

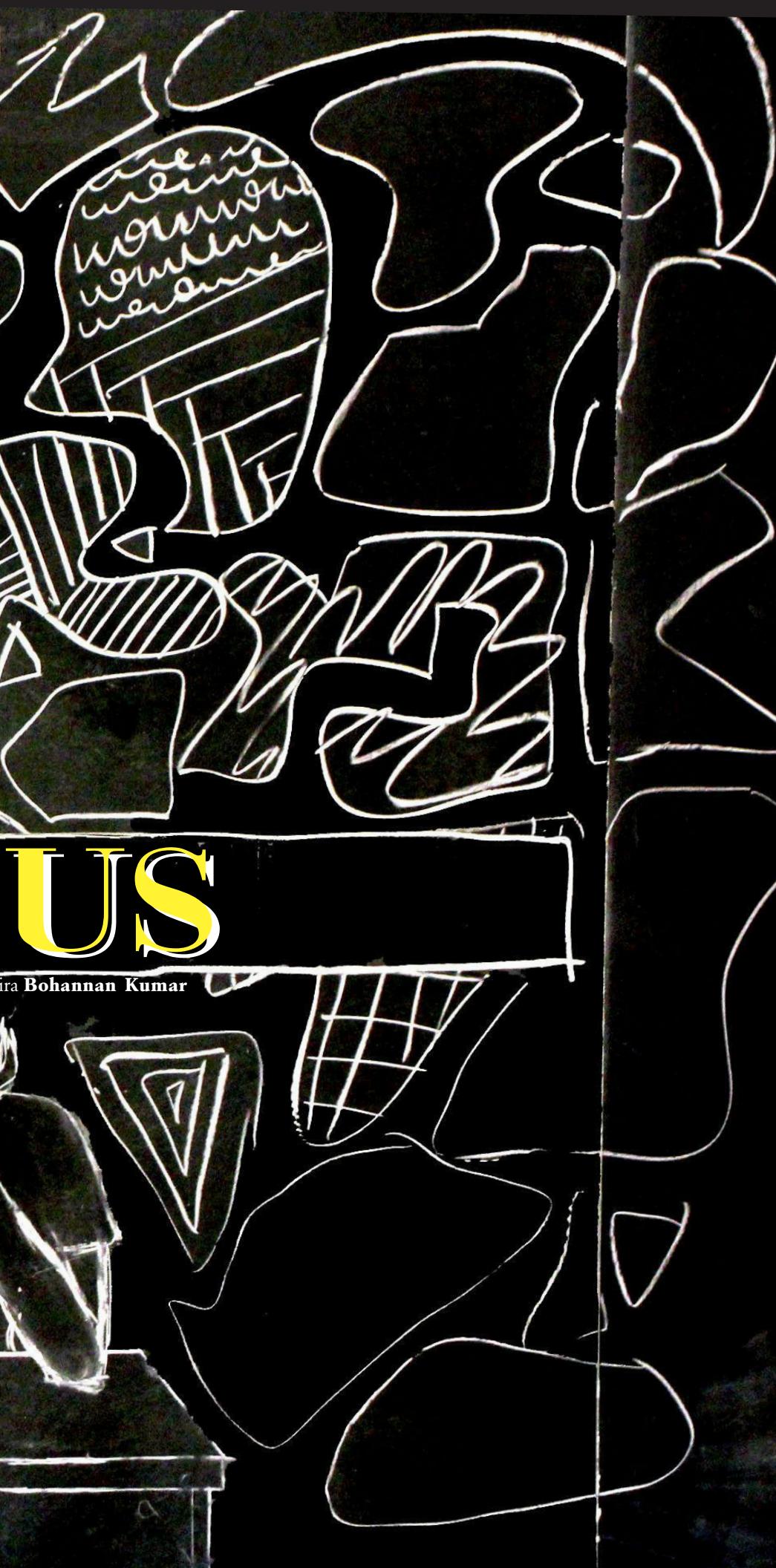
ART BY MAYA DURHAM



# IN FOCUS

By M.





