

# Stutterer Speaks Up in Class; His Professor Says Keep Quiet



Matt Rainey for The New York Times

Philip Garber Jr., who is taking courses at the County College of Morris, was told by a professor that his stutter was disruptive.

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RANDOLPH, N.J. — As his history class at the [County College of Morris](#) here discussed exploration of the New World, Philip Garber Jr. raised his hand, hoping to ask why China’s 15th-century explorers, who traveled as far as Africa, had not also reached North America.

He kept his hand aloft for much of the 75-minute session, but the professor did not call on him. She had already told him not to speak in class.

Philip, a precocious and confident 16-year-old who is taking two college classes this semester, has a lot to say but also a profound stutter that makes talking difficult, and talking quickly impossible. After the first couple of class sessions, in which he participated actively, the professor, an adjunct named Elizabeth Snyder, sent him an e-mail asking that he pose questions before or after class, “so we do not infringe on other students’ time.”

As for questions she asks in class, Ms. Snyder suggested, “I believe it would be better for everyone if you kept a sheet of paper on your desk and wrote down the answers.”

Later, he said, she told him, “Your speaking is disruptive.”

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Unbowed, Philip reported the situation to a college dean, who suggested he transfer to another teacher's class, where he has been asking and answering questions again.

While Philip's case is unusual, stuttering is not: About [5 percent](#) of people stutter at some point, and about 1 percent stutter as adults, according to the National Institutes of Health.

His classroom experience underlines a perennial complaint among stutterers, that society does not recognize the condition as a disability, and touches on an age-old pedagogical — and social — theme: the balance between the needs of an individual and the good of a group.

“As we do with all students seeking accommodations, we have taken action to resolve Philip's concerns so he can successfully continue his education,” said Kathleen Brunet Eagan, the college's communications director.

She would not say if Ms. Snyder, who declined to discuss the matter, had been disciplined, but noted that the college “strives to educate faculty and staff on how to accommodate students.”

Ms. Snyder has taught history at the college for a decade, and several current and former students on campus said in interviews that they had largely positive views of her. She was one of the first students when the college opened in 1968, then earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Montclair State University, and taught middle school social studies for more than 30 years.

For Philip, who has spent most of his life being home-schooled or attending a small [charter school](#), the teacher's attitude was a surprise and a disappointment. “I've never experienced any kind of discrimination,” he said, “so for it to happen in a college classroom was quite shocking.”

Jim McClure, a board member of the [National Stuttering Association](#) and its spokesman, said Philip's experience is unusual — because most stutterers avoid speaking in class.

“Teachers ignore them, or have to coax them to speak out,” Mr. McClure said. “The fact that this guy wants to participate is a really healthy sign.”

Kasey Errico, who taught most of Philip's seventh- and eighth-grade classes at the Ridge and Valley Charter School in Blirstown, N.J., noted that there were always students who monopolized class time.

“I wonder what this professor has done with those students, the ones who didn't stutter,” Ms. Errico said. “If she told them the same thing she told Philip, then I might understand.”

Two students in Ms. Snyder's class, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid alienating their teacher, said that Philip did take up more time than the other students, but not egregiously so, and that his contributions were solid. They said they did not know what happened between him and Ms. Snyder, but did notice the day he held his hand up for most of the class and never got called on.

“What about a kid who's got a thick accent and has to repeat everything?” asked Philip's father, also named Philip, the managing editor of two small newspapers. “I don't think you'd tell that kid he can't talk.”

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But advocates for people who stutter say that the same people who accept a delay in a bus ride to load a disabled passenger are often less patient with those who struggle to speak clearly.

Doctors once saw stuttering as a psychological issue, but the current medical view is that its origins are physiological and hereditary, though emotions can make it worse. Last year, the National Institutes of Health identified the [first genes](#) linked to stuttering.

The outlines of Philip's experience are common: there was a family history (an uncle who stuttered), the problem began before he reached school age, and he spent years going to speech therapists, some of whom did more harm than good. His most recent therapist gave Philip confidence and some techniques for managing his speech, but he decided last winter to stop going, at least for now.

"I understand that it can be hard to listen to someone who stutters, but the answer can't just be to shut him down," said his mother, Marin Martin, a nurse. As it is, she said, "there are social situations where he just can't be part of the conversation."

Talking with Philip requires a degree of patience — all the more so because he is remarkably uninhibited, and tends to speak in complete paragraphs, as displayed in videos on his [YouTube channel](#). For the listener, the payoff is insight and wry wit.

He has suppressed a trait common to stutterers — bouncing all or part of the body, as if trying to force a word out. "I found it's hard to get people to listen when they think you're having a seizure," he said. An avid amateur photographer, he hopes to make a career of it, but worries that "even if nobody expects the photographer to say much, you do have to talk."

After years of speech therapy, Philip can force himself to speak fairly fluidly, but it requires such intense concentration that he cannot hold a train of thought for long while doing it.

For now, he is taking courses in history and English composition at the college, [home-schooling](#) in other subjects and traveling into Manhattan once a week to work on acting and playwriting with [Our Time Theater Company](#), a group for people who stutter.

As for Ms. Snyder, he said he might have had some sympathy for the professor's quandary if she had expressed it less harshly.

"I've been very lucky to never have been teased, bullied or anything, but some people who stutter completely stop speaking because of that kind of abuse," Philip said. "People don't think of it as a legitimate disability. They just need to learn."