



The main newspaper cover features a woman in a bright green top and dark pants sitting on a white sofa with a young child. The child is leaning in to kiss the woman on the cheek. The background is a vibrant red wall. A large white letter 'U' is positioned on the left side of the wall. To the right, there is a framed picture of a pink car. Below the 'U', the text reads 'ON SUNDAY 3.07.2011 SundayMail'. On the right side of the cover, there are two short articles: 'JULIA ROBERTS When a pretty woman kisses another man' and 'FRANCES WHITING Why I just don't do pillow talk'. A large white box with the text 'FREE SPEECH' is overlaid on the bottom left of the cover. Below this box, the text reads 'A unique school is making sure our children have a voice'. At the bottom of the cover, there is a white cross icon followed by the text 'MOVIES + MUSIC + ARTS + THEATRE + FASHION + FOOD + SOCIALS + WHAT'S ON + WEDDINGS + BABIES'. A red mushroom-shaped stool with white polka dots is visible in the foreground on the right.

FREE SPEECH

A unique school is making sure our children have a voice

+ MOVIES + MUSIC + ARTS + THEATRE + FASHION +
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BY
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PHOTOGRAPHY
ADAM ARMSTRONG

SMALL TALK

Tucked away in a leafy corner of Brisbane, a school hardly known to locals is attracting global attention for its work in helping a special group of children learn to talk

In the soaring dining room of a home in Graceville there's a fight going on. It's all over a couple of iced buns. It's typical young sisters stuff. A doe-eyed four-year-old and her elder sister both want the bun with the most icing.

There's nothing typical, though, in how this little stoush unfolds. Words pour out of the younger one with persuasive ease. The elder, Elessa, goes into a mini meltdown. She wails and rages, she groans in tones only her mother and sister can decipher. Her hands whirl and wave in bizarre and exaggerated gestures – behaviour more typical of a volcanic toddler who can't find the words to express their needs.

Their mother, Elena Russo, once again musters all her patience, stays calm, articulates clearly. She does not scold.

"Use your words, sweetheart, use your words," she urges.

A few tears later, a truce is settled, the buns are eaten and peace is restored. A moist-eyed Elessa and her little sister carve an endless – and noisy – circuit of happiness around a large deck on small plastic cars.

Across the river at a home in Fig Tree Pocket, three children are perched at a breakfast bar. Little Fin East, brother Noah and sister Ruby are eating fresh-baked muffins. Noah, 6, and Ruby, 3, do all the talking while Fin dissects the muffin in silence, pausing occasionally for a cheeky grin. The trio moves to the next room to play Wii – a Friday treat.

Ruby weaves through the pair with a high-octane singing and squealing, Noah yells and exhorts like a football coach on a sideline. Fin pumps the remote up and down with both hands and bounces on the spot, huffing and puffing like a bellows on a scrawny pair of legs. He utters not a word. There's all the normal boyish excitement there – just not the words to go with it.

Fin East and Elessa Russo are not toddlers. They are five and six years old.

They are not physically or intellectually impaired. They are not deaf or blind. Nor are they autistic. Both live in loving, affluent homes. They are intelligent children,

brimming with intuition, humour and empathy. You see it in their eyes, you see it in their smiles.

But they have something called primary language disorder (PLD). Their speech and language are not delayed, but just muddled in a big cognitive soup inside their heads.

They are happy, beautiful little souls who hear but (often) cannot understand, whose words are locked inside their heads and whose mouths fight to create those words which they *do* dare to speak.

Too often, though, their developmental blockage is misunderstood as intellectual disability, autism or just plain bad behaviour.

Fortunately, they have what their parents call their "angels". Their angels are the teachers, therapists and physios who work humbly in a deliberately peaceful corner of Brisbane at the Glenleighden School.

Glenleighden is a modest little idyll in an unlikely bush setting in Fig Tree Pocket. But it provides world-leading PLD education through a holistic mix of specialist teaching, music, occupational and speech-language therapies, physiotherapy and psychology.

