

Grammar School staff to accommodate Marchant, but as I walked around the *Victorian* buildings I could not see how he would get around the site. Thankfully I was able to find a stair-climbing wheelchair; this, combined with the 'can-do' attitude of BGS, meant Marchant was able to begin his time there in 2008.

In the week before he started, I was invited to give talks about Marchant to prepare both staff and pupils. Unfortunately, throughout that week, Marchant sat at home, worrying more and more about his new school – and this triggered seizures. But his anxiety lasted only until his first break-time, when he found himself surrounded by boys who went on to become his firm friends. Marchant was particularly happy in Years 7 and 8: he loved the rough and tumble boys of that age crave. His friends would carry him upstairs, take him out of his wheelchair, and hide in cupboards with him. When I collected Marchant to take him home for lunch I would find him riding up and down in the lifts with his friends. An excellent example of inclusion!



When you think of Stephen Hawking, you do not think about who feeds him, wipes his dribble, toilets him: you just see the man. At BGS Marchant is likewise seen, but even his teachers and friends are not fully aware of the Herculean daily struggles he faces with his complex condition. His uncontrollable muscle spasms have broken every wheelchair he has been given. The spasms increase in intensity when he is tired, emotional or stressed, and often continue throughout the night. The more he consciously tries to move his limbs, the greater the spasms. Marchant also cannot feel where his body is in space, and he is in a lot of pain (to understand this, imagine sleeping on your arm at night: in the morning you don't know where your arm is, but it feels painful). Marchant cannot speak, and his lack of awareness of where his body is in space – combined with his constant spasms – means it is hard to use communication aids. He is able to communicate when Ills Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) provide sensory feedback to his hand by supporting it, and this enables him to write on a printed qwerty keyboard. Anyone can learn Marchant's 'yes' and 'no' in minutes using this method, but it takes months to become fluent in his communication technique. Actually, Marchant *can* use his voice, and when he was younger – before his spasms were strong – he could be understood in context. Unfortunately his voice is very clear at inappropriate times: for example, he shouted out the answers so clearly

in a SATs test at Primary School. he had to be removed from the class.

Because of the spasms in his throat, feeding Marchant is also extremely difficult and variable; in the morning he is often sick, but by the evening he can eat fish and chips. He needs a calm environment to eat his food, and confidence in the person feeding him. Marchant's vision is also variable and can vary from hour to hour, because the visual processing in his brain is faulty: it's called 'Swiss cheese' vision. He told us that swinging helped this condition, and when he was younger he suddenly started squealing on the swing and told us, "The holes have gone!" This accounts for his love of sailing: the movement calms him and helps his vision.

In Year 9 Marchant was invited to a conference of healthcare professionals to give a lecture on how poor vision and epilepsy affected his life. Afterwards he had a letter of congratulations from a consultant, and an epilepsy nurse said she had learned more from Marchant about epilepsy than from the rest of her nursing career.

With these levels of disability, getting the right person to support Marchant is crucial. Yet again BGS rose to the occasion and – being different from other schools – they allowed Marchant to interview for his LSAs, which was sometimes tricky when you consider what credentials a teenage boy might consider important! BGS also allowed me to be involved in the process and I have sat alongside Mrs Liz Thorne (Director of Studies for Students' Learning Needs) and her successor, Dr Mike Ransome, interviewing candidates. Luckily, we always agreed on the candidates, but were often unable to predict which Marchant would plump for. His choices were always LSAs who were calm – his main criterion – and they became part of our family.

The role of an LSA is very tricky: you are Marchant's friend, yet invisible, and also a member of staff at BGS. The conflict was apparent on the day Marie, Marchant's LSA, saw his Year 8 friends trying to set paper on fire in a Chemistry lesson. Of course Marie informed the teacher. Marchant told her, in front of his friends, that he hated her for being a 'grass'. Later that night he was crying and would not go to bed until he rang Marie and told her that he loved her. But there has been a lot of laughter: one highlight was an EPQ research trip to Berlin, with LSAs Jeremy Young, Bai-ou He and Sarah Hunter trying to get Marchant up escalators and flights of stairs in his rather heavy wheelchair.

