

| <http://nyti.ms/1MReJHh>

The Strange Case of Anna Stubblefield

She told the family of a severely disabled man that she could help him to communicate with the outside world. The relationship that followed would lead to a criminal trial.

By DANIEL ENGBER OCT. 20, 2015

Anna didn't want to keep her feelings secret. As far as she knew, neither did D.J. In recent weeks, their relationship had changed, and it wasn't clear when or how to share the news. "It's your call," she said to him in the lead-up to a meeting with his mother and older brother. "It's your family. It's up to you."

When she arrived at the house on Memorial Day in 2011, Anna didn't know what D.J. planned to do. His brother, Wesley, was working in the garden, so she went straight inside to speak with D.J. and his mother, P. They chatted for a while at the dining table about D.J.'s plans for school and for getting his own apartment. Then there was a lull in the conversation after Wesley came back in, and Anna took hold of D.J.'s hand. "We have something to tell you," they announced at last. "We're in love."

"What do you mean, *in love*?" P. asked, the color draining from her face.

To Wesley, she looked pale and weak, like "Caesar when he found out that Brutus betrayed him." He felt sick to his stomach. What made them so uncomfortable was not that Anna was 41 and D.J. was 30, or that Anna is white and D.J. is black, or even that Anna was married with two children

while D.J. had never dated anyone. What made them so upset — what led to all the arguing that followed, and the criminal trial and million-dollar civil suit — was the fact that Anna can speak and D.J. can't; that she was a tenured professor of ethics at Rutgers University in Newark and D.J. has been declared by the state to have the mental capacity of a toddler.

Anna does not agree with this assessment. She does not deny (as no one could) that D.J. is impaired: His cerebral palsy leaves him prone to muscle spasms in his face, his neck, his torso and his arms and hands. She acknowledges that it's hard for him to stay in one position, that muscle contractions sometimes twist his spine and clench his fingers in a useless ball. It's clear to her, as it is to everyone, that he has trouble making eye contact and keeping objects fixed in view. She knows that he wears diapers and cannot dress himself; that he can walk only if someone steadies him; and that otherwise he gets around by scooting on the floor. She knows that D.J. screams when he's unhappy and chirps when he's excited, but that he can't control his vocal cords. Anna understands that even now, at 35, D.J. has never said a word.

But she takes issue with the other half of D.J.'s diagnosis: that he's not just spastic but has a very low I.Q. In 2004, five years before Anna met him, a clinical psychologist named Wayne Tillman, who consults for New Jersey's Bureau of Guardianship Services, assessed D.J. and found that his impairments precluded any formal testing of intelligence, but that certain facts could be inferred: "His comprehension seemed to be quite limited," "his attention span was very short" and he "lacks the cognitive capacity to understand and participate in decisions." D.J. could not even carry out basic, preschool-level tasks. A few months later, a court made P. and Wesley his legal guardians.

From the time she met D.J., Anna thought Tillman had it wrong. D.J. might be unable to speak or hold a pencil, but those are motor skills, not mental ones, and their absence didn't mean his mind was blank. What if D.J. had a private chamber in his head, a place where grown-up thoughts were trapped behind his palsy? Then, of course, he would fail the standard

tests of his I.Q. — tests made for people who can answer questions verbally or read and write. What D.J. needed was another way to share his deep intelligence.

At the request of D.J.'s family, Anna began to work with him, using a controversial method known as "facilitated communication." Starting with her hand beneath his elbow, she helped him point at pictures, and then at letters, and eventually at the buttons of a Neo, a hand-held keyboard with a built-in screen. With his hand in hers, she helped him type out words after 30 years of silence.

Wesley and his mother had been thrilled with D.J.'s progress, but now, suddenly, they recoiled. (Neither D.J.'s family nor Anna agreed to be interviewed for this article; all their quotes and recollections are drawn from court records and testimony. P. and Wesley are referred to by a middle initial and a middle name to shield D.J.'s identity, which has not been publicly revealed.) When Wesley told Anna he thought she had taken advantage of his brother, she could not muster a response. At last, with her help, D.J. began typing: "No one's been taken advantage of. I've been trying to seduce Anna for years, and she resisted valiantly." Then he typed another message, meant for Anna: "Kiss me." Wesley walked out.

Later, after he told Anna that she wasn't to see his brother anymore, she tried to plead her case by phone: "I will put in writing, prick my finger and sign with blood — whatever makes you reassured that this is for real," she promised in a voice mail message. "I will leave my husband, and I will make a permanent life and home with [D.J.]."

But the family had had enough. What at first struck them as a miracle — a voice for D.J., his inner self revealed — now seemed a fraud. D.J. could not have given his consent to any love affair, they later told the authorities, because he suffers from profound mental disabilities, just as the psychologists had always told them. His "messages" must have been a sham. If Anna pretended otherwise, it was only so she could use D.J. as a guinea pig for research, or to further her career, or because, as Wesley

would later say during the three-week trial for sexual assault that concluded this month in Newark, “she was having some sick, twisted fantasy.”

Anna has never wavered in her claim that she and D.J. fell in love and that his messages were his. Even after she was indicted, she seemed more concerned about his fate than her own. “In the spring of 2011, [D.J.’s] access to his means of communication was taken from him,” she wrote in a chapter for a recent academic book, which was published while the justice system creaked its way toward trial, “and he is once again treated as severely intellectually impaired by those who have control over his life. This chapter is dedicated to him, in hope that he will one day regain his voice and his freedom.”

Marjorie Anna Stubblefield goes by her middle name, pronounced with an aristocratic *a*, as in the word “nirvana.” Her last name is her former husband’s. Years ago, she was Margie McClennen, an honors student who grew up Jewish in the nearly all-white town of Plymouth, Mich. “I was raised to believe that I have the responsibility of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world,” Anna wrote in her 2005 book “Ethics Along the Color Line.” As a high-school student, she put that lesson into practice, writing articles for the school newspaper — one about a classmate who became pregnant, and another about a press-freedom case involving Plymouth students. Each won a national award. While a sophomore, Anna played the title role in a town production of “The Diary of Anne Frank.” “Marjorie just *was* Anne Frank,” says Elyse Mirto, a fellow cast member who is now an actor. “You know that famous quote — ‘I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart’? That was Marjorie.”

