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Boy Genius? Mother Says She Faked Tests

By ERICA GOODE

Justin Chapman was the smartest little boy in the world.

There were documents to prove it: An I.Q. test, given when Justin was 6, recording his score at 298-plus, the highest on record. A perfect 800 on the math portion of the SAT. Another intelligence test, taken when he was 3, on which he maxed out the scale.

Based on such achievements, Justin enrolled in an online high school at 5, and at 6 he took courses at the University of Rochester in New York.

He met with Gov. George E. Pataki of New York. He was featured in a BBC documentary about child geniuses. He spoke at conferences about the special needs of highly gifted children.

His mother, Elizabeth Chapman, told reporters how her son walked and talked precociously, evinced a relentless hunger for learning and needed only two to five hours of sleep each night.

But in an interview with The New York Times after a newspaper raised doubts about Justin's accomplishments, Ms. Chapman admitted that many of the records attesting to his superior intelligence were a sham. Ms. Chapman said she falsified the records of the I.Q. test given when Justin was 3. The SAT scores, she said, belonged to a former neighbor's son. She also said Justin had studied the manual for the Stanford Binet Intelligence Scale before taking the test in April 2000.

She said that Justin was unusually bright and that she was trying to open doors for him that would otherwise have remained closed.

"I didn't plan on it," she said. "It just happened, and I let things get out of control."

The Rocky Mountain News reported on Feb. 13 that Justin had been hospitalized for psychiatric problems and had been taken from his mother and put in foster care, facts confirmed by documents provided to The Times. The article raised questions not only about Ms. Chapman's claims about her son but also about the methods used to assess Justin's I.Q. by the experts who pronounced him profoundly gifted.

Exactly how smart Justin is remains unclear.

The strongest clues that something was wrong came from the child himself. Last fall, Justin, now 8, began to show increasing signs of emotional turmoil. In September, after moving here from upstate New York, his mother enrolled him in the Brideun School for Exceptional Children in nearby Broomfield. Marlo Payne Rice, the school's director, said Justin did fine for a while, but in November began refusing to do any work, threw temper tantrums, kicked a hole in a school wall and confessed to a social worker that he did not want to live anymore.

On Nov. 18, he told a psychiatric evaluator at St. Anthony Hospital North, where his mother took him after she said she found him with an empty Motrin bottle, that he wanted "to be someone else," according to records provided by Ms. Chapman.

The hospital found no harmful effects from the Motrin (Justin later said he had taken only one pill) and sent the boy to Devereux Cleo Wallace, a treatment center for emotionally disturbed children. The Department of Human Services in Broomfield County took temporary custody of Justin and charged his mother with neglect.

In court documents provided to The Times by Ms. Chapman, the department alleged that she had repeatedly interfered with Justin's psychiatric care, tried to take him from the hospital, failed to supervise him properly and "by means of a rigorous speaking and travel schedule in order to display her child's intelligence has produced an identifiable and substantial impairment of the child's functioning or development."

A trial on the neglect charge is scheduled for the middle of this month.

Justin's mother said her son spoke at only seven conferences in 19 months and enjoyed doing it. She said she tried to remove him from the hospital because she was concerned about the drugs the doctors wanted to prescribe.

Ms. Chapman, who had steadfastly maintained that Justin's test scores were legitimate, said she decided to tell the truth in hopes it would help her regain her son, who was placed with a foster family in late December.

She added that she also hoped to recover the trust of the experts on highly gifted children who gave her and her son emotional support and found financial sponsors for them. Some children who become known as profoundly gifted receive speaking fees and monetary support from organizations or individuals.

Among those who trusted her, Ms. Chapman said, was Dr. Linda Silverman, a psychologist and the director of the Center for Gifted Development in Denver, who had administered the Stanford Binet test to Justin two years ago.

Dr. Silverman, who has spoken publicly about Justin, uses a controversial form of the Stanford Binet test that some experts believe produces inflated scores.

"He's way beyond genius," Dr. Silverman had told one newspaper. "He's probably unique in the world."

Ms. Chapman said Dr. Silverman gave Justin the test in good faith and knew nothing about his preparation. She said that Dr. Silverman asked if Justin had been coached and that she told the psychologist he had not.

Dr. Silverman "has been nothing but supportive of us and wanted to help in any way possible," Ms. Chapman said. "She loves Justin like a grandmother."

Ms. Chapman said she had apologized to Dr. Silverman and had informed the human services department about the falsified scores.

Contacted by The Times, Dr. Silverman, who is scheduled to testify in the case, declined to comment.

Ms. Chapman, a 29-year-old single mother, who had largely homeschooled Justin, said she was only trying to do what she thought was best for her son.

