

An augmentative conversation between student and Steve Gleason

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Tulane student Benjamin Alexander, right, communicates with former New Orleans Saints safety Steve Gleason, left, using computerized technology during a meeting at Gleason's home. His father, Sam Alexander, assists him during the conversation. (Photo by Mark Berger)

It was a meeting between two men. Neither one could speak. They utilized modern computerized technology to convey their innermost words. One was a 38-year-old, former professional football player. The other was a 21-year-old college student, a nonverbal person with autism.

The former professional football player is Steve Gleason, an iconic figure who has come to represent the rebirth of a city from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Gleason is known for his memorable blocked punt against the Atlanta Falcons in the first game in the newly refurbished Louisiana Superdome following Hurricane Katrina.

His performance energized his teammates and the city of New Orleans. Gleason was a kamikaze on special teams. He now battles amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and is confined to a wheelchair because of the neuromuscular weakness that is a result of the disease. The connection between this disease and football are intuitive, not scientific, but the specter that one caused the other hard to avoid. Scientific studies have suggested that there is a genetic component in addition to trauma to the brain that can predispose someone to ALS. In 2011, Gleason was diagnosed with the terminal illness of ALS, which has an average life span of two to five years, although there are reports of people living longer. Today, Gleason has lost his ability to speak due to ALS, but not his ability to think and communicate. A voice output computer program produces words based on his eye movements.

The other conversant was me, the 21-year-old Tulane University junior English major who is a nonverbal person with autism. For eight years, I had no means of communicating until by chance my parents placed a keyboard in front of me and the world opened its doors as I was able to attend neurotypical schools. The words have been flowing out of my fingers as I have expressed my innermost thoughts of how I feel about “being trapped inside my mind” by this fiend called autism.

Benjamin Alexander is a junior at Tulane University majoring in English with an emphasis on creative writing. Steve Gleason received an MBA from Tulane in 2011.

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“We have a similar voice. It comes out of a computer.”

Benjamin Alexander, junior