

On the Shoulders of Giants: Lorna Jean King and Bernard Rimland

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Lorna Jean King and Bernard Rimland, two legendary pioneers in the field of autism, recently passed away within weeks of each other. Like so many other parents and professionals, I feel a tremendous sense of loss. I am extremely fortunate that I worked with both of these remarkable individuals for many years.

While an undergraduate at UCLA, I first learned about autism. When working as a therapist, and conducting research on self-injurious and stereotypic behaviors, I questioned whether these and other symptoms of autism could be due to non-behavioral reasons. I shared my ideas with Dr. Ivar Lovaas, another autism giant; he introduced me to Bernie Rimland. Little did any of us know that this would be a defining moment in my life.

I was only 19 years old when I first met Dr. Rimland, and he was about fifty. Despite Dr. Rimland's status as a leading figure in the autism world, he graciously spent hours talking with me and took me under his wing, an act he repeated hundreds of times over the years with other professionals and parents. I am grateful for Dr. Rimland's generosity of time then, as it was the start of a lifelong personal and professional friendship.

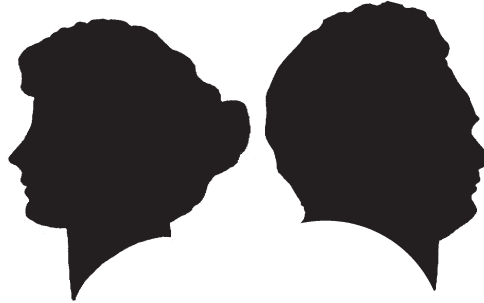
Dr. Rimland, like me, believed in applied behavioral analysis (ABA); he also felt strongly that biomedical and sensory interventions were effective in treating autism. This notion was revolutionary at a time when doctors blamed mothers – and sometimes fathers – for causing their children's autism, by subconsciously rejecting them. No one thought recovery was possible. Today's parents may not realize that in only the early 1960s, the leading treatment for autism was psychotherapy.

Dr. Rimland set forth his revolutionary ideas about the biological basis of autism in his groundbreaking book *Infantile Autism*. This classic, that singlehandedly destroyed the myth that “refrigerator mothers” cause autism, was a strong influence on me as I studied cognition in graduate school.

I became convinced that autism cannot, and should not, be explained using a simple paradigm. Rather, it is a complex disorder in which behavior is a result of thinking (i.e., attention/cognition), and thinking results from sensory input (e.g., vision, hearing, touch).

The clarity of an individual's sensory input depends upon both environmental factors and the health of an individual's nervous system. This perspective has allowed me to integrate the behavioral, sensory, and biomedical approaches to autism.

After graduate school, I learned much more about the role of the sensory systems and biochemistry in autism. During that time, the mid-1990s, I was fortunate that Dr. Rimland invited me to do research examining the efficacy of various biomedical treatments, and to help organize the Defeat Autism Now! (DAN!) project.



I also began studying sensory problems in autism: the auditory, visual, tactile, and vestibular systems. That research led me to many other autism experts, including a woman who was another remarkable influence on me: Lorna Jean King.

Lorna Jean called me and introduced herself after reading my paper on self-injury as a form of self-stimulation. We spoke for over two hours, and she invited me to her school near Phoenix, Arizona. I was in awe of the brilliant and groundbreaking approaches she had developed to ameliorate autistic symptoms others had dismissed as “untreatable.”

I visited Lorna Jean King's clinic at least a dozen times, presented lectures to staff and clients, and conducted research with her. We spent many hours discussing sensory problems in autism, especially the importance of the vestibular system. Her visionary ideas contributed greatly to my own work and philosophy by helping me see the crucial role of sensory integration in calming and alerting children with autism. I learned that with sensory treatments came improvement in the ability to attend and learn.

One of the highlights of my career was speaking at continuing education conferences with Lorna Jean King, Temple Grandin, and others for four consecutive years in the 1990s. Each one of us would give two presentations, and we had plenty of time to exchange our current thoughts on autism. I felt honored to be included with these experts, and came away excited and energized by their ideas and insights.

Over the years, as I became increasingly involved in the work of the Autism Research Institute, I developed an even deeper appreciation of Dr. Rimland's astronomical contributions to the field of autism. He was involved in almost every aspect of research on autism causes and treatments, including genetics (he conducted the first twin study).

A multi-volume encyclopedia would be necessary to summarize his half-century of contributions to the field. Bernie taught me to see the big picture, to question what is accepted by the establishment without any scientific support, and to do whatever possible to help those affected with autism and their families.

In accepting the position of Director of the Autism Research Institute, I am aware that I am, to paraphrase Isaac Newton, “standing on the shoulders of a giant.” Dr. Rimland revolutionized the field of autism, bringing hope to an entire world of children once dismissed as “hopeless.”

Bernie Rimland and Lorna Jean King will always be with us. Their dedication to the field of autism was unsurpassed, and their passing leaves a void that cannot be filled. Their life-long work has influenced thousands of professionals, and impacted hundreds of thousands of children with autism now, and will in the future. I am enormously grateful that they were an important part of my life, and hope that I can honor their memories in my own work.