Year 9 was very difficult for Marchant. He lost Marie, who had been his LSA for many years. She was replaced by two LSAs, Ruth Hannon and Dom Munton. This change also coincided with Marchant's going into House tutor-groups, away from the Year 7 and 8 friends he had made. Added to this, the atmosphere in the year changed, along with the hormones: pupils became less physical, and now tended to stand around in groups, chatting. Marchant needed two LSAs because he had grown, and because of the increased pace of work. However, whereas Marchant's friends had helped carry bags for Marie, he was now surrounded by *two* adults: Ruth and Dom had to win the trust of the Year 9 friends, to become invisible and allow Marchant to be one of the gang. Ruth's youthful appearance

MARCHANT BARRON AT BGS

Bristol Grammar School's strapline – 'Life-changing learning, friendships, and adventure' – promises marvellous things; and truly, for my son, BGS provided a chance in life that no other school could offer.

Marchant was born with severe cerebral palsy. Despite this, he had a very happy time at Christchurch Primary School: he was voted class representative by his peers, and did very well in his SATs. With Year Seven on the horizon, however, no secondary school in the area could include him: head teachers would not even discuss the possibility of his attending. The exception was Dr David Mascord, then BGS Headmaster. Dr Mascord visited Marchant's primary school for a morning and spoke to Marchant, his friends and staff, to find out for himself if this unusual pupil could fit into BGS. I was bowled over by the enthusiasm of the



aided this integration, and she even got told off for being in the teachers' tent at camp; the teacher concerned was very embarrassed!

Ruth and Bai-ou got Marchant through his GCSEs and some very difficult times. The iGCSE exam board for Chemistry made some allowances for visual impairment. However, although they would enlarge and modify papers, and allow letters and words to be read out, they would not permit symbols to be read out (when presented with 'H₂O', Ruth would have to read 'H', point to the '2' without saying anything, and then read 'O'. Imagine how difficult this would be). After an hour of mock iGCSE Chemistry Marchant started to whimper, and ten minutes later he was crying: so was Ruth, who said she felt that the process was torturing him. Luckily, Mike Ransome was the invigilator that day and it was decided that for iGCSE proper Marchant would sit the 'regular' Chemistry paper with the other pupils, but BGS would mark his in-house, and allow Ruth to read out the symbols. There was a similar problem in the iGCSE English Language paper: the exam board would not allow a reader at all, even though other exam boards did. Mr David Selwyn, a stalwart friend of Marchant's, wanted to chain himself to the BGS railings, he was so outraged that such a pupil should be unable to sit his iGCSE in English Language. Instead, Marchant just sat the 'regular' paper with everyone else – with a reader – and the School again accredited his grade. Marchant got seven A*s and one A grade at GCSE. This reflects his love of learning, and the School's fantastic teaching; but more importantly, without BGS's flexibility, he would have been unable to sit two of these exams.

Marchant's LSAs are still part of our family, but have gone on to use their experiences in a variety of ways. Marie supports families at risk, Ruth trained to be a primary teacher and is going to Malawi, Bai is training to be an occupational therapist and Dom is mushroom-farming in a chateau in France and writing poetry (no one who knew him will be surprised at this!). Jeremy is going to train as a secondary school teacher (hoping to come back to BGS one day) and Sarah is still with Marchant. Knowing that Sarah, and her serenity, will go on to Bath Spa University with him has made this huge transition possible.

Marchant loves learning, and he has loved his teachers at BGS. Of course, none of the teachers at BGS had ever taught somebody with cerebral palsy, and it must have been daunting.



I remember one teacher, who had seen Marchant at the sailing club before he joined the School, admitting she thought BGS would be impossible for him; when she told her Year 8 son that Marchant was joining the School, the son said, "How will he play Rugby?" Supply teachers particularly enjoyed having Marchant in their class. In one cover lesson the group was a bit raucous and Ruth, his then LSA, gently asked the class to be quiet as Marchant needed to hear what she was reading to him. Everyone immediately fell silent and the supply teacher was very grateful! It is difficult for teachers to communicate directly with Marchant without the help of his LSAs, but Ms Yemenakis told me of a special moment she had shared with him: she had made a very subtle joke in class, and while nobody else had laughed - not even Marie – Marchant had cackled and clearly enjoyed the joke. Teachers found out very quickly he has a wicked sense of humour.