# US

ira Bohannan Kumar

**M**argaret Glenn '20 has known for the better part of a decade that her brain works in a different way than most.

"As a kid, I always spaced out when other people didn't. I had trouble staying organized when other people didn't. I had trouble focusing on things. I had trouble completing tasks," Glenn said. "I started noticing that around fourth grade, fifth grade, and I remember telling my mom about it and so she took me to a...therapy/testing [facility] and I was put on the scale for ADHD. Everyone is kind of on the scale, in my experience...but some people are farther down than others."

Lanny Tygrett, a licensed independent social worker who works with clients who have ADHD, said that some of Glenn's challenges with focus and task completion are often seen in ADHD children. Their cause: a difference in the way ADHD brains process stimulation.

"ADHD is misfiring and understimulation of the brain," Tygrett said. "If they're not stimulated in what they're doing, their brains will see it somewhere else, be sparked by something else."

The provision of stimulation by sources other than schoolwork can lead to distractibility and inattentiveness in class, which Glenn saw in her own life.

"I would really zone out and I would miss important things in class...and I'd have no idea what I was doing on my homework and my grades would start dropping because I was paying no attention in class," Glenn said. "You're kind of in an avalanche of unfinished tasks...and suddenly you're thinking, 'Oh my gosh, I have to finish these,' you're in a total panic. It's just a complete avalanche."

Tygrett said that some young people with ADHD don't receive any aid-aid that could help them "level the playing field."

"Many kids go undiagnosed—especially girls, especially those with inattention [the type of ADHD which results in lack of focus], and they're struggling and it's a big challenge to meet expectations," Tygrett said. "The way it's treated by others or perceived, the way a particular kiddo is treated...they slip through the cracks."

Glenn managed with these symptoms on her own for several years, but when she reached the seventh grade, she found herself searching for a way to alleviate them. She eventually decided she wanted to take medication for ADHD and went to her parents with this request.

"I was like, 'I want a solution to this,

because this is what it's going to be like for the next...six years.' I was originally denied," Glenn said. "My mom told me she wanted me to go to therapy first, because she didn't exactly like the idea of me on medication, but that just did not work because we couldn't really find a good fit for me."

After a while, though, Glenn was able to meet with a therapist she felt really understood her more than the others she had tried.

"They're all trying to help you, but there's also this kind of click, 'Hey, I can talk to you and you can help me, but I can also tell you about my problems and issues,' and when I found somebody that could help me, give me advice without being my parent, that was...this awesome thing to me," Glenn said. "It's...a feeling of relief, as well, because you have someone to talk to."

As she entered high school, though, Glenn was still struggling to cope with the more difficult effects of her ADHD. She petitioned her parents to take medication once more. This time, her request was met with a different response. Glenn attributed this in part to her existing connection with her therapist.