The school's work isn't heralded only by the children's parents, but by educators and by PLD parents worldwide – parents who would love the chance to send their kids to Glenleighden, to unleash their voices and unlock their characters.

Executive principal Vikki-Rose Graydon says Glenleighden is unique in the southern hemisphere and regularly receives inquiries from around the globe.

Glenleighden parents who spoke to *U on Sunday* are an inspiring embodiment of the old adage: "You'd do anything for your kids". Their sacrifices to have their children touched by the talents of Glenleighden are colossal – and, sadly, not uncommon.

Elena Russo and husband Marcello are a good example. This year they took the huge step of uprooting their family, business and whole lives from Sydney so daughter Elessa could attend the school.

Immediately, Elena felt understood. She felt the



collegiate warmth of other PLD parents and, even after one day, could see that the disruption and dislocation had been worth it.

“After her very first day she said, ‘My name is Elessa’. She’d never said her name before – she’s six years old. That was immense,” Elena explains. “I nearly crashed the car, I was so excited. It was fabulous. Pure joy.”

Katrina Johnson and husband Mark are another family who completely transformed their life so son Kelly, 6, could attend Glenleighden.

The pair had just renovated a Queenslander in Ipswich, “way overcapitalised because we thought we were going to be there a long time”. They sold up last year to move their three children to a small, rented home in Kenmore to be closer to the school and do away with a three-hour daily routine of drop-offs and pick-ups that was ripping the family apart.

“Plus we had to sell in a really bad market,” Katrina says. “Basically, we have nothing now. We have our cars, and that’s it.”

After one year and one term, the financial sacrifice has paid off. Kelly has gone from sentences of two words to a glossary. He is at reading level 7, can form short sentences and the meltdowns that could rage for two hours are “pretty much” gone.

Rebecca East and husband Jono are also Glenleighden parents. Soon after a major renovation of their Woolloowin home, the pair rented it out and moved their four children to Fig Tree Pocket (coincidentally to a house only a few doors from the school) – all for son Fin.

“We’ve never had this much change in our relationship,” Rebecca explains. “We had just got the other kids sorted in kindy, prep and a new (high) school. We knew this would affect everyone but it was just a no-brainer – we had to do it. He’s done a term, and it’s just amazing. Aaaamazing. Twelve weeks ago he could barely talk. Yesterday he was bouncing down the driveway with holiday pictures for show-and-share.”

As compelling as their stories of financial sacrifice, dislocation and the exasperating procession of specialist appointments are, they pale against the stories of the families’ emotional journeys.

All who talk to *U on Sunday* tell their stories in cracking voices, through mists of tears.

*Sometimes I look at her
and she looks sad. When I
ask why, she just says: ‘I
can’t talk, Mummy’*

Elena Russo

PLD is insidious. It is hidden. PLD children look no different to any other child. Parents generally don’t see a problem for quite some time in the child’s life, believing their child to be simply delayed, quiet or anti-social.

When they do finally see it, it is still baffling. Even specialists can be stumped by it. Often, it’s misdiagnosed as autism, or misunderstood as intellectual or physical disability.

It also manifests in different ways, from talking and comprehension, to concentration, writing, balance, co-ordination, motor skills, problem-solving and hugely heightened senses, such as hearing, for example.

They are proof of how crucial language is, how language is the key that unlocks so much. It affects our ability to learn, to earn, to communicate and, strangely, even our ability to stay upright.

As Graydon explains: “It’s so hard for these children because, essentially, we develop our whole intellect through language. Just putting on shoes and socks can be a major operation for some of these kids.”

A further problem for parents is that PLD children will often display increased independence – where words fail, actions speak.

Rebecca East, for example, thought Fin was simply an extraordinarily self-sufficient toddler.

“He’d get his cup, push the button on the fridge door, go and jump on the trampoline, go and play with his blocks,” she recalls. “We just thought how adorable and wonderful it was that he looked after himself and wasn’t demanding too much attention of us.”