It has never been difficult to get Marchant to do homework; the problem has been to get him to stop. He loves learning, and is very competitive. He loved all his subjects, and was made an Honours student in Year 10. He would spend days on History homework and projects. He did want to take History 'A' Level; however, doing eight GCSEs nearly killed him, because things take much longer for him to do; he never had a spare moment. He also hated me trying to help with his homework, and we always argued. So we decided he should do only two 'A' Levels, which would allow him to rest in the evenings: he went on to study English Language and Biology. His love of History didn't falter, though: he chose to do an Extended Project Qualification which researched the background of a novel he wants to write, about the redemptive power of love between a Nazi youth, Heinrich, and a disabled Jewish boy, Boris.



Jeremy was the LSA who helped Marchant through his 'A' Levels, showing tremendous patience and tenacity. Marchant had been used to communicating with Ruth at a very fast pace, and as Jeremy had only just started when Marchant went into the Sixth form, things were obviously slower. Marchant got frustrated, and upset in English lessons. Mr Briggs, like all his Sixth-form teachers, dealt with this with great empathy and kindness: he would often come out of lessons and talk to Marchant, to try to calm him down. Everyone's persistence paid off and Marchant was made an Honours Student in English Language. The English Language paper – which should take 150 minutes – took Marchant fourteen hours over three days. It is a testament to Marchant – and to Jeremy and Sarah and to his teachers – that he achieved straight A*s at 'A' Level and high marks for his EPQ.

Throughout his school career Marchant was awarded many prizes, but he did not allow me to go to any prize-givings. He went with his father, until the final prize-giving in June 2014, when I must admit I was overwhelmed. Marchant was awarded the David Pemble Prize for bravery and determination, and the Old Bristolians' prize in English Language. But the third prize which was given out honours the School as much as my son – the Marchant Barron Prize for Creative Writing is to be awarded every year, henceforth, in his honour. This is typical of the BGS ethos.

BGS is like a family, and this was apparent from the very start. When Marchant found a room inaccessible, the porters carried him. When I cried through sheer tiredness and stress, Jo Abrams in Reception comforted me. When Marchant was stuck at the back of the Great Hall in Assembly, unable to go up to receive his Duke of Edinburgh Award, Headmaster Mr Roderick Mackinnon climbed across the chairs to get to him. I remember George, a friend of Marchant's, ringing to tell me he had seen an exo-skeleton on *The Gadget Show* that might help him; and how Mr Ben Scott cycled from Birmingham to Bristol to raise money to get Marchant off-road monster truck wheels. I have no doubt that the BGS relationships Marchant has made will continue to blossom.

Even the fabric of the School changed to accommodate Marchant. Driving him home for lunch was taking a lot of time, and he needed a quiet place in which to eat, and do physiotherapy. Ben Tavener, Head of Facilities, solved the problem: in Year 11 they adapted a building so that Marchant could have his own room. In the Sixth Form, when

he needed a hoist, oversaw the building of Marchant's own special hut next to the Sports Hall, a private space that must have been the envy of many a teacher. It did not have the Jacuzzi or the bar that Marchant and his friends wished for, but given a few more years at BGS I am sure he would have managed to persuade everyone that these too were necessary for the management of his disability.

Bristol Grammar School has shown Marchant understanding, respect and great kindness. He has thriven in a School that matches his passion for learning, and which has fantastic pastoral support. But beyond this, as Marchant says in his poem below, the School displays great humanity.

When Marchant was born I did not know what the future would hold. Now I have a



young man with many challenges, but not only has BGS allowed him to follow his passion for writing, it has also taught him that he can overcome any barriers given friends and the right attitude. So whether it is camping in the wilderness to get his Bronze Duke of Edinburgh award or studying for a degree in Creative Writing, the world is his.