Her parents were involved in local politics, environmentalism and women’s rights, but their most enduring cause was that of people with disabilities. Each trained in special education for their Ph.D.s. Her mother, Sandra McClennen, started working with blind, cognitively impaired children in 1963. For decades, she taught disabled people social skills, like shaking hands and talking appropriately with strangers, in the hope of helping them move out of state-run hospitals and into community housing.

Anna shared this interest in disabilities: As a high-school student, she studied Braille and learned the alphabet in sign language. But as a junior academic, she would apply the mandate of *tikkun olam* to a different focus — the fight for racial justice. Since getting her Ph.D. in 2000, she has become a prominent scholar in the field of Africana philosophy, has published widely on race and ethics and has served as the chairwoman of the American Philosophical Association’s Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers — the first and only white scholar ever to have done so. “Our world is in shambles,” she wrote in “Ethics Along the Color Line.” “White supremacy is central to this state of affairs, and we cannot repair the world without ending it.”

Her own family is mixed-race — she has two children with her ex-husband, Roger Stubblefield, a black tuba player and classical composer. For 11 years, she served on the faculty at the Newark campus of Rutgers University, whose student body is among the nation’s most diverse. Yet for all her work on behalf of African-Americans, she worried that she might be ambushed by the “habits of racism.” “Even in well-intentioned quests to be antiracist,” she wrote, “white people all too often invade or destroy the space of nonwhite people.” The same essay lays out what could be a thesis statement for her whole career: It is crucial, she wrote, for white philosophers “to wrestle with the horrors and conundrums of whiteness.”

Those “horrors and conundrums,” as Anna saw them, formed the nexus of oppression she had sworn to fight in all its forms. As the years went by, her mission seemed to broaden and merge into her mother’s. By 2007, Anna had begun to argue that a person’s intellect — and the degree to which he or she is “disabled” — could be as much a social construct, as much a venue for tyranny, as race, gender or sexuality. It was, after all, white elites, she wrote, who first devised measures of I.Q. “as both a rationalization and a tool of anti-black oppression.”

With this shift in her scholarship, Anna began to wrestle not just with race but with disability; not just with racism but with ableism. If poor, black Americans were the most vulnerable members of society, she wrote in

2009, then poor, black, disabled Americans — men like D.J., born with cerebral palsy, raised by a single mother, seemingly unable to communicate — were the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. Voiceless in both fact and metaphor, she said, they were the ones “whom we push so far to the margins of our society that most of us, regardless of race, do not even notice when they fall off the edge.”

By the time that warning made it into print, Anna had been working with D.J. for about a year. This was her mitzvah and her *tikkun olam*. She was helping to repair the world.

When D.J.’s brother finished his dissertation, he included a dedication to his family: “Mom, I stand in awe of your strength and grace,” he wrote. Wesley also put in a message to his little brother: “[D.J.], you never cease to amaze me.”

Wesley graduated from high school in 1993, then enrolled at Rutgers. He was always very close to his brother, whom he sometimes calls “Baby Bubba.” By the time Wesley was named one of D.J.’s legal guardians, he had earned a master’s degree in history; in 2009, he was on track to get his Ph.D. and in one of Anna’s courses. During class, Anna showed part of a 2004 Oscar-nominated documentary called “Autism Is a World,” narrated by Julianna Margulies and co-produced by CNN. The film described a nonverbal girl with disabilities and an I.Q. of just 29 who went to college after learning to type using facilitated communication, or F.C. The girl reminded Wesley of D.J., and after class he went to Anna for advice: Could his brother also learn to use a keyboard? Anna said she had attended a three-day workshop on the technique the year before and maybe she could help.

One Saturday not long after, Wesley and P. took D.J. up to Anna’s office in Conklin Hall. In preparation for their visit, Anna had cut out pictures from magazines and drawn on index cards. “In which room would you find a stove?” she asked, laying out four cards showing a kitchen, a bedroom, a bathroom and a laundry room. “Please don’t be insulted,” she

added quickly. “I assume you know the answers to these questions.”

D.J. couldn't name the pictures or gesture at them on his own. It seemed to Anna that he would try to point and then freeze up and lock his hands together. So she used the method that she learned during the workshop. First, she placed her hand beneath his elbow to stabilize his arm and found that, with this help, he could pick out the picture of the kitchen. Then she asked him to show her the president of the United States, and D.J. pointed — still with her support — to a photo of Barack Obama. Now she used her other hand to tuck his pinkie, ring and middle fingers lightly under hers, as if their hands were spooning, with just his index finger sticking out. From this position, she introduced a set of letter cards and finally a keyboard. “It was clear he knew the alphabet and could spell simple words,” she said later. “He was a fast learner.”

P. took D.J. to Rutgers every other Saturday and then asked Anna over to her house for more facilitation. “I would get excited: ‘Did he do something?’ ” P. said. “I tried to contain myself, but [Anna] said I was distracting him.” At one point, Anna had to make P. leave the room.

That fall, P. took more than half a dozen mothers of children with disabilities — friends from her support group — to meet with Anna and learn about facilitated communication. (One soon began working with Anna.) “I thought it was the best thing since sliced bread,” P. said.

Wesley was enthusiastic, too. When he met other users of facilitated communication, he noticed that D.J. was among the very few who weren't white and didn't come from some degree of privilege. “I was proud,” he said in court. “Who wouldn't be?” His brother “was the Jackie Robinson of F.C.”

The method that Anna used with D.J., and with several other clients at the time, was devised some 40 years ago to help a girl with cerebral palsy named Anne McDonald. Born in 1961 to a family that ran a dry-cleaning business in a railway town 60 miles north of Melbourne, Australia, she came out feet first, with signs of fetal distress. For the first hour of her life, she could not breathe on her own. At 3, she was given a diagnosis of spastic

quadriplegia with severe mental retardation and sent to the St. Nicholas Hospital for children with profound disabilities.