At 2½ they noticed Fin wasn’t talking much, and one-year-old Ruby was overtaking him.

Rebecca went into denial. She quietly sought therapy,

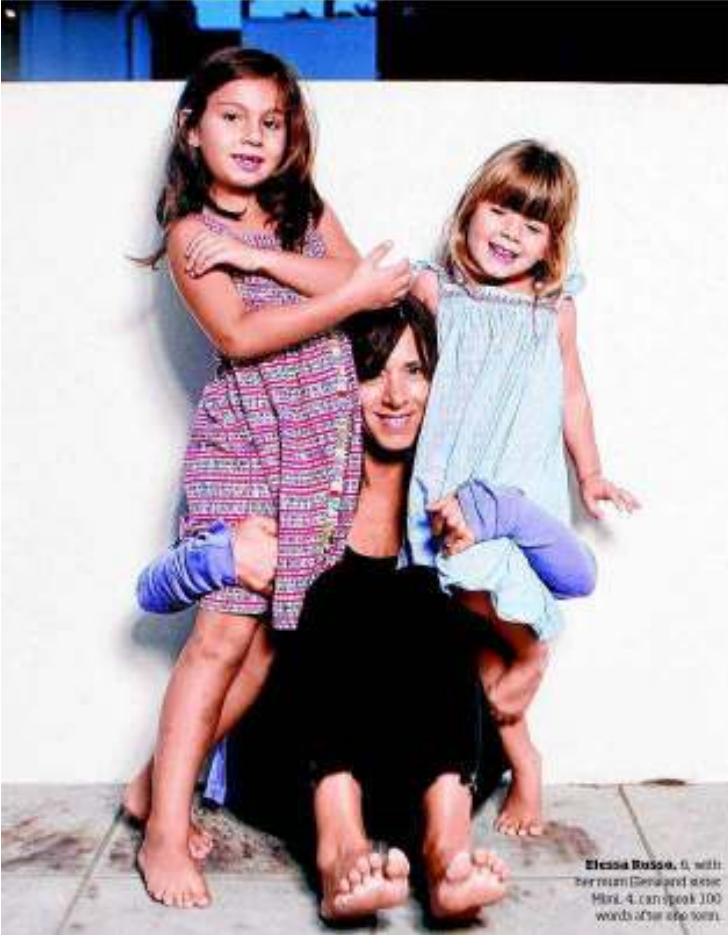
but refused to believe there was anything seriously wrong with her beautiful little boy.

Therapist followed specialist, diagnosis followed assessment, disappointment followed diagnosis, until Fin was deemed to have pervasive development disorder – longhand for a form of autism.

“I was delighted because finally we had a name and something else to research and I thought, ‘We can fix him’ I was happy, told the family, did the research and realised that he could be (autistic) . . . but I’m not going to give up on him and accept this label and this diagnosis that fits him for life, which isn’t repairable – you just design and have a management plan in place to make his life easier. But I couldn’t do it. I threw the diagnosis in the bin.”

Rebecca consulted paediatrician Dr Michael McDowell who explained how PLD children can display autistic behaviour, but aren’t autistic. Striking out at siblings, squealing or banging your fork on the table are valves for





Nicola Russo, 6, with her twin brother **Marino, 4,** can speak 100 words after the storm.



the anger at not being able to speak. Since entering at Glenleighden at the start of the year, Rebecca estimates, Fin has gone from 30 words to forming whole sentences. Above all, though, he has the confidence to talk to people.

“One of the big things the school has given him is confidence. He’s joined a soccer team thanks to the confidence he’s got from Glenleighden. He’s still a quiet little chappy, but just this week he said, ‘Mum, can Madeleine come to my house?’ I just welled up.”

When Katrina Johnson’s son Kelly chewed car tyres as a toddler, she thought he just had some kind of sensory deprivation. He was also obsessed with *Toy Story*, watching it on fast-forward, rewind or playing one section over and over again – never at normal speed.