"I love Justin very much and I want him to be home and to be able to help him," she said. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone in doing this."

"I'm just sorry I didn't speak up sooner," she added.

Ms. Chapman said Justin never took the SAT's. Instead, she scanned the score report sent to a former neighbor's son into a computer and substituted Justin's name. When Justin, at 3, was given the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence-Revised, he completed only 2 of the test's 13 subtests. Ms. Chapman said she later filled in the rest.

Ms. Chapman also said that a month or so before taking the Stanford Binet, Justin found a copy of the manual in the University of Rochester library and memorized the answers.

She denied coaching Justin. But she said she did tell him: "When you take the test, make sure you don't say the full answers and make some mistakes."

Ms. Chapman said that although she lied about the records, Justin demonstrated his own abilities in his college and high school work and in the syndicated column he wrote, called The Justin Report.

"The problem is that it's hurting Justin because he is still a really gifted boy," she said.

"I know what I did is wrong, but what social services is doing now by treating him like an average 8-year-old is also harmful," Ms. Chapman said.

Efforts to find objective evidence of Justin's greatly accelerated abilities were unsuccessful. Most of his exchanges with teachers and mentors took place by way of e-mail. And much of his classwork was completed on the Internet.

Justin did take courses as a non-matriculating student at the University of Rochester during the spring and fall of 2000 and the spring of 2001, said Robert Kraus, of the university's public relations office. But in telephone interviews, several of Justin's professors said that they gave only take-home exams in their classes and that their contact with him was largely through e-mail.

Adeline Basil, a school principal who is on the board of Advocacy for the Gifted and Talented, said she heard Justin give a speech about age discrimination in the fall of 2000.

"He was a little kid but very poised and confident," Mrs. Basil said.

Justin used charts and tables to illustrate his talk, she said, and seemed passionate about his subject.

Ms. Chapman said Justin, whom she now sees only in supervised visits of one hour a week, did not like being separated from his best friend, his schoolmates, his room with its blue Harry Potter bedspread and his white cat, Jedi. He did not feel comfortable with his foster family, she said. Ms. Chapman also said she was concerned that he was not receiving the stimulation he needed in the public school he now attended.

She conceded, however, that Justin had been worried about cheating on the I.Q. test.

"It was driving him crazy in a sense," she said. "I tried to justify to him that it wasn't cheating because he did the test himself."

[A spokesman for the Broomfield Police Department said on Friday that investigators were looking into Ms. Chapman's actions "to see if a crime had been committed."]

Byron Howell, deputy city and county attorney in Broomfield, said state laws on confidentiality prevented him from commenting on any aspect of the case. The court records of cases involving child abuse or neglect are closed in Colorado.

But in a clinical report from Children's Hospital, where Justin was transferred in November at his mother's request, psychiatric evaluators said Justin "has not either been given a chance or has chosen not to develop his own sense of self" and "can no longer meet the expectations that have now become his identity."

The evaluators said Justin was given an I.Q. test at the hospital and scored "in the average range of intellectual functioning." But they noted that he became very upset during the testing, hiding under furniture, throwing toys and calling the questions "stupid."

Other experts in child development said the results of intelligence tests given when a child was emotionally upset had little meaning.

In their report, the evaluators at Children's Hospital recommended that Justin's mother undergo a thorough psychiatric evaluation and take parenting classes.

A psychiatric evaluation of Ms. Chapman by a court-appointed psychiatrist, the report of which she provided to The Times, said she did not have "any typical type of

psychosis."

But it questioned her parental judgment and noted that her "values and belief system are heavily involved with the talented and gifted ideas around her son."

Ms. Chapman said her parents, who live near Rochester and did not respond to a telephone message left at their home, have filed for custody, as has Justin's father, James Maurer.

She said Justin was conceived out of wedlock after she had been dating Mr. Maurer for only a short time. Mr. Maurer, who lives in Raleigh, N.C., confirmed that he had filed for custody, but declined to comment further.

Since the publication of the Rocky Mountain News article, Justin's story has stirred discussion among teachers, parents and experts concerned with the education of highly gifted and talented children. Several experts said they feared that the case might have a negative impact.

"Anybody who works with these children has a sense that these kids are different," said Ms. Rice, the director of the Brideun school.

The circumstances of Justin's case, she said, risked tainting "the whole view of a population of children that have a heck of a time getting their needs met anyway." The school enrolls many children who are "twice exceptional," in that they are gifted but also have learning disabilities.

Whatever happens to Justin, his future life is likely to be less centered around intelligence testing.

Ms. Chapman said that last week, she told her son what she had done.

"He was so forgiving when I told him the truth," Ms. Chapman said. "He gave me a hug and said, 'I understand.'"