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'Rain man' inspiration works to promote understanding

Man with amazing recall, father push for understanding of people's differences

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Kim Peek speaks Wednesday at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody. An autistic savant and the inspiration behind the title character in the movie "Rain Man," Peek is an advocate for those with developmental disabilities.

RUFFIN PREVOST/Gazette Staff

CODY - Kim Peek can tell you when you'll retire, but he's not an investment adviser. He can tell you the names of every pitcher in the 1959 World Series, but he's not a sportscaster. He can tell you the ZIP code of any town in America, but he's not a postmaster.

Peek is just amazingly different from anyone you'll ever meet.

"You don't have to be handicapped to be different," Peek said Wednesday at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody. "Everybody's different."

Along with his father, Fran Peek, Kim spoke as part of a program sponsored by NOWCAP Services, a Wyoming nonprofit organization that provides services to people with developmental disabilities and acquired brain injuries.

The world's most famous autistic savant, Kim Peek was the inspiration for the film "Rain Man," and his incredible mental abilities far surpass those of the Raymond Babbitt character in the movie.

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Tell him your birthday, and he'll instantly tell you the day of the week you were born, the day of the week your birthday will fall on next year, and which day of the week you will turn 65, so you can plan your retirement party.

"Kim retains about 98 percent of all the information he processes," his father said.

"His brain doesn't have a wastebasket."

And Peek processes an amazing amount of information.

"He was tested as part of an optical study at the University of California at Los Angeles," Fran Peek said. "He reads the left page with his left eye, the right page with his right eye, and has a total photographic memory. He read eight pages in 53 seconds.

"He was tested an hour later and recalled 98 percent of what he read, including the page numbers, and almost all of it verbatim," Fran said.

Kim has trouble, though, with motor skills, and needs help with simple tasks like buttoning a shirt, shaving or putting toothpaste on his toothbrush.

"You do all those things so I have more time to read," Kim has told Fran.

Doctors are still working to understand exactly how Peek's brain works, his father said, but his condition may be the result of being born without a corpus callosum, the bundle of nerves that connects the left and right brain hemispheres.

For much of his life, Peek had limited social skills, as is the case with many autistic people. But after the success of "Rain Man," Kim and Fran have received endless requests for appearances.

Since the film, the two have traveled around the world, speaking as advocates for those with developmental disabilities.

In the process, Kim has logged more than 2 million frequent-flyer miles and nearly 1 million road miles. Father and son have spoken to more than 3 million people.

But the bond shared by the father and son was apparent long before their rise to public prominence.

"My dad and I share the same shadow," Kim Peek has said.

Fran Peek, 80, said he sometimes gets as much out of speaking to other parents of autistic children as Kim, who is 55.

Together, they present a compelling case for Kim Peek's mission, which he gladly recites for every audience: "To learn to recognize and respect differences in others, and treat them as you want them to treat you, so that we can have a better world to live in."

The public attention has brought about a blossoming in his son, Fran Peek said. Kim has become more social and confident, challenging the conventional wisdom that people with such disabilities don't change.

He enjoys delighting audiences with his amazing recall of an encyclopedic range of facts and statistics.

Mention any town, and Kim responds with the ZIP code, area code and call letters for the local radio and TV stations.

His brain is a flawless almanac of information on his favorite topics, including sports, history, music and politics.

If he doesn't know the answer to a question, it's not because he can't remember. He simply hasn't read about it - yet.

But Peek doesn't easily grasp metaphors or abstract ideas, and he sometimes takes things too literally.

An astounded history professor in Peek's home state of Utah was amazed at his recall of Civil War battles, including dates, names and casualty counts.

Fran Peek recalls the historian asking Kim if he knew Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Kim responded, "Yes, 227 Northwest Front St., but he only stayed there overnight. He gave a talk the next day."

Against the advice of doctors, Fran Peek and his wife decided early in Kim's life not to place him in an institution. Kim lived at home, along with two younger siblings, "who are both very normal and bright," said his father.

Fran Peek said it's important not to isolate people like Kim, but to challenge them to interact with others, as well as to bring others into contact with those who are different.

Betty Carmon of Powell agreed, saying she spent time every day working with her son, Steele, to help him become an independent member of the community.

Steele is autistic and works at the IGA grocery in Powell, Carmon said. She praised NOWCAP staff members for playing a large part in Steele's progress toward independent living.

"NOWCAP is the best organization I've worked with because of their attitude," Carmon said. "They're about helping people become independent so they can care for themselves. They help people learn about their abilities, rather than their disabilities."

Fran Peek said it was sometimes tough to spend the time working with his son to get him to try to button a shirt or cut his food, but if he had it to do over again, "I probably would have made him do more things, instead of doing so many for him.

"But the important thing is, these people are different, and they may be challenged, but they're going to make it. It's up to you to help them make it, and you'll feel better if you do."

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