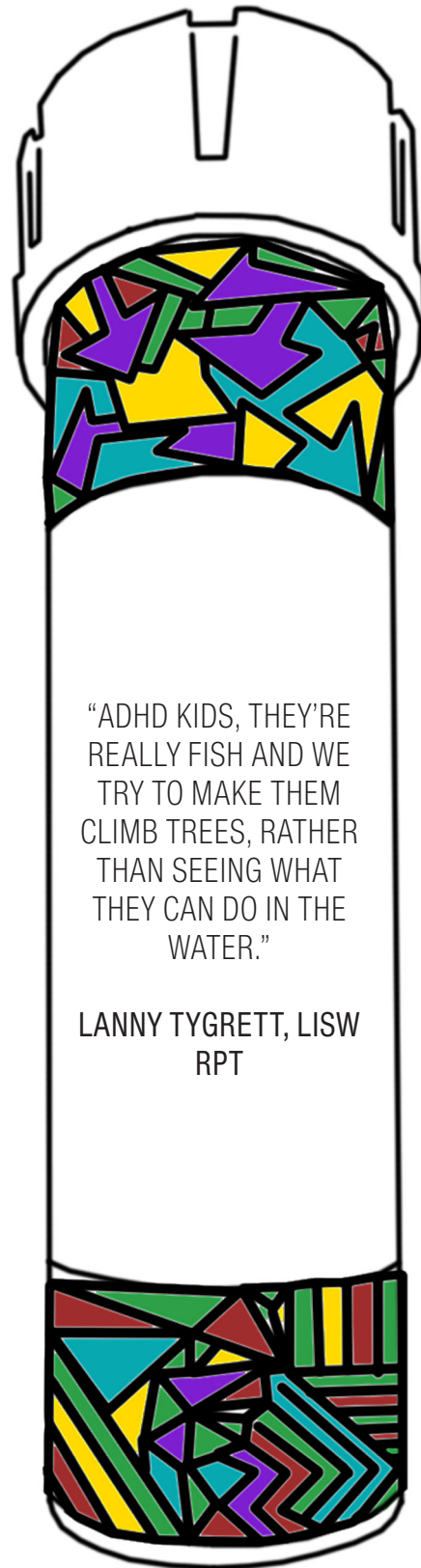
"My psychiatrist and my therapist said to my parents, 'This is...your decision, obviously, because she's your child, but it's also hers because she's the one that is going through all of this. If she wants to go on meds, I think you should try that, because she's saying this doesn't work, even though you believe this works, it may or may not,'" Glenn said. "I can put the words out that I want to say and my parents just see me, and they see, 'That's just our kid,' but if my therapist says to them these things, they're talking to an adult, and they're...getting this from a professional sense."

Her parents were swayed. In freshman year, Glenn began to take medication for her ADHD.

"Right away, it works. When you first take it, it starts working, it's great, but then your brain starts to kind of develop an immunity to it, so you have to kick up the dose or you have to get a different prescription—there are a ton of different medications for ADHD, but...in my case, my psychiatrist tries to find a perfect fit...where you're not not on meds but you're not totally 'drugged,'" Glenn said.

The journey to finding a medication, Tygrett said, is often tough but rewarding.

"ADHD and depression are the two diagnoses I recommend medication for most. Finding medication is trial and error," Tygrett said. "It's a challenging process to



find the correct medication, but when it works, it works, and it's very helpful."

Glenn found that medication was as good as its word, aiding her to achieve higher in school.

"When you get a new prescription for your glasses and you go, 'Hey, I can see things now,' it's kind of like that. It's like, 'Hey, I'm not zoning out as much in class. I'm actually paying attention to things. I'm actually finishing tasks, I'm actually finishing homework without going on to something else.' I'm doing better in my lifestyle because I'm not flitting from one thing to the next."

For Glenn, medicating her ADHD was the most effective solution to the problems it posed. When others take the same course of action, though, medication can hurt more than it helps—like in the case of Theo Prineas '18, who believes that the benefits of his ADHD are erased under the influence of treatment, and the pros medication provides don't outweigh the cons.

Prineas, like Glenn, was diagnosed with ADHD in elementary school.

"I wasn't performing very well in school, and my parents were really concerned," Prineas said. "I did well on a couple of very specific subjects in which I showed a lot of interest, yet in most of my classes I was not doing too well. I always scored well on the book reports but I never scored well on math, and I never scored well on science, because I just hyperfocused on books."

Hyperfocus, Prineas explained, is an intense focus on one topic—a tendency common to people with ADHD that is the opposite of inattention. Prineas's own tendency to hyperfocus was one of the first things that clued him in to his ADHD.

"There was a time in...third or fourth grade when I was reading 'The Hobbit.' It was during SSR and my teacher called SSR time over but I didn't hear her because I was too focused on my book," Prineas said. "That's hyperfocus, basically."

Many hold a very particular image of ADHD—as something that is symptomized by a short attention span and little ability to focus. However, hyperfocus and attention dynamics like it illustrate that this image isn't always accurate. Prineas considers ADHD and in particular his tendency to hyperfocus to have both positive and negative effects.

