

## ON THE LIGHT SIDE

## Queen of the Rodents? They might disagree

BY MARDI CRAWFORD

In a recent column, I proudly proclaimed myself Queen of the Rodents. This was not based on my family, no, but rather on our unexpected adoption of a baby mouse, loss of said baby mouse and compensatory purchase of one baby hamster.

His name was Crosby Hamster, and he was installed in a playground some schoolyards would be happy to lay claim to. That he seemed exceptionally tired did not concern me. In a household with four young children, we are all perpetually exhausted.

Crosby had many enjoyable playtimes, free runs and perhaps, in hindsight, what he (wrongly) viewed as "run-ins" with Barney.

Barney is our 85-pound retriever. In retrospect, I realize that the introductions I orchestrated between the two of them must have been terrifying for little Crosby, weighing in at four ounces after a hearty breakfast of seeds. My intentions were good; I wanted to demonstrate our devotion to Crosby to the family member most likely to eat him.

Sadly, Crosby Hamster died of wet tail (don't ask; I was just glad it wasn't heart failure) on the very day my column ran.

His rapid deterioration coincided with my husband being away on a golf trip. Blaming my husband's golf was the only way I could justify to him that Crosby passed away at an emergency vet clinic at a cost of \$175, rather than via one of the many cheaper alternatives closer to home.

Crosby died despite receiving the absolute best



Submitted photo  
**Strangest BlackBerry screen ever: Who knew they made oxygen tents this tiny???**

of emergency care. On Saturday morning, when I broke his demise to the children, I was able to show them a picture I had taken on my BlackBerry of Crosby under a small oxygen tent, on a warming blanket, with a syringe of antibiotics beside him.

Dozens of adults have laughed at this shot, me included. But for the kids, it was the most concrete way of communicating the responsibility we had taken and the care Crosby had been given.

I explained that many people might not be able to afford to pay for this kind of treatment, and others may not choose to. In the end, this was what our family had done, and we could feel very good about Crosby's life, as short as it was.

A hamster is irreplaceable for, in my experience, roughly 37 minutes (especially if you've only had it for one week). The very day Crosby crossed over to the great running wheel in the sky, we came to have a new hamster, new hamster cage, new hamster food, and something even fishier.

It was the only way the children could get past their grief. Or so they assured me. Crosby was placed (carefully marked) in the freezer in preparation for a later burial at the cottage, and before I could blink, we had returned from PetCetera with Crosby II (who was covered under warranty!).

I have no viable explanation for the three beta fish, three exotic fish and three tanks that somehow came home with us: our heads were swimming?

I wish I could tell you that this story ended happily. Crosby II made it a little longer than his prede-

cessor, but after a few weeks he, too, showed symptoms of the dreaded wet tail. (He was pale and listless.) I caught it earlier this time and administered antibiotics myself from a syringe.

Yes, I do like life on the lunatic fringe.

I could see a sequel in the making: Crosby II was going to fail. I took him to our regular vet. With their guidance and support, I elected to have Crosby II euthanized. The Q-Tip-size defibrillator paddles sat, unused, on the crash cart.

I had forewarned the children of this potential outcome, and they had said their tentative good-byes that morning.

Later that afternoon, I received a card of condolence and a red rose from the staff at my vet clinic. My three-year-old, Mike, fiddled endlessly and somehow turned the picture of Crosby I in intensive care into the main page on my BlackBerry. It's an excellent conversation starter.

These experiences with the Crosbys have renewed the children's interest in Barney, the wonderful family dog they have known since birth. The loving, licking, sneaking shadow who wants only to be fed and fussed over and whose big, wagging tail, I am glad to report, is generally dry.

These days we are down to three fish, one retriever and no rodents. All is good in the world of pets — except that I still have to get the Crosbys out of my freezer and up to Muskoka!

• *Mardi Crawford of Waterloo was The Record's Career Mom columnist.*

## PEOPLE: Michael and Kevin Blane

## Successful Grade 1 is great cause for celebration

BY JOHANNA WEIDNER  
RECORD STAFF

**Who:** Michael and Kevin Blane.

**When we first wrote about them:** December 2003. The Cambridge twins were about half a year into an intense, home-based therapy program for autism. Michael and Kevin were diagnosed with the pervasive developmental disorder in spring 2003 when they were almost three.

The boys displayed typical behaviours of autism — playing alone, not talking, avoiding contact, hitting their heads and flapping their arms. They retreated into their solitary worlds, even from the affection of their parents, Audrey and Don Blane, and older sister, Chantale.

"The outside world frightened them," their mother said.

**Reaching out . . .** The twins' parents researched the disorder and discovered a program developed by an autism-treatment specialist in London. The province pays for a behavioural-intervention program, but the Blanes were drawn to this other holistic approach that combines behavioural therapy, special diet and attitude training.

