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Deserving of a gold star : Actress and local neurologist collaborate on innovative project for children

MARILYN McMAHON, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER
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Two amazing women, each with completely different talents and skills, have teamed up to teach students about their brains so they can lead smarter and happier lives.

One is actress Goldie Hawn, known for her ditsy blonde persona in the classic 1960s television show "Laugh-In" and movies such as "Cactus Flower," "Private Benjamin" and "The First Wives Club."

The other is Dr. Judy Willis, 60, who had a successful practice in Santa Barbara as a neurologist for 15 years and then decided to become an elementary and middle school teacher in Santa Barbara schools to implement her strategies for more effective learning.

Dr. Willis and Ms. Hawn connected three years ago when the actress called the neurologist and asked her to help with the Hawn Foundation, which she had founded the year before.

"Someone had sent Goldie an article that I had written titled 'The Neuroscience of Joyful Living.' I had never heard of the Hawn Foundation," said Dr. Willis during an interview in the Santa Barbara foothills home she shares with her husband, Dr. Paul Willis, also a neurologist and former colleague before his wife made the dramatic career move to teaching.

Ms. Hawn, in a phone call from Los Angeles where she lives, explained that she had started the foundation "to equip children with the social and emotional skills they need to lead smarter, healthier and happier lives. We need to rethink our approach to classroom education, integrating neuroscience with the latest social and emotional learning techniques."

Her views on education, she told Dr. Willis, were inspired by her own experiences while growing up in Washington, D.C., where she was born in 1945.

"I was not an A student. I was dyslexic, and I had some reading comprehension problems, which could have made me feel inferior. However, my parents were very supportive. They wanted me to be happy. They didn't need me to become a doctor or lawyer — they saw what my talents were and nurtured them," said Ms. Hawn in an article written for the March/April issue of Neurology Now magazine of the American Academy of Neurology.

Her parents are the late Laura Steinhoff Hawn, a jewelry shop/dance school owner, and Edward Rutledge Hawn, a band musician and descendant of Edward Rutledge, the youngest person to sign the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Titled "Golden Opportunity," the article, which also features Dr. Willis, goes on to explain that the actress created the Hawn Foundation because of her own experience in school and that of her children.

"There was so much memorization and so many books that my children were getting back problems. It was drudgery. I thought, What about their excitement around learning?" said Ms. Hawn, who



Dr. Judy Willis, local neurologist/teacher, collaborates with actress Goldie Hawn, founder of the Hawn Foundation, on an innovative program to teach parents, educators and students strategies for more effective learning by showing them how the brain works. Dr. Willis has written several books about the topic and uses a plastic model of the brain in presentations she makes around the world.
MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS



Goldie Hawn helps students in Vancouver, B.C., learn geometry using techniques from MindUp! curriculum written by Dr. Judy Willis of Santa Barbara.
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was determined to do something about it. "I figured, Let's make school a really cool place to go."

She is the mother of three grown children — Oliver Hudson, Kate Hudson and Wyatt Russell.

Attempts to talk with Ms. Hawn were unsuccessful.

It was more than 10 years ago, while she was still a neurologist, that Dr. Willis, the mother of two adult daughters, had her epiphany about the way children learn.

"I began to see a definite increase in referrals in the late 1990s of children for ADD (attention-deficit disorder), OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) and oppositional defiant syndrome," she said. "Teachers were telling parents, 'I think your child might have a neurologic problem.' I had a big jump in referrals — from five a month to 25 a month."

She decided to observe classrooms in a local elementary school and found students "staring straight ahead or causing distractions. I saw how many kids could be perceived as having neurological problems. They weren't interested because they were being force-fed. Material was being crammed through really fast. There was no time for enjoyment."

As a neurologist who dealt with all aspects of the brain, Dr. Willis said she knew strategies that children could use to make them learn faster, retain the information and have fun in the process.

But the only way she could tell if her methods worked was to become a teacher herself, so in 1998, she gave up her medical practice and went on to earn a master's degree in education and a teaching credential at UCSB.

"The only one who wasn't supportive of my decision was our good friend Julia Child," laughed Dr. Willis. "She felt I should keep my medical practice."

Dr. Willis' first year of teaching at McKinley Elementary School on the Mesa proved to be a challenge, which was not unexpected.

"I knew it would be because of the demographic," said Dr. Willis, who taught second grade the first half of the year and fifth grade the second. "I saw that the theory could work, but there were too many distractions. When it worked, it was fabulous."

