



# Brilliant Minds with

by Kathleen G. Nadeau, PhD

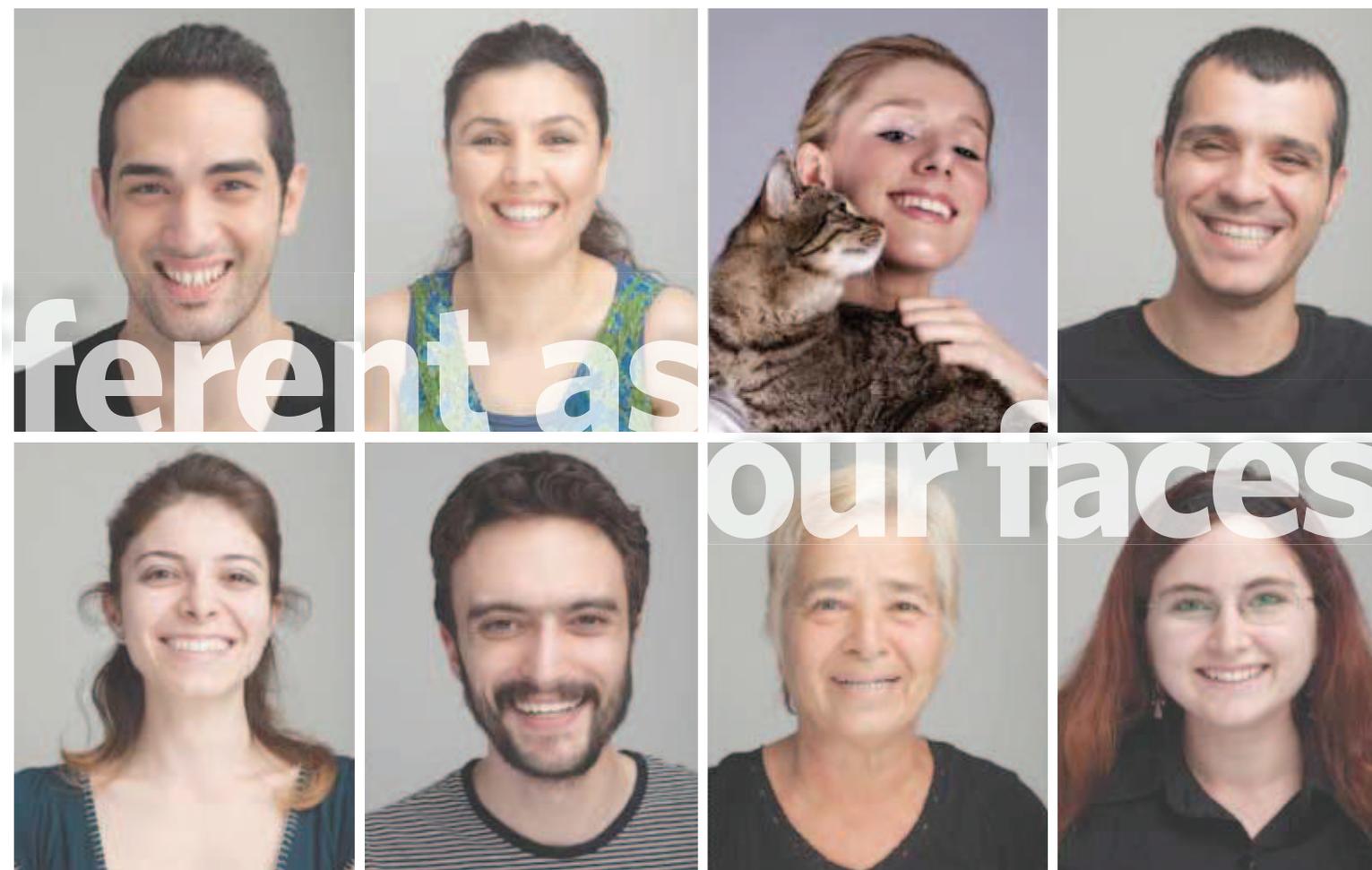
**THE LONGER THAT I WORK IN THE FIELD OF ATTENTION AND LEARNING DIFFERENCES,** the more I appreciate something a professor of neurology told me over forty years ago—our brains are as different as our faces. Think of the incredible variety of human faces. We all recognize that physical beauty takes many forms; however, too many educators on the postgraduate level cling to an outdated notion that there is only one kind of smart and only one way to demonstrate those smarts.