The program, called intensive multi-treatment intervention, was a big commitment, requiring 40 hours of one-on-one time for each boy every week. Two special playrooms were created in the family's home for the individual therapy for the boys.

Filling those hours of therapy required finding volunteers, including two workers from Extend-a-Family, and

enlisting family and friends. The approach was not to try to eliminate the autistic behaviour, but to join the twins in what they were doing. The boys were constantly engaged by asking questions, singing, talking, playing and keeping eye contact to forge an emotional and social connection that's missing in autistic children.

**Steady improvements . . .** Michael and Kevin soon started pulling out of autism and continued to improve as the years passed. The boys began talking, playing together, seeking affection from their family — basically becoming engaged with the world.

The Record followed the twins' progress in several stories, the latest last summer after three years in the program. At that time, the boys had joined regular classes at Sunshine Montessori School in Kitchener for a couple of months, and they were signed up for Grade 1 in the fall.

**Today . . .** The Blanes are hosting a party to celebrate the boys' successful finish of Grade 1. All the people who have helped the twins along the way are invited. Michael and Kevin, now 7, succeeded in a regular class, without an educational assistant and no curriculum modification.

"They have earned it on their own merits and with flying colours," Audrey said.

The boys have also been busy every day after school in swimming, sports and music classes.

"Michael and Kevin have such an incredible eagerness to learn. . . . There is



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no mountaintop too high for these guys to climb up."

At the start of Grade 1 last fall, the boys were shy and timid. The Blanes weren't sure what to expect, but they were pleasantly surprised.

"They did a lot of growing up in the past year," she said.

"You cannot pick them out of a crowd of kids on the playground now."

Before, they were like magnets and stuck to each other, afraid of other children. Now they play with their own friends.

**Exploring the world . . .** The therapy ended when the twins started school, but supervised playdates continued to boost the boys' self-confidence. And that's the focus for this summer, along with honing social skills, which they'll do in the five summer camps in which they're enrolled.

"They need to see how typical kids play and react," Audrey said.

The boys also need to catch up to their peers in another crucial area that can't be taught in school — life experience. They twins missed out on a lot of experiences during the intense home program.

"We need to get them out in the world and just show them what's out there," their mother said. "They're going to be exposed to what they haven't had in their life."

But all those areas for improvement are minor compared to where the boys came from four years ago when they were diagnosed with autism. Today, they do not fit the criteria for the disorder, their mother said. They are only a bit shy and language-delayed.

"To see how far they've come, it's just amazing," she said. "Michael and Kevin are my miracles."

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**Intensive home therapy has helped autistic twins Michael (left) and Kevin Blane of Cambridge make great gains. Now, they have completed a regular Grade 1 class without special assistance or curriculum modification.**

## RESEARCH FILE

## Study links jail, homeless

■ **Study conclusion:** Incarceration often leads to homelessness.

■ **Researcher:** University of Guelph sociology Prof. Bill O'Grady, who worked with Steve Gaetz of York University's faculty of education and John Howard Society of Ontario researchers.

■ **Study focus:** Inmates are often released from jail with no other choice but to live on the streets or in homeless shelters because of a lack of discharge planning and support from the institutions, O'Grady said.

Out of a sample of more than 100 male inmates and releasees, O'Grady found at least half had experienced homelessness.

"It's a vicious cycle," O'Grady said. "Homelessness can lead to incarceration, and incarceration can lead to homelessness."

Funded by the National Homelessness Initiative, O'Grady and Gaetz interviewed convicts incarcerated in provincial jails. They also interviewed inmates who'd recently been released and were living with friends, had found their own accommodations or were living on the streets.

Half of the people interviewed said they didn't receive any preparation for their return to society, O'Grady said, despite a provincial mandate to promote successful reintegration.

"Sometimes all they have are the coveralls they are wearing and a bus token. They end up turning to crime just to survive."

The system is also failing those who haven't been convicted but are waiting months in custody for their next court date. These people often lose their home and face the possibility of living on the streets.

**Published:** In a report for the National Homelessness Initiative, O'Grady recommends government ensure all inmates receive discharge planning. Discharge planning should be extended to people who are not convicted but in custody awaiting a court date.

**Source:** University of Guelph news service.

## Important notice for permanent residents

**If you are thinking of travelling outside Canada, check the expiry date on your permanent resident card (PR card).**

Every Canadian permanent resident needs a valid PR card to return to Canada by commercial carrier — plane, bus, train or boat.

The PR card provides proof of your immigration status.

Without it, you won't be allowed to board the carrier back to Canada. Canadian citizens don't need a PR card.

The PR card is valid for five years. **Check the expiry date and apply for a new one at least two months before you travel.**

For more information and current application processing times, visit [www.cic.gc.ca](http://www.cic.gc.ca)

Or call **1-888-242-2100**  
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