Even as a teenager, McDonald was small enough to fit into a baby stroller and weighed less than 30 pounds. Her eyes were often crossed, and her arms, neck and tongue remained in constant motion. When Rosemary Crossley, then an assistant at the Mental Health Authority, first saw McDonald, she was bone thin and writhing on the floor. Neither McDonald nor any other child had toys or wheelchairs, Crossley has said, and they weren't getting an education, either. "Just the floor and a cot," is how she remembered it.

In 1974, Crossley selected McDonald and seven other children for a special play group. She called them "beanbaggers" — most were so physically disabled that they could sit only in beanbag chairs. Three years later, she turned the play group into a communication study. Her plan was to ask the kids to point at objects, photographs and words, and thus find a way for them to voice their basic needs. She started with McDonald: " 'Annie, I think I can teach you to talk,' " she recalls in "Annie's Coming Out," the memoir she wrote with McDonald. " 'Not with your mouth ... but with your hands, by pointing to pictures of things.' "

The problem was that McDonald had a lot of trouble pointing. When she tried to move her arm, Crossley wrote, it would "shut up like a rabbit trap," sometimes snapping back against her face. Crossley realized that she would have to keep it balanced. "I was acting as a responsive item of furniture, not moving her arm but simply facilitating her own movement."

The supported pointing worked brilliantly. Now, McDonald could pick out word-blocks and form sentences like "I want a book, please." Just two weeks into this training, Crossley took out a magnetic board with letters on it to see if McDonald could spell things on her own. Less than a week later, McDonald pointed to the letters 'I' and 'H' and then to 11 more, producing "IHATEFATROSIE." "This is the first sentence Annie ever spelled," Crossley wrote. "Annie had freed herself."

After a month, McDonald demonstrated a familiarity with local politics. In two months, she was doing fractions. It all happened so quickly that some of Crossley's colleagues wondered if her assisted pointing might be a fraud. Perhaps Crossley had controlled the children's hands herself, guiding them to shapes and letters in the way that people move the pointer on a Ouija board.

Crossley had the same concern. "What I did not know was whether I was subconsciously manipulating her," she wrote, "or imagining her hand movements over the letters and making up sentences to fit what were really random twitchings." But she became convinced that the method worked after McDonald started spelling things with other people — including references to private jokes that no one else could have known. How had she learned so much so fast? She had worked out the rudiments of language by watching television and overhearing nurses' conversations. She had learned arithmetic by counting slats on the barriers that enclosed her cot.

Soon after McDonald turned 18, she went to court for the right to leave St. Nicholas. In a proceeding, she was shown an arbitrary pair of words — "string" and "quince" — while Crossley was not in the room. Then she had to spell them out with Crossley's help. "String" and "quit," she wrote. Not exactly right, but close enough. The judge accepted the method and ruled that McDonald was competent to make her own decisions. Addressing the press right after, she spelled: "Thank you. Free the still imprisoned!" McDonald went on to graduate from college and died at 49.

The philosophy that drove Crossley's work, one of radical inclusion, was gaining traction in the world of special education. In 1984, the same year that "Annie's Coming Out" was made into a movie, Anne Donnellan, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, published a sort of manifesto for disability rights. An academic paper called "The Criterion of the Least Dangerous Assumption," it advised teachers on how to treat disabled children: When you assume they will never function as adults, when you shunt them into special classes and give them toys meant for younger children, you make them victims of your meager expectations. It's

better to treat every child as if he or she has hidden talents, Donnellan warned, because if you do the opposite, what happens if you're wrong?

Assuming competence was the founding principle of Crossley's method. But her work would not become widely known until a Syracuse professor of education named Douglas Biklen visited Crossley's Melbourne clinic in 1988. He described that trip — along with a second one a few months later — in a bombshell paper for *The Harvard Educational Review* in August 1990. The implications were enormous, Biklen wrote. Those who had been categorized as having among the “lowest” intellectual capacities could now tell the world they existed; they could say, as he put it, “We will reveal ourselves, we will show our creativity, when we feel appreciated, when we are supported.”

With Biklen's help, facilitated communication spread through the world of disability services with a near-religious fervor. At Syracuse, he set up an institute that trained teachers, parents and social workers. Among its earliest disciples was Anna's mother, Sandra. When she heard about the method, she set out for one of Biklen's workshops on the night train. Back in Michigan, she had Anna serve as the videographer of her early sessions.

At the peak of F.C.'s popularity, a workshop could draw 1,000 people, says Christine Ashby, who now runs Biklen's institute. By October 1991, the technique had made its way into this magazine, in an article that began with a boy in Syracuse who was thought to have an I.Q. of 37 until he started using facilitated communication; he received a standing ovation when he graduated from high school. Three months later, Diane Sawyer did an Emmy-winning segment on the method for “Primetime Live” on ABC. “For decades, autism has been a dark mystery,” she told her viewers, “a disorder that seems to turn children in on themselves, against the world. Tonight, however, you are going to see something that has changed that. Call it a miracle. Call it an awakening.”

Not everyone was convinced. Howard Shane, a speech pathologist and professor at Harvard Medical School, was at a conference in Stockholm in

the summer of 1990 at which Crossley presented her data. He had been trying to help nonverbal people communicate for more than 15 years, using keyboards linked to voice synthesizers and other tools: Press a button, get a word. In Sweden, Crossley claimed that she had made stupendous breakthroughs just by squeezing a shoulder or cradling a hand.

“It just didn’t fit with anything that I or anybody had ever seen before,” Shane says now. “Either she saw something that nobody saw, or there was something wrong with me, in that I was dismissing people as being retarded when all you had to do was just believe that they could do it.” He snorted as he recalled Crossley’s presentation: “We were sitting in the back of the room, and I turned to my friend and said, ‘This is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.’ And then I said, ‘But what harm could it do?’ I actually said that to her. I said, ‘But what harm can it do?’”

Shane got his first call from a district attorney a few months later. A nonverbal adult in Northampton, Mass., had accused someone of sexual assault while typing with her hand supported. The story turned out to be untrue, but it was not the only accusation of this kind. Facilitated communication arrived in the United States during a hysteria over child sexual abuse, fueled by memories “recovered” during hypnosis or elicited from children. By the end of 1994, some 60 users of facilitated communication had made claims of sexual abuse.

