

Stuttering is a debilitating affliction. But a programme taught by recovering stutterers gives sufferers hope, writes **Bev Nicol**.



Speaking up: Callum Freebairn's speech improves overnight during a McGuire Programme course for stutterers.

Picture: SAM BAKER

Freedom of speech

MARTY Van Der Kley, 29, sits in his wheelchair, his spine askew from the spina bifida with which he was born, and writhes with every utterance as he introduces himself to the class. His eyes roll toward the ceiling as he gasps for air and spits his words out in disjointed syllables through tense lips. Speaking is a struggle.

Marty is one of five brave New Zealanders, supported by 10 course graduates and three course instructors, meeting in Palmerston North for a four-day course to address their fear of stuttering.

The McGuire Programme, an international organisation founded by American recovering stutterer Dave McGuire, attempts to transform stutterers into eloquent speakers. Students confront their fear with tools to help them accept themselves as recovering stutterers.

Martine Backhouse, 43, knows the agony that Marty suffers. The softly spoken librarian from Otaki talks to people she doesn't know every day in an effort to combat her inadequate speech. She gets through most days fine, though some remind her of the torture of travelling to Wellington from Te Horo by bus as a youngster. "I'd spend the whole trip sweating over the idea of asking the bus conductor once I got into town for 'tuh-tuh-two sections, please'. It was torture, the journeys would blur." Sometimes

she'd pay for three sections instead.

Marcellus Ramakers, 38, is a marketing manager from Auckland. He recounts a recent address at a business meeting with Japanese peers and other senior managers. He spat out each word, his face contorted and his hands erratically slapped at his thighs. After the meeting a colleague said, "Well, that was embarrassing." Marcellus, who is more than two metres (6ft 7in), said he felt two foot tall and wished the floor had opened up to swallow him.

"The way I am now, my career has a definite ceiling on it. I've got goals and aspirations; I'm not the kind of person who can sit where I am forever. If I don't do something about this now, I'll never move forward."

Callum Freebairn, 17, has developed a stutter in the seven years since he was 10. His words stick in his throat like glue and he repeats himself constantly. The affliction has possibly developed as a result of the frustrations suffered through Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. Maintaining eye contact is difficult for him, and he takes time to process information.

During the course, when he shows overnight improvements in his speech he tugs at everyone's heartstrings — no matter how unemotional he appears.

Jack Hoetjes, in his mid-40s, is a purchasing manager for a big New Zealand manufacturer. Typical of a covert stutterer, he scratches at an itch that isn't there to redirect tension from his face and forms his sentences cryptically to avoid feared words.

"I heard about the McGuire Programme 10 years ago," he says. "I've been coming up with excuses not to attend ever since."

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The McGuire Programme, developed in 1994 and taught worldwide, is a holistic approach to a psychological problem. It introduces the stutterer to a new method of speaking that revolves around three key points: pausing, breathing and speaking.

The pause is mainly about resisting time pressure. Stutterers feel they have to answer quickly so pausing helps them take back control of speaking. Students learn to formulate their words through discipline and focus, getting rid of filler words, such as um, aah, just, actually, basically, you know. Stutterers often use

these to disguise their problem.

The Programme's New Zealand director, Chris Bland, tells of introducing himself to a room full of people. Extremely nervous, he told the silent room, "I've actually forgotten my name. No, I've remembered actually. It's actually Chris Bland actually." Everybody thought it was a joke and laughed.

Breathing is the programme's most difficult of elements because it involves changing a habit of a lifetime and breathing in a different way.

The students, and the graduates who coach them, face each other in lines, hands at right angles across their chests, which are strapped with a belt, so they can feel their ribs expand. They gasp in great gulps of air as they force their costal diaphragm down and their ribs outwards with each inward breath, and suck the diaphragm up and draw their ribs inwards with each exhalation. It's the way opera singers and broadcasters are taught to breathe, providing control and sufficient air to aid the voice.

It's simple in theory — adding voice to an exhalation means a stutterer stops stuttering. When there is no outward movement of air, there is a greater chance of stuttering. Marty's a shining example of success. His breathing using the costal diaphragm isn't perfect but as it slows and calms, his speech steadies.

CONTINUES D2

Freedom of speech

CONTINUES D1

Marty's wandering eyes are hard to keep focused but when they are his speech again improves dramatically. As he progresses his breath control, his name changes from "Mmm Arty" to "Marty".

The results of the course are astounding. The students hit the streets on day three to encounter strangers. They ask for directions or introduce themselves as recovering stutterers.

Then they meet at a popular spot in the centre of town and address a tearful crowd with public speeches that come off the cuff and from the heart, each as eloquent as a seasoned public speaker. Emotions run high and adrenaline surges through each of the speakers.

On day four the students are given more tools and assigned their lifelong coaches.

The McGuire Programme survives on the voluntary efforts of graduates, who can train to be coaches and course instructors.

Not one person in this programme is a speech therapist, and the camaraderie and



In full voice:

From left, Marcellus Ramakers, Martine Backhouse and Marty Van Der Kley.

Picture: SAM BAKER

shame and guilt for another 40 years. What I've done is nice for friends and family, but the work has to come from me."

Callum speaks more mechanically than the others. He knows the road ahead requires work and he shows excellent discipline. "I'm pleased to be a recovering stutterer," he says.

Marty struggles in his wheelchair as he addresses the group. Then he drops his breath and seems to look everyone in the eye.

His voice comes out with clarity and eloquence, at three or four words a breath. "It's about doing it with attitude, even if it's not always perfect," he says. "Life's about attitude and sticking with the race even if it's not smooth." There's not a dry eye in the room.

■ *Bev Nicol is a recovering stutterer, primary coach and course instructor with the McGuire Programme.*

■ *For more information on the McGuire Programme go to mcguireprogramme.com or contact Chris Bland on 06 323 5313 or e-mail him at chrisbland@xtra.co.nz*

empathy are the programme's strengths.

At farewell speeches Martine is no longer timid, her voice strong and purposeful. "This is the best present I've ever

given myself," she beams. Jack tells us of his temptation to leave halfway through the course. "But I realised that if I walked out now I might have to live with the