It's basic knowledge among elementary level educators that each child has a preferred learning style. Educators of the young are keenly aware of multiple intelligences, most of which are not measured by standardized "intelligence" tests. At the highest levels of education, in postgraduate and professional schools, such awareness does not seem to have taken root. Many graduate or professional school students have sought my assistance with learning differences that have impacted their

studies. Sadly, each appears to be a trailblazer within his or her particular program, fighting a lonely battle against great odds.

While we've come so very far in training educators to teach all kinds of minds, awareness and acceptance of ADHD and learning differences seem to stop at the doors of graduate and professional school programs. Let me share with you a few vignettes from my years of effort to help students on the postgraduate level to complete their degrees.

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# Learning Differences

## Three stories

“John” contacted me as a third-year medical student. He had earned top grades in his first two years of medical school by virtue of his many hours of hard work in the library. John had verbal working memory challenges that became problematic when he could no longer rely primarily on his visual learning style. In his third year, learning became mostly auditory as medical students followed their professors through clinical rounds. Despite his documented auditory processing and verbal working memory challenges, John’s request to tape record clinical rounds was denied. Despite my strongest efforts in his defense, this intelligent, hardworking medical student was dismissed from his program midway through his third year. Unlike many similar stories, John’s has a happy ending. I was aware of a few rare medical school programs that were wise enough to understand learning differences among bright students. John was allowed to transfer to an LD/ADHD-aware medical school program. Two years later, I received an invitation to his medical school graduation ceremony.

“Aileen” was in her third year of veterinary school when she contacted me in desperation. In her case, her clinical rotations were prov-

ing impossible because her program expected students to rapidly write detailed fifteen-to-eighteen-page reports on each animal admitted to the veterinary hospital during their shift. Aileen had a documented written language disability that made such an assignment nearly impossible. I recommended that she be allowed additional time to write these lengthy reports in a non-distracting environment. Her professor’s response was hostile. He told her that none of the other students required such “coddling.” Fortunately, my letter to the dean of the school achieved a more positive outcome. Given the prolonged hostility and prejudice that Aileen had experienced in her program, I advised the dean that the only reasonable accommodation was to allow her to complete her clinical rotations at another institution. The dean wisely granted this request, and Aileen is now a successful veterinary school graduate.

“Matt” is a brilliant scientist. Although he was able to complete his doctoral degree from a highly selective graduate program, his learning differences strongly came into play after he became a young professor. Matt found himself unable to balance his teaching load against pressures to publish academic articles. After several years of struggle, Matt sought testing to better understand the source of his struggles and was



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diagnosed as a highly gifted person with ADHD. A history of difficulty with planning, task initiation and task completion was clearly present from early childhood, however, he had been able to compensate due to his very high IQ. I advised Matt to work more collaboratively with colleagues in order to find the structure and support he needed to complete publications. This request was met with disdain from his mentor, who responded that any PhD should be expected to work independently—yet another declaration that there is only one right way of doing academic work. Fortunately, Matt was able to find a team of mathematicians with whom he has collaborated very successfully, producing several high quality publications in rapid succession.

**Another rampart to climb**

John, Aileen, and Matt all encountered a level of discrimination and sometimes clear hostility when they requested accommodations that would allow them to complete a task in a more brain-friendly way. Fortunately, after much struggle, and with professional support and guidance, all three of them found a more enlightened academic setting. Most students with special needs on the postgraduate level are not so fortunate. As a result of these academic prejudices, many fine minds are going to waste.

Throughout the more than thirty years of my professional career, I have always worked to identify underserved groups of people with ADHD. While we've come so far in helping younger students, we've got another rampart to climb. Disability support service providers on campuses need to work in concert against the powerful and pervasive prejudices against graduate and professional students with special learning needs. Rather than leaving each individual student to fight a costly and lonely battle, we should work together as a community to educate postgraduate-level educators. Our efforts have helped many students reach the level of postgraduate and professional school education. However, many of these students feel that they've been dropped off on the doorstep of postgraduate education. From that point on it's up to them to fight for their rights alone.

Accommodations in postgraduate education are our last frontier. Instead of leaving students to fight a lonely and often losing battle, the community of ADHD and learning disability specialists needs to work together to support students at this highest level of education. Our challenge is to inform graduate and professional program faculty that there are many ways to learn and many ways to succeed in postgraduate-level education. **A**