As these cases multiplied, Shane and others began to look more closely at whether facilitated communication could be trusted. When Betsy Wheaton, an autistic 16-year-old from Maine, typed out that her father “makes me hold his penissss,” Shane, brought in to evaluate her, arrived with a battery of tests. First, he showed Wheaton and her facilitator, a speech and language trainer named Janyce Boynton, a set of pictures — a shoe, a spoon, a ball — and asked Wheaton to identify them. In some trials, Wheaton was shown the same pictures as Boynton; in others, she was shown different ones that Boynton wouldn’t see. No matter which she saw, the results were the same: Wheaton spelled out whatever was on the pictures shown to Boynton.

Next, Shane started asking Wheaton for information that Boynton didn't know — the color of her parents' car, the names of her family pets. Wheaton pointed to the letter board with Boynton's help, but her answers were inaccurate. For a final test, Shane took Wheaton into the hall and showed her a key and other things from his pocket. Back in the room, he asked her to name the objects she had seen. With Boynton supporting her arm, she failed to spell out anything at all.

The results of these experiments matched those from published studies that used a similar controlled approach — asking typers to name objects their facilitators either could or couldn't see. In almost every case, it seemed that the messages nonverbal people typed were not their own. One early review of this research found just four subjects whose communications might be valid out of 126 people tested. A subsequent review of 19 studies of facilitated communication performed during the 1990s found zero validations across 183 tests.

It looked as if the technique had been debunked. Professional societies put out formal statements questioning or condemning its use. In late 1993, "Frontline" aired a special that told Betsy Wheaton's story, among others, and suggested that facilitated communication was an elaborate display of what psychologists call the ideomotor effect, in which an external suggestion or a person's beliefs or expectations trigger unconscious movement: The facilitator was guiding the typing, even if she didn't know it. In early 1994, "60 Minutes" ran a similar exposé called "Less Than a Miracle." Public funding for the technique in schools started to dry up. Attendance at Biklen's workshops in Syracuse dropped sharply.

Even Anne McDonald's story turned out to have a set of complicating facts. Before the "string" and "quince" test that won her case in court, she was subjected to a series of investigations that came to different, often contradictory conclusions. Cheryl Critchley, a freelance journalist, has documented several harrowing accusations made by McDonald and Crossley's other typers. McDonald said the hospital superintendent had tried to smother her with a pillow, and another young woman said he had

forced a noxious liquid down her throat.

The backlash against facilitated communication “was horrible,” says Anna’s mother, Sandra, who still acts as a facilitator with clients and testified in an F.C.-related sexual-abuse case in Michigan as recently as 2008. (She also traveled to Australia in 2005 to meet with Crossley and McDonald.) “In the early 1990s, people were so excited, and we were able to get a lot of people going on at least some communication. Then came the pushback, and a lot of schools said you can’t do it anymore and literally took away the only communication system that had ever worked for many of their kids.”

D.J. is about five feet tall, with skinny arms and legs and the lolling head of a punch-drunk boxer. He has a tendency to rock from side to side and to bang his face against his knees; his nose looks as if it has been broken once or twice. When he is anxious or upset, he puts his hands in his mouth and bites them, leaving open sores. In a better mood, he likes to play with plastic coat hangers or scoot over to the refrigerator for a snack. D.J. loves to eat; he loves to be outside; he loves to look up at the ceiling lights.

Sitting at the keyboard, D.J. also seemed to have a lot to say. His messages were simple and misspelled at first, but his skill and fluency improved. Eventually he could hit a letter every second, and if Anna guessed the word before he finished typing, he would hit the “Y” key to confirm. Anna brought books for him to read, Maya Angelou and others, and discovered that he read like a savant — 10 pages every minute. (She turned the pages for him.) They discussed the possibility of his enrolling in a G.E.D. program.

As D.J. came into his own, Anna kept her mother posted on his progress. In the spring of 2010, Sandra asked if D.J. might like to give a paper for a panel she was organizing at a conference of the Society for Disability Studies in Philadelphia. The panel was on Article 21 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, which lays out the right to freedom of expression and opinion. D.J. wasn’t sure he

could do it, Anna said, but she convinced him he should try.

For the next six weeks, they worked together on his presentation — a one-page essay that D.J. wrote with Anna’s support and constant feedback over many sessions at his adult day program. In early June, D.J. traveled to the conference with his mother and brother, and then Wesley read D.J.’s paper to an audience of some 40 people. “The right to communication is the right to hope,” the essay said. “I am jumping for joy knowing I can talk, but don’t minimize how humiliating it can be to know people jump to the conclusion I am mentally disabled.” In Philadelphia, Anna and her mother typed with D.J., too, and introduced him to other users of facilitated communication. Two of D.J.’s fellow typers on the panel, Jacob Pratt and Hope Block, had just become engaged. They had been going on “supported dates” — flirting with each other through F.C., planning get-togethers, negotiating intimacy — for about a year.

Anna found that her relationship with D.J. was getting deeper, too. All the time they spent working on the essay, all the books they read together and all their conversations had changed the mood between them. “I began to gradually be aware that I was having romantic feelings,” she would later testify. “I became aware of things when he wrote the essay. It wasn’t all that original — people who had had the same experience had said similar things — but with all the spelling mistakes, he had a way of putting things.”

She had also grown more involved with D.J.’s family. When P. came down with walking pneumonia and needed urgent care, Anna showed up at the hospital. At one point, P. baked a pie for Anna’s family. “I could have called her Aunt Anna or Cousin Anna,” Wesley said during a deposition. “She was like family.” In October, P. went with Anna and D.J. to a second conference in Milwaukee. The paper that he gave there, read aloud by Anna’s father, ended up being published in a peer-reviewed academic journal.

That fall, D.J. started sitting in on a 400-level course in African--American literature at Rutgers. A Rutgers undergraduate named Sheronda

Jones, recruited by Anna, used F.C. to help him do his homework. “He pretty much read the books,” Jones remembered in a statement to the police. “I can’t tell you what he read. And he typed out the information.” She added, “I know because one of my roommates was in the class with him, and they pretty much wrote some of the same things.”

