

Honoring Dr. Bernard Rimland

Children with autism and their parents said goodbye to their best friend and greatest champion, when Dr. Bernard Rimland, Founder and Director of the Autism Research Institute (ARI), died on November 21st at the age of 78. Dr. Rimland's nearly fifty years of work on behalf of those with autism began with a single child: his own son, Mark, born in 1956.

Mark was a screaming, implacable infant who resisted being cuddled and struggled against being picked up. He also struggled against being put down. Rimland's pediatrician, Dr. Black, who had been in practice for 35 years, had never seen nor heard of a child like Mark. Neither Dr. Black nor Dr. Rimland, who at that time was three years beyond his Ph.D. in psychology, had ever seen or heard the word "autism."

Soon after Mark turned two, Dr. Rimland's wife, Gloria, remembered reading in college about children with symptoms like Mark's. Digging through a dusty box of Gloria's textbooks in the garage, Dr. Rimland saw the word "autism" for the first time. That discovery was the beginning of a quest that changed the autism world forever.

Knowing that Mark was a greatly loved child and that the "refrigerator mother" theory was both wrong and destructive, Dr. Rimland set out to discover all that was known about autism. He scoured libraries for articles on autism, including foreign articles he had translated, and found "not a shred of evidence" to support the hypothesis that bad parenting caused autism. What he discovered instead, was powerful evidence that autism was a biological disorder—a fact that seems obvious now, but was revolutionary at the time.

Doggerel for the 1996 Defeat Autism Now! Conference

by Sidney MacDonald Baker, MD

Let us all dress up like Rimland, PhD
I'll tell you how the look should be -
With ego in and outta the way
And chin and neck stuck out and in the fray
Where he takes short term rights
Or wrongs and puts 'em aside in lieu
Of long range goals he keeps in view
And insures no opportunity is missed
To stir things up - even get some folks pissed.
That's why Bernie's here just off the red-eye
To make sure our conversation flies
Like him with vigor quite enormous
And love and passion to inform us.
Today, tomorrow and tonight
At least to get the questions right.

Lets take a ride on River Rimland,
Follow Bernie's boat and him in
The class IV rapids of dissent
Through the gorge of critics' discontent.
- They would rather row a slower boat
And take a safer course and float
In waters deep and calm and clear
Where reflection alleviates the fear
That we could round a bend and find
That we are not completely double blind.

Let's follow Bernard bear and watch his motion
'Cross states, and countries, skies, and oceans
A creature with enormous habitat and range
His ecologic niche is shift and change
Where competition for sometimes scarce resources
Is provided by less progressive forces
Like some of us right here who came with doubts
As to what this conference may be about
And worried that perhaps some heresies
Might contaminate our reputes or our CV's.
Fear not, the doubters have their work cut out
Be prepared to speak, complain and shout
And bring to bear in his direction
The necessary heat of disaffection
The crucible that forges science hard
And nourishes our children's friend Bernard
Whose optimistic energy infects us
While he continues to expect us
To keep his tempo and intense resolve
To see autism's mysteries dissolve
In the solvent of our collective might
Or perhaps a single drop of insight
Distilled by someone here or somehow touched by us
Who have gathered here to think and to discuss
How perception, memory and recognition
Can get so sensitive that kids' cognition
Can get off track and make developing
So difficult for certain human beings.

Defeat Autism Now!

Bernie Rimland created Defeat Autism Now! (DAN!) by bringing together dozens of the world's leading researchers in different fields to create a state-of-the-art treatment plan and to prioritize research goals. A small first meeting grew into a worldwide DAN! movement that now includes huge standing-room-only conferences, major research projects, and hundreds of DAN!-trained physicians and health care practitioners. See Upcoming Events for the Spring DAN! conference in Rimland's honor, April 20-22nd in the Washington, DC area.