They spent their first family holiday on the Tweed Coast almost entirely indoors after Kelly cried and screamed

uncontrollably as even the slightest breeze would seem like a cyclone around his head and send him into a sensory frenzy. A friend suggested Kelly may be autistic.

“I just thought this was all just quiriness,” Katrina says. “I thought maybe he had a speech and language impairment . . . I thought, ‘No, my son’s not autistic, he’s lovely. He loves cuddles and he loves being touched’.

Katrina eventually saw a specialist who diagnosed Kelly with high-functioning autism.

“I just broke down, and kept saying ‘no’,” Katrina recalls through tears. “I walked out of there holding his hand, I could barely even pay the bill. I thought my son was damaged. It wasn’t the same kid as the day before, a kid who was going to do great things . . . I think I cried every day for six months.”

Katrina put Kelly into mainstream education with a



special education unit, and then in an autism intervention unit until Kelly last year was assessed and admitted to Glenleighden. (Her children have switched schools three times to accommodate Kelly's needs.)

When he started at Glenleighden, Katrina says, Kelly could say one or two words. Another Glenleighden parent now considers Kelly a "beautiful little talker". The meltdowns and sensory deficiencies have "pretty much" gone, with Kelly's main impairment now being language.

"I wanted him to have expressive communication. I wanted him to be able to answer something as simple as 'How was your day?' He might now say: 'Bad. I hurt hand'. Now I can actually talk to him. I used to call him bubble boy because he would shut himself off away from social contact. Not any more. It's absolutely changed his world."

PLD is a puzzle – it's hard to diagnose, and it's hard for parents to walk in their children's shoes. The best explanation Elena Russo can find is that her daughter lives in a foreign country, where she can neither understand nor express herself, but where some of her other senses are heightened. Elessa can hear a plane coming three minutes before it soars overhead, for example, but struggles to communicate many basic needs.

"It's taken us years to get this diagnosis," she explains. "You go to 10 different people and get 10 diagnoses. One doctor even told us she had anxiety – a two-year-old with anxiety!"

"I had to fight the system because I knew there was a clever, bright kid in there and they were saying she wasn't. She gets it, absolutely. She knows she can't speak. Sometimes I look at her and she looks sad. When I ask why, she just says: 'I can't talk, Mummy'."

Elena says Glenleighden has unfurled her daughter from an anxious and withdrawn girl to a happy, confident and socially well-adjusted one who now boasts more than 100 words – all within a term.

Precisely how Glenleighden unlocks these children's voices is hard to distil. Simply put, it treats the individual and sees communication through the prism of the whole child, a holistic, interdisciplinary approach which looks beyond words alone.

"Self-confidence, self-esteem and achievement in life come from a belief in one's ability to face and overcome obstacles, thereby the school motto: Achievement over Adversity," the school's website explains.

Graydon says the aim of the school is to prepare students, where possible, to re-enter mainstream schools,

and many do. She says, though, that the vocational outlook for many can be more limited than mainstream children.

Those aspirations right now seem almost secondary to our parents, who are happy just to see their children growing in confidence, revealing their characters, finding their place in the world.

Being happy, communicating and having friends – simple stuff. They rejoice in the leaps their children have already made. And despite all the hurdles, they see their children as gifts who have given them fresh eyes on the world.

As Rebecca East says: "We are, in a way, blessed to have these children because it shows you everyone is an individual, and we don't learn the same way and don't progress to the same degree. You just look at everybody with much fresher eyes. This journey we are having is lovely. I have a much better outlook on the world now . . . It's life and it's wonderful and the potential these kids have after being at a school like Glenleighden is endless. You know what? He (Fin) can be anything."

The Glenleighden School holds its Lunch for Language fundraiser on July 29 in Brisbane. Info: 3378 8625.

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Glenleighden principal Vikki-Rose Graydon says her school is unique in the southern hemisphere.



Rebecca East with
Ruby, 3. Noah, 6, and
Pat, 5. Pat has now
joined a soccer team.