A man who had been said to have the mental capacity of a toddler was now on the conference circuit and taking college classes. At last the world could get to know D.J. and understand his mind. “He’s an extremely ethical person — it’s one of the things that impressed me about him,” Anna said in court. “You know how you can meet somebody who’s extremely physically attractive, and then when you get to know them, they have such a horrible personality that they don’t really look attractive to you? It works the same way in reverse. If somebody has an interesting, engaging mind and good heart and a beautiful soul, that is transformative. It shows through, and you love the person. And so you love being close to them, and you love the body that they’re in, because that’s the body that they have.”

Even as Anna came to feel this transformation, even as it seemed to her that D.J.’s world had opened up, her relationship with his family was not as stable as it seemed. One problem was that no matter how much progress D.J. made with Anna, his typing never worked with his mother or brother. They spent many hours training in F.C., but neither had success. Anna typed with D.J.; Anna’s mother typed with D.J.; Sheronda Jones typed with D.J. But somehow, P. and Wesley always failed.

Wesley remembered that he would take hold of D.J.’s arm, and they would type a single word together: *the*. Then nothing. Anna, he recalled, would tell him: “You have to keep practicing. You have to sit down and work with him and just continue at it. D.J. prefers to facilitate with some people more than others.” P. said that when she tried to grab D.J.’s hand, he would pull it away or scratch her. Anna told her to stop mothering him.

In January 2011, Wesley grew so frustrated that he went online to find the video about F.C. that Anna had shown in class two years before. He

wanted to see how people helped the woman in the film. “I was looking for a model to pattern myself after,” he said during a deposition. But when he started searching, he came across a different film — not “Autism Is a World,” but the “Frontline” investigation from 1993.

Other things raised Wesley’s suspicions, too. Some of D.J.’s messages didn’t seem as if they came from him. D.J. typed with Anna that he didn’t like gospel music, but Wesley knew his brother loved to sway in church, doing what Wesley called the “Stevie Wonder dance.” D.J. also typed, through Anna, that he enjoyed red wine — especially from a label called Fat Bastard. But Wesley spent Communion Sundays with D.J. and said he never showed much interest in drinking wine. “It seemed very class-based,” Wesley said. “It seemed very much of what she liked but not what [D.J.] liked.”

While Wesley harbored private doubts, P. began to feel put off by Anna’s interventions. They quibbled over the clothes D.J. wore and the records he listened to, and they debated whether D.J. should find his own place to live. I’m his mother, P. said. Let him be a man, Anna told her.

In March 2011, Anna invited D.J. to Rutgers to give a presentation about his disabilities. Students asked him questions:

“What are your hopes and dreams?”

D.J. typed that he would like to go to college, become a writer and work in disability activism.

“Would you like to be in a romantic relationship?”

“I want that more than anything,” D.J. answered. “But I don’t know if that’s possible for people with disabilities like mine.”

That was the moment Anna knew she couldn’t keep her feelings to herself. “I wanted to put my arms around him and say: ‘You can have that. I love you,’” she later testified. A week later, at his afternoon day program, Anna finally told D.J. how she felt. “I love you, too,” he typed. She said she

had known that for a long time, and he said he had known it, too. And then he typed, “So now what?”

They went back and forth on this question. “He grilled me on how much I really loved him, how committed I was to him, how I felt about my husband,” Anna wrote in an account of their relationship that she compiled six months later at her lawyer’s request. D.J. wanted to know if she would someday marry him. “I said: ‘Please, I love you very much, but please don’t ask me that just now. I need time to think through everything.’ He said that he was sorry. He didn’t mean to push that hard. It was childish of him.”

After many hours of discussion and several visits to the day program, Anna finally convinced D.J. that she meant all that she had been saying. “O.K., I believe you really do love me,” he typed. “But are you physically attracted to me?”

“That broke my heart all over again,” she said in court. “I said, ‘I’m in love with you the whole way.’ Then he said, ‘Kiss me,’ and I did. He said, ‘Kiss me again.’ I kissed him again.”

D.J. typed, “Do you think it’s even possible with my cerebral palsy for us to make love?”

They met the following Sunday at D.J.’s house, while his mother was at church. They tried to kiss while lying down on D.J.’s bed, on the theory that it would be easier, given his impairments. But D.J. kept sitting up, and then he lowered himself onto the floor. Anna offered him the keyboard and asked if anything was wrong. Nothing’s wrong, he typed, he was very happy, but also overwhelmed — he needed a minute. Anna said O.K., and D.J. scooted out into the hall. “Look, whatever we’re going to do, you set the pace,” she told him. “You call the shots. This is all about what feels right for you. I just love being close to you in whatever way works for you and for your body. No pressure.”

A few minutes later she was naked.

“I’ve dreamed about this,” he typed.

At his request, she said, she pushed down his pants, loosened his diaper and performed oral sex on him. They never finished — “I was close,” D.J. typed — but they had tickets for a disability-related film festival at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They were going to see “Wretches & Jabberers,” a 2010 documentary about F.C. produced by Douglas Biklen, the founder of the Syracuse institute.

A week later, Anna recalled, the couple tried to have sex in Anna’s office at Conklin Hall, with condoms, a blanket and an exercise mat. It didn’t work, and they ended up just sitting on the floor together, Anna talking and D.J. typing. Anna asked him if he might want to see some pornography, “to see what things looked like and different positions people used and that sort of thing.” She said she wouldn’t want to pay for porn or watch anything offensive, but that she would be O.K. with finding free clips on the Internet that depicted couples engaging in mutually pleasurable intercourse. He demurred, typing out that in his view the women in porn are being exploited, and that, besides, Anna was more beautiful than any porn star, and he really wanted to be thinking only about her when they finally made love.

The following Sunday in her office, it finally happened. D.J. “was very happy with what was going on,” she said in court. If he needed to say something, he would bang the floor, and she would pause to set him up with the keyboard. “It was a few hours from getting undressed to afterglow,” she said. When they were finished, he typed: “I feel alive for the first time in my life.”

It’s not that Anna didn’t know of F.C.’s checkered reputation. But like many in that insular and passionate community of users, she thought the method had been unfairly pushed aside. Anna knew it worked, firsthand.

