs and LPs and can recite all the cuts on each one. However, during the University of Pittsburgh study he learned he could concentrate on things besides computers and music.

“I can, but I often choose not to,” Bradley said.

## Thoughts

His family said figuring out Bradley’s thought processes continues to intrigue them. For example, they said, he can’t lie or pretend and he has trouble if words have more than one meaning.

For example, when a teacher asked the class what a horizon is, he said, “It’s a car,” referring to the Plymouth model.

He has to be reminded to wear a coat in cold weather, because he is unaware of the temperature, and if he is hurt or sick, he doesn’t notice. His favorite books are lists of facts

with a prized Christmas present always a World Almanac.

“I remember walking into the living room and he was reading the phone book,” Stephanie said.

“Making us see things from his point of view is very frustrating for him,” said Carol.

Bradley said other people’s manner of thought, their inability to remember everything, for example, is mysterious to him, too.

But when asked if he would like to be the “normal” brother 8-year-old Stephanie had hoped to welcome home, Bradley said he wouldn’t change anything.

“I’m proud to be autistic,” he said. “I don’t know any other way of life. It’s who I am. It’s the reality.”

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