"ADHD is an acronym for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, but I don't think of it as a disorder. I think of it as a difference in the way I think and the way I react to stimuli. There are a lot of useful



things that come out of it and a lot of really difficult things that come out of it,” Prineas said. “I have never gotten less than an A in English because I just think about it all the time, but other classes like math I wasn’t so great at. Sometimes my teacher would be talking and I would want to pay attention... but I couldn’t bring myself to pay attention because it was not interesting to me.”

Tygrett said that the brains of those with ADHD often are not meant to function within today’s systems of traditional schooling.

“The quote I often refer to from Albert Einstein is, ‘If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid,’ and ADHD kids, they’re really fish and we try to make them climb trees, rather than seeing what they can do in water,” Tygrett said. “We expect them to be organized, expect them to write papers, to get their ideas on paper, but if they’re excited they stream idea after idea. It’s difficult to get that down, but if you talked to them they would know so much.”

Prineas and his family made an immediate attempt to remedy his difficulties with subjects like math through medication.

“Our first move was to put me on medication. It was called Concerta, and it had some side effects. We would put me on it during the week and take me off on the weekends, and I just kind of zombified during the school week. I would be all placated and calm and self-contained. I wouldn’t really initiate a lot of action, I wouldn’t initiate contact with other people. I would just...go off and sit on my own. Also, I lost my appetite. I couldn’t hyperfocus because I didn’t do anything, and I felt sick all the time, and I couldn’t eat enough. There was nothing good about medication for me,” Prineas said. “Eventually we just decided that that was not a feasible option for me. There were too many side effects that I couldn’t deal with, my parents couldn’t deal with.”

These symptoms aren’t uncommon for children on ADHD medication, Tygrett said.

“Medication can bring a flat affect,” Tygrett said. “Their brightness and energy level seems to dull...along with increased anxiety and increased aggression...it’s hard to see in kids, for parents and for me.. Medication is not the right solution for everyone, but it is highly effective when the right medication is found.”

Despite the adverse effects Concerta had on Prineas, he said that there are a few changes it created that were beneficial.

“I will say about the medication that I did do better in school with it. I got better marks

in elementary school on medication,” Prineas said. “I’m definitely twitchier [without medication]. I have a lot of nervous energy, so I’ll sit down somewhere and immediately start jiggling my knee or tapping my fingers. A lot of the time people think I’m ignoring them because I’m doing that or being rude and tuning them out, but it’s really just a side thing that’s happening and it helps me focus.”

Prineas, like Glenn, said his parents played a role in his decisions regarding how to best manage and treat his ADHD.

“I think my mom played a really big part in the decision to take me off medication. She was the one who did the most reading about how to deal with ADHD and how to raise a kid with ADHD. I just wasn’t exhibiting good symptoms,” Prineas said. “After they took me off, my parents took me out of school. They homeschooled me and I learned how to learn in my own way. When I came back to school in junior high, I had that style of learning to fall back on that I hadn’t had before and I did better in school. I’ve managed to cope with it in my own way. I do think that for some people medication is really helpful, but it wasn’t for me.”

Tygrett agreed that creating environments that work to help her ADHD clients grow and develop skills in their own way, as well as giving them self-confidence, is important.

“Medication is only a piece of the puzzle,” Tygrett said. “[My work with clients is] very skill-based, practicing skills related to organization, managing impulses, really listening and hearing what is being said. With children...there is a significant focus on what they’re doing well.”

Prineas stressed that understanding the way his brain functions and coming up with solutions to the problems his ADHD can cause has been the most valuable way for him to work with it. Whether those solutions are alternative learning styles, medication, or other strategies, he said, they can lighten the load of the worse symptoms of ADHD and maximize the strengths it provides.

“If you look at some of the most intelligent people of the last hundred years, a lot of them struggled with some subjects in school and did well in others. A lot of them have been diagnosed with spectrum disorders,” Prineas said. “If there’s a topic I’m really interested in, then I’ll pursue it to the ends of the earth and that’s the hyperfocus. But if there’s a topic I’m not interested in...I can’t focus on it. I think being able to understand that and being able to learn in your own way is really, really important.”