She had watched her mother use F.C. for 20 years. In 2000, Sandra introduced her to an F.C. user with autism named Nick Pentzell. Anna was teaching at Temple University. He sat in on her classes. (She also typed

with him herself.) At Rutgers, Newark, Anna worked regularly with several people other than D.J., including a nonverbal teenage boy named Zach DeMeo. Zach, now 22, has autism and lost his speech while a toddler. Like D.J., he met Anna through an older brother who was enrolled at Rutgers. Soon they were having weekly or biweekly sessions at Anna's office. "It changed his life," says Zach's mother, Toni, a substitute teacher on Long Island. "She was so selfless and devoted. She saw us on weekends. She left her family to help my son." Anna and Zach have been friends for six years, and they stayed in touch even as she prepared for trial. "She speaks to my son as an equal," Toni says. "She treats him as a human being. If he told me he was in love with her, I would believe him."

As for D.J., once Anna decided that he could express himself — once he told her several things that she said she could not have figured out herself, like his nickname and his date of birth — then her mind was free of doubt. "I knew [D.J.] was the author of his typing," she said in court. "Why would I question that?"

Those who do raise doubts about F.C. tend to go too far, she wrote in a 2011 paper for *Disability Studies Quarterly*: "Although opponents of F.C. present themselves as engaging in scientific debate, some instances of continuing anti-F.C. expression meet the criteria to count as hate speech." She conceded that there were studies showing that the method didn't work, but there were others that indicated just the opposite. The skeptics' dismissal of F.C., she argued, their insistence that it never works, could be taken as a form of ableist oppression.

"We just need to recognize that research does *a* thing," Christine Ashby, the head of the institute in Syracuse, said at last year's annual summer conference for typers and facilitators. "Research gives us *a* piece of information, but it's very dangerous when that piece of information gets used to take away people's way of gaining access to the world."

Almost 300 people had convened at the city's Sheraton hotel, including parents, siblings, support staff and F.C. trainers, and about 75 typers,

almost all of whom were on the autism spectrum. Most were children and teenagers; a few had cerebral palsy. In the hotel's ballroom, the typers sat with their facilitators and listened to the presentations, or they got up and walked in circles. They also laughed and groaned and blurted out a score of chirps and mournful cries — *whooo, whooo, unna-unnahhh! Unna-unnahhh!*

“For a really progressive view of disability, there's no other place to be,” a graduate-student organizer told me on the first day. “It's like we're in this little bubble. It's an amazing bubble!”

At one point during the conference, Ashby led a session for facilitators called “Circling the Wagons: How Shifting Definitions of ‘Research’ Keep the Voices of F.C. Users Out.” Before she set out on a critical review of the studies from the 1990s, she apologized, half-joking, for the ableism of that metaphor: double-blind. Such insensitivity was not surprising from the F.C. skeptics, she said, who are more concerned with scientific method — with cold, quantitative research — than with real, lived experience.

When stories like Betsy Wheaton's started to emerge in the 1990s, proponents of F.C. acknowledged that their method was subject to abuse. People rushed into it without proper training and then fell victim to their own enthusiasm, Ashby said. A responsible facilitator, she explained, always checks her client's eyes to make sure he is looking at the keyboard. She always pushes backward against his hand or arm, steadying his movement instead of guiding it. She always tries to “fade support,” so that he can type more independently. And when something sensitive comes up — like a claim of abuse — she checks the message with another “naïve” facilitator.

In Syracuse, I met several people who started with F.C. and later learned to type without support, including Jamie Burke, a young man who once worked with Rosemary Crossley and now spelled out his words to me with no one touching him. His messages were somewhat cryptic: “Law of fair and just,” he wrote, and also, “I love challenging my correction.”

Jamie proves that the method works, Ashby said during the “Circling the Wagons” session, but the skeptics claim that he would have learned to speak and type anyway and that F.C. might even have slowed him down. “Simply achieving success means you didn’t need support in the first place,” Ashby said with exasperation. “Several years ago, one of the biggest F.C. skeptics offered something like \$100,000 to any F.C. user who would go and pass his double-blind test,” Ashby said. “Do you know how badly I wanted to get one of the people I know and love to go do that? Just because I wanted to stick it in his face and use that money to do good work in the world. But I would never subject somebody to that.”

“No!” cried a facilitator in the room.

“Who would do that?” Ashby said, shaking her head. “That is the most inhumane thing I’ve ever heard of. You go in to see this person who despises you, who thinks you are incompetent and incapable. And you go perform in front of them, like a *show pony*. And if you can do it, then he’ll still say that you probably weren’t autistic to begin with.”

The proponents of F.C. have argued from the start that when typers fail in formal testing, it’s because they become confused or feel antagonized; they freeze up in the face of inquisition. Mainstream experts have no patience for these evasions. If the method works for someone, they say, then have that person tested — and don’t claim that he hides his skills only under careful scrutiny. Yet their admonitions go unheeded by a growing number in the autism community. Ashby said that she has seen a resurgence of F.C., but that “it’s happening much more carefully this time.” Recent surveys of parents, caregivers and special-education teachers find that less than 10 percent now use facilitated communication. The practice has even made its way back into pop culture, too. In 2013, the memoirs of a Japanese teenager with autism, who is an F.C. user, were translated into English by the novelist David Mitchell and his wife, K.A. Yoshida, as “The Reason I Jump.” On “The Daily Show,” Jon Stewart called it “one of the most remarkable books I think I’ve ever read.”

Meanwhile, because of past scandals, facilitated communication has been quietly rebranded. In 2010, the Facilitated Communication Institute in Syracuse changed its name to the Institute on Communication and Inclusion. “We need to do more on F.C., but we can’t call it that,” said John Hussman, a major donor to the institute who runs a \$6 billion mutual fund and whose son uses the technique. He had just given a talk on the neuroscience of what is now often termed “supported typing.” “We have to come up with some other name to fly under the radar and maintain credibility,” he said.

At the conference, I interviewed, through typing, a teenager named Matt who spoke only in echolalic phrases — things he had heard and couldn’t help repeating. “Aunt June will be right back!” he kept shrieking. “Nobody’s having bread! Where’s Aunt June?” But with a facilitator’s left hand on his shoulder and her right hand beneath his armpit, he spelled out a sober proclamation: “I came here to affirm a commitment to facilitated communication. I would spend life locked in a prison of silence without it.”

