

[Four teens 'recovered' from autism star in documentary](#)

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A woman named Nancy speaks to the camera about the day her daughter, Janna, was diagnosed with autism.

"My pediatrician told me over the phone that I should just put her into an institution," she says.

But we see Janna sitting next to her mom. She's 13 in the video and, as far as the viewer can tell, as typical as any other teenager.

"What's an institution?" she asks.

"A hospital," her mom tells her.

Janna makes a face and cocks her head away in disgust. Like any other teenager would.

Janna is one of four children featured in the documentary "[Recovered: Journeys Through the Autism Spectrum and Back](#)," produced by Dr. [Doreen Granpeesheh](#). The film was screened Saturday night at Chapman University.

Granpeesheh is the founder and executive director of the [Center for Autism and Related Disorders](#). The children were all CARD patients in the early 1990s, and after years of intensive Applied Behavioral Analysis — 25-40 hours per week — they were "recovered" from the autism spectrum, according to Granpeesheh.

The film uses footage shot by Granpeesheh in those early years. She largely forgot about the 80 hours of tapes until about five years ago. "I thought, I paid a lot of money for this footage. I should do something with it."

So she started tracking down the children. According to Granpeesheh, she found six of the original children; five, she says, were "recovered."

Three of those children were at the screening Saturday. (The fourth lives in the Midwest.) All of them say they're no longer on the spectrum. Janna (no last names are used in the film) is in competitive color guard and helps rescue stray dogs. Brett runs track and just received his learner's permit. Nick was voted Most Likely to Succeed by his classmates. They spoke confidently during a panel discussion and to strangers afterward.

Claims of recovery are sometimes controversial in the autism world, particularly because many of the biomedical treatments that are used (chelation, special diets, hyperbaric oxygen therapy) are considered untested or dangerous by mainstream doctors.

None of the children in the film, though, used biomedical interventions, partly because they predate the biomedical movement. Their improvement, Granpeesheh says, is due only to the early, intensive therapies they received, not to any controversial interventions.

(The film is, however, dedicated to Bernard Rimland, the founder of the Autism Research Institute, which advocates for biomedical interventions. During discussion following the movie, Granpeesheh spoke in support of theories — largely rejected by mainstream science — that toxins in vaccines and elsewhere cause autism.)

All of the children show, to varying degrees, mild behavioral quirks that are consistent with autism. All of them avoid eye contact to some degree. During a reception after the screening, while the audience, CARD staff and the teenagers mingled, Brett snuck down an empty hallway to be alone.

“He’s a little quirky,” his dad, Keith said, but no longer on the autism spectrum. After all, he said, who isn’t a little quirky? “I’m a little quirky. His mom’s a little quirky. He’s part of society.”

“He’s my hero,” he added.

ABA is a method of teaching behaviors by focusing on the conditions that lead to the behavior, and what incentives are received after the behavior. The film shows CARD staff painstakingly teaching the children to count, to listen, to make eye contact, to speak. They do this by controlling the conditions in the room and by giving hugs, cheers, high fives and treats to reward certain behavior.

Unlike biomedical treatments, it is accepted by mainstream medicine, though some critics say it is [unethical](#) or simply rote training.

In the film, Nick says he was frustrated by the hours and hours he spent in ABA, but that he remembers making the decision to do it to get better. “I’m damn proud,” he told the audience Saturday.

Unlike Nick, Janna says she didn’t even know that she was autistic. “I never knew I had a problem until my mom said ‘you’re in this movie.’ I’m like, for what?”

The film is [available on DVD here](#). Director Michele Jaquis says she is submitting it to film festivals and periodically screening it at events like Saturday’s.