According to Dr. Willis, when the brain is stressed, the "emotional switching station sends information to the lower brain and three things happen — fight, flight or freeze. This is true in people and animals. In the classroom, students who are staring are in the freeze mode, those who are bothering others are in the fight phase and those who are entertaining themselves are in the flight mode.

"When there is no stress, the emotional filter allows information to get to the thinking part of the brain, so students don't have to act out," she said.

After her stint at McKinley, Dr. Willis continued to test her strategies with fifth-graders for three years at Laguna Blanca School in Hope Ranch.

"It was very successful, but my husband began prodding me to try a more challenging environment, so I decided to teach math at Santa Barbara Middle School, an age group undergoing many changes. And the subject they hate most is math, especially the girls," she said with a smile. "I started with seventh-grade math, and the general feeling was 'I hate life, I hate math and I hate you.'"

Within a short time, their attitude began to change, and the five years she taught there from 2004 to 2009, she said, were very successful, inspiring her to write the book "Learning to Love Math: Strategies That Change Student Attitudes and Get Results" (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, \$24.95).

As she began to write articles in professional publications about her successful methods, the word spread, and Dr. Willis was invited to speak at conferences and seminars around the country and world.

Among her strategies is guiding students in activities that help them focus and achieve positive moods to prime themselves for learning.

"We practice techniques to increase mindfulness. For example, students learn to do visualizations, deliberately recalling a place where they felt happy, calm and safe," said Dr. Willis. "Students discover that when I guide them to visualize historic events, to picture vocabulary words with images that depict their meaning, or to see math procedures acted out in their mind's eye with 'dancing numbers,' they can better recall history, vocabulary or math lessons."

She also has students do relaxation breathing before a test or challenging lesson.

"They report that they feel calmer, more alert and more focused — and they do understand and remember more," Dr. Willis said.

Traveling to eight different countries in one year plus trips in the United States became too difficult to juggle with her classroom schedule. Reluctantly, she gave up her teaching position last year.

"I miss teaching, but I am thrilled to teach educators on all levels how information flows to the brain and what they can do to make this happen. It is not a mystery," she said.

Explaining how the brain works is especially important for students who believe that they are not smart and that nothing they can do can change that, Dr. Willis believes.

"Many children, and even some parents and teachers, think that intelligence is determined at birth and that even intense effort will not budge their academic abilities," she said. "The realization that they can literally change their brains by improving how they approach learning and how they study is liberating. Genius is not in your genes. Environment is huge."

It was exactly this kind of thinking that caught Ms. Hawn's eye and led her to ask Dr. Willis for help with the Hawn Foundation.

Hubert Alexander Ingraham, prime minister of the Bahamas, met with Goldie Hawn and Dr. Judy Willis to discuss the possibility of adopting the MindUp! curriculum in Bahamian schools.

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Goldie Hawn and Dr. Judy Willis were featured in the March/April issue of Neurology Now magazine of the American Academy of Neurology.
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"When Goldie called, she told me that she was afraid that people wouldn't take her seriously because of her reputation as a blonde bimbo. As a scientist, I would give her foundation credibility. She had done her homework," said Dr. Willis. "As a celebrity, she could get people's attention, and I can explain technical aspects of the brain."

Together, the women have collaborated on MindUp!, a curriculum of 15 lessons that teaches children how their brains operate, explaining in simple language basic parts of the brain, such as the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex.

"We're not asking our kids to become neuroscientists," said Ms. Hawn in the magazine article, "but we want them to understand what's going on in terms of the basics of the brain. In doing so, it gives them a sense of control, that they can form and grow their brains the way they want to. It puts them in the driver's seat."

The program started in 2005 in Vancouver, B.C., with 12 teachers and has expanded to more than 1,000 trained teachers, according to Dr. Willis, whose life has become a whirlwind of travel to spread the message around the world.

Before the end of the year, she will be presenting in Dubai, Geneva, Jakarta, Melbourne, Vancouver and Alberta as well as throughout the United States.

In November, Ms. Hawn and Dr. Willis will speak at a conference, "Mind & Its Potential," in Sydney, Australia.

"I want every teacher in every school around the world to know enough about how the brain works and to share it with their students," she said, adding she wants parents to understand, too, which is why she has written her latest book "A Brain Owner's Manual for Your Child," due to be published in 2011.

There are no plans currently to introduce the curriculum in Santa Barbara schools, according to Dr. Willis, because "Goldie wants to focus first on areas with large numbers of disadvantaged children from low-income families."

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