Later that afternoon, I met a 20-year-old man named John who had a prominent underbite. John had been assessed as having the mental capacity of a 3-year-old, but using F.C. he could write poetry. His father handed me some printouts of John’s writing (“The place to discover the ember of love is worlds away but so close/in the land of the nonverbal autistic”), then grabbed John’s finger so we could have a direct exchange. “Know that we are intelligent,” John’s finger typed into the keyboard.

“We figured out that he taught himself to read at age 3 by reading a dictionary,” his mother said. “Now he’s a senior in high school.”

Wasn’t she worried by the studies showing that F.C. doesn’t work — that the messages aren’t always real?

“From a parent’s perspective, who cares about the research?” she replied. “The research will work itself out. In the meantime, I want to talk to my son.”

Before Anna showed up at D.J.'s house that Memorial Day in 2011, she warned him that his mother and brother might be upset by their relationship. They might even ban her from seeing him, she said, and as his legal guardians, they had the right to do so. "They would never do that to me," D.J. typed back. "They love me too much."

Some weeks after the blowup that ensued, P. called Anna on her cellphone and asked her to explain herself. "Well, look," Anna said. "I was not pleased to realize that I was feeling that way. I didn't think it was professional. I mean, I'm married and all that stuff — it wasn't something that I was looking for, and so I just kind of really, really repressed it." She added that D.J. was the only person she had been with, other than her husband, in more than 20 years.

Anna and her husband married in June 1989, when she was still a teenager in college and Roger was 24, a tuba player for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. They had a son six years later and a daughter a few years after that. In 2010, when Anna first began to fall in love with D.J., she and her family were living in a modest house in West Orange, N.J.

"The marriage wasn't great," Anna later said in court, "but I wasn't at a state of wanting imminently to end it." Eventually, she said, it came down to a choice of hurting Roger or hurting D.J. "There wasn't any choice. I wasn't going to hurt [D.J]."

Roger declined to be interviewed for this article, but in testimony at a pretrial hearing, he said he realized that his marriage was in jeopardy only when "the prosecutors came and banged down the door." Even then, he and Anna went to couples' counseling. The therapist's first words, he said, were, "Anna, you must stop dwelling on this relationship with [D.J]."

Roger may have hoped that she would follow that advice, but when he went through the browser history on their home computer, he found that Anna had been looking up real estate listings. In a fury, he took the 12-page account of her relationship with D.J., the one she had written for her lawyer, and emailed it to D.J.'s family and to the prosecutor's office. "If

you're so proud of this so-called relationship," he remembered thinking, "then let the whole world know."

A ridge of high pressure slid into New Jersey right after Memorial Day, pulling sticky air up from the Gulf of Mexico. Temperatures surged into the triple digits in early June and stayed there, kicking off what would be among the very hottest summers in the state's history. Barred from seeing the man she loved, not sure if his family would ever reconsider, Anna became desperate.

"I just wanted to follow up with [D.J.] as to why I wasn't there today," she said in a voice-mail message to P. a few days after they first discussed the relationship. The next week, she tried again: "It's Anna. Wondering if things are going to work out. ... "

Finally, Anna went to D.J.'s house one evening, uninvited, so she could speak with his mother face to face. She parked outside just before 6 p.m. and waited for P. to arrive from work. "We have to talk," she said when P. headed past her to the door.

"About what?" P. said.

She phoned Wesley and took Anna around to the back porch, so the home health aide wouldn't hear what they were saying. There, Anna promised to sign a formal declaration saying she would leave her husband in five years and marry D.J.

"Anna, go home to your children," P. responded.

When Wesley arrived and saw what was going on, he confronted Anna with his doubts about the typing. "If you believe that [D.J.] can do this F.C. thing, then if I ask [D.J.] a question, he should be able to give me the right answer." Anna agreed to the test, and Wesley asked, "Who is Georgia?"

With Anna's hand on his, D.J. typed an answer, very slowly, over several minutes: "Georgia in high school worked for Mom."

Georgia, who died before Anna got to know the family, was D.J.'s "auntie." She had often cared for Wesley and D.J., helping out when their mother was at work. Wesley said later that Georgia was D.J.'s other mom, that he loved her as much as anyone and that she made the best scrambled eggs and toast in the world.

Then Wesley said he had a second question, and Anna objected.

"Well, this is just a follow-up question," he continued. "Tell me who Sally is." Sally was a nickname that D.J.'s family used for Georgia.

Now D.J. typed, with Anna's help, something about "Mom's little nephew," but the answer trailed off. As Anna remembered it, Wesley shook his head and said he hoped Anna could work out her marital difficulties. (In court, Anna's lawyer argued that the answers to Wesley's questions were correct: Georgia had "worked for Mom," in the sense of helping her with child care, and she was "Mom's little nephew's kin.")

"Thank you for everything you've done," P. said.

"Don't thank me for what you're taking away," Anna said.

Wesley walked Anna to the door, and she drove off. But as soon as she turned the corner, she had to pull over; she was shaking too much to drive. Wesley later told the police that Anna had been so distraught, he was afraid that she might be suicidal or that she would "go home and do something to her kids."

"That was the worst day of my life," Anna later wrote.

The next few weeks in Newark were even hotter than the ones that came before. At a zoo just down the road from P. and D.J.'s home, keepers fed the cougars ice pops made of blood. As the scorching summer days went by, Anna heard nothing more from D.J.'s family. She grew depressed and couldn't eat; she said she lost 20 pounds.

At the beginning of August, in a final reckless measure, she wrote an

email to the director of D.J.'s afternoon day program. She said that D.J.'s family was "unsure" if she could see him anymore, but she asked if she could visit just one more time. "It's a mess, and really frustrating for me, because it has more to do with issues within the family and who gets to make decisions about [D.J.]," she wrote. Could she just come in "quietly," so she could tell D.J. why she disappeared? She had to let him know that she still cared about him, that she was trying to fix the situation.