He and I will miss the friendship and support of so many staff. In short, I feel it was not only Marchant at BGS ... I was there too. Thank you all.

Sue Pringle

EXTRAORDINARY ORDINARINESS

Without love my life has no meaning .Without love I am just a boy who is stuck in a wheelchair, vulnerable, unable to talk, unable.. Love opens up my life. I am a friend, a scholar, a poet, able to live a life of extraordinary ordinariness.

My friends have been the reason why my life is worth living. I remember the terror of walking into BGS for the first time. I saw a sea of uniforms and a mountain of stairs. I wondered if I would fall, if I would be alone, if I would cry. I worried my words would be stuck in my body. Friends open up the world for me. I hear the stories of their lives, their adventures, their music, their dreams and I feel included, I am in the world. It is the best of times when I share adventures and experiences with them; these are the times when I really live. It is easy to name my friends but it is even harder to leave one of them out. If you look at the photographs on these pages you will see many people have been my friends. I love to just mess about with them; I especially remember school trips, supporting Diamond's and Keen's at Sports Day and pimping my wheelchair for the final 'muck-up day' at School. I particularly enjoyed



the freedom of the Sixth Form. Paul Abrams from Facilities took me for beers and even Mr Edwards didn't seem to mind me using his local. My friends in the Nerd Herd heard I wanted to do the expedition for the Bronze D of E, so we did it together even though they were doing their Gold. They knew I wanted to climb muddy hills and sleep under canvas, though they did not get much sleep themselves. Thank you to Mr Carr for making it all possible and nominating me for a Young Hero award.

'We crossed the line for each other before we started the race' is a line from a poem I wrote about doing the Bristol !OK, which a group of staff and pupils from BGS ran in. I gained a medal but lost three teeth that day,



when my very good friend Anna Sutton and I fell after the finish line. Anna and Paul Abrams pushed me around 9.9 km of the race: I walked the last 100m in a standing aid - I was jubilant.

My LSAs became part of my social group and were my friends. I loved Marie's sense of fun, Ruth's ease and confidence that it will all be OK, Dom's man-to-man talks, Bai's gentle patience, Jeremy's calmness and Sarah's friendliness. I loved each one of them but at times I was mad at them because I resented them. I resented needing them. I need to be

with my school friends on my own. This struggle is still part of my life, needing help but craving independence. I want to chat up girls and be a whole man, not a team all the time. At times I have been so frustrated and lonely. I have seen Nikki, the BGS counsellor, who was amazing, always calm and compassionate. I tried to go out with just my friends, no LSAs. It was good but I got frustrated because I was restricted to yes/no answers. I need to be one of the gang, not the one to be looked after. After one such outing I wrote this poem:

Being Not Doing

I love doing,
But doing does not love me
So I am left to be.
I am burdened by being
But 'to be' sets me free.

I already knew I needed 'to be' more and in year 12, with the help of Mr Smith, I started a meditation club, the M Club. I loved the enthusiasm of the Year 7 and 8s who came along. I had a relationship with BGS even before I started at the School. I knew Mr Selwyn, who lived next door to my dad. Mr Selwyn's passion and love for English was infectious, and runs through the whole English Department. Teachers were always my friends and helped me. Mrs Lewis never fooled me that she was strict: she always made me laugh and I loved her cookery lessons. Dr Rosser's GCSE Physics class was more like a club, and when I was on the Charity Committee they sent me to persuade Dr Rosser to have wet sponges thrown at her. She wore a tee-shirt that day saying 'Only for you Marchant'.



I leave BGS to do creative writing. I have to; writing poetry is my reason to be, it is my release. Mr Briggs is a poet and I am sure he is behind the Creative Writing Prize given in my name. I was equally shocked and honoured; most people are published or dead before such an accolade.

Well this is my tum to say 'Only for you ... BGS'. The poem is about my time at School so its title has to be *Agape* (unconditional love).

Agape

As one being we move
My dissonant body joins the rhythm
Cherished, each note unique
My voiceless passion is heard

Each one finding their song
Yet still our resonant melodies blend
Encouraged, we sing louder
Until our anthem of
Humanity is heard beyond these walls.

Marchant Barron