The director called the family right away. Wesley and his mother had been ready to let matters rest, but when they heard about the email, they decided to take action. On Aug. 7, Wesley wrote a letter to the dean of faculty at Rutgers, Newark, and told her that Anna was harassing his family. He cast his complaint in terms that harked to Anna's scholarship in racial justice: "Her continued attempts to see [D.J.] and her insinuation that my mother and I do not know what is in [D.J.'s] best interest is insulting and straddles the racial assumptions about the capacity of black parents to properly raise their children."

He had accused Anna of turning into her own worst nightmare. "White people uphold white privilege in ways that they repress," she once wrote. Even when they mean to help, they behave "in ways that are disrespectful and that undermine the self-empowerment of the people whose space they invade." Had Anna done the same to D.J. and his family? A professor of ethics who wrote passionately about the rights of the disabled was accused of sexually assaulting the person she was most determined to protect — a black, disabled man; a child of a single mother; a member of the most vulnerable among the vulnerable.

In mid-August, D.J.'s family went to the police, and when P. spoke to Anna for the last time on Aug. 22, their phone call was recorded.

"Yes, [D.J.] wanted to be physically involved with me, and I wanted to be physically involved with him," Anna said. But, she continued, "our relationship is not just about or primarily about the sex part. We love each other very, very, very much, and I wouldn't have sex with somebody that I

didn't love."

P. listened carefully from her end of the line, as did two detectives from the Essex County Special Victims Unit. Anna didn't know it yet, but her relationship with D.J. and the "least dangerous assumption" from which it began — that he was mentally sound and thus capable of consent — had put her in a very dangerous spot.

"Were you really serious about this?" P. asked, baiting her for details.

"Yeah, I am," Anna said, her voice shaky. It had been two months since she had seen D.J., and she was miserable. "I mean, you have to understand, literally, I'm lucky if I get through 20 minutes of any day without thinking about him. That's how much I miss him." She went on, "If — if — if I did things like bite my hands, I'd be biting my hands right now, too."

How, she wondered, could something "so special and so incredible for both of us" have been turned "into some kind of horrible, wrong thing?"

"I wouldn't have fallen in love with him if he wasn't capable of consent," she would later say in court. "I wouldn't have fallen in love with him if he wasn't someone interested in reading books and talking about them. He was my best friend."

Last month, Anna Stubblefield went on trial for two counts of first-degree aggravated sexual assault, the same charge that would apply to someone who had inflicted severe injury during a rape or participated in a violent gang rape. The state set out to prove that D.J. was incapable of consent to sex or physically helpless to resist it, and that Anna either knew or should have known the same.

D.J. went to court only once, presented by the prosecutor as a "demonstrative exhibit." His mother led him in, holding up his tiny frame at the armpits. She walked him down the aisle and over toward the jury, as his head rolled back and his eyes seemed to focus on the ceiling lights. "Jury, this is my son," she said. Then she turned D.J. to face the judge. "Your honor, this is my son." If D.J. spotted Anna in the courtroom — it

would have been the first time in four years — he did not react. Anna’s lawyers later argued that the prosecutor tried to block her from his view, so D.J. wouldn’t reach for her as he used to.

Each side called in outside experts to meet with D.J.: Howard Shane of Harvard for the prosecution and Rosemary Crossley for the defense. But before the trial began, the judge ruled that facilitated communication failed New Jersey’s test for scientific evidence. That put Anna’s defense team in a legal straitjacket. Its entire case rested on the fact that D.J. could communicate through his keyboard, or that at least Anna reasonably believed he could. Now much of the evidence of that communication had been summarily tossed out. The judge ruled that Anna, and only Anna, could testify about the typing and why she thought it worked. She would have to win the jury’s sympathy alone.

On the morning of Oct. 2, after the jury had deliberated for less than three hours, a red light flicked on in the courtroom, signaling a verdict. Anna waited in her charcoal suit and sling-back shoes and the silver bird brooch that she had worn nearly every day in court. Her mother sat in the gallery, holding hands with Anna’s older brother, Michael, a computer scientist who had flown in from Wisconsin. Throughout the trial, several benches in the courtroom were filled with a rotating cast of Anna’s friends and fellow activists: Nick Pentzell, the autistic man from Pennsylvania; Devva Kasnitz, an anthropologist and former president of the Society for Disability Studies, who has a severe speech impediment; Toni DeMeo, Zach’s mother. On the courtroom’s other side, P. sat with Wesley, Wesley’s girlfriend and another member of the family.

The jury found Anna guilty on both counts. D.J. was incapable of giving his consent, and Anna’s faith in D.J.’s typing — learned from her mother, sustained through academic conferences, reaffirmed by friends and colleagues — could not excuse her. In the language of moral philosophy, she was, at best, “culpably ignorant,” lost in a fog of good intentions.

Anna sat in silence as her lawyers argued for continuation of her

\$100,000 bail. When the judge explained that Anna had been convicted of two counts of a first-degree felony and that further bail would be impossible, she collapsed onto the defense table in loud, convulsive sobs. “Please,” she begged, “what about my daughter?”

“I truly feel for what is a very difficult situation,” the judge said quietly. But Anna would be facing 10 to 20 years for each of the two times that she and D.J. had sex. The prosecutor had asked for the punishments to run consecutively. Anna, whose sentencing is scheduled for Nov. 9, could end up in the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women for up to 40 years.

Though Anna’s father says that she had been training in jujitsu to be able to defend herself in prison, she seemed optimistic to the end, planning out the life she would lead with D.J. after she was found not guilty, after he was freed from P. and Wesley and after they at last could marry. “We would have welcomed him with open arms into our family,” Anna’s brother said.

Just before 11 a.m., the bailiff lifted Anna from her seat and cuffed her hands behind her back. As she stood, she tried to speak, but her body shook and her throat closed up amid the sobs. The word “justice” could be heard, but nothing more.

Correction: November 8, 2015

An article on Oct. 25 about Anna Stubblefield, who was on trial for sexual assault, referred incorrectly to Sue Rubin. She was not among those present at the trial.

Daniel Engber is a frequent contributor to the magazine and a contributing editor for Slate and Popular Science. His last feature was about the quest for a natural sugar substitute.

Sign up for our newsletter to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.

A version of this article appears in print on October 25, 2015, on page MM40 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: The Facilitator.

