

Touched by an Angel

Gifted children are otherworldly, Linda Silverman says. The challenge is helping them thrive here on earth.

By Harrison Fletcher

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Linda Silverman began with the vocabulary, working from the high end of the IQ test, using words so obscure that even she, with a Ph.D., would have trouble with them. And yet the six-year-old boy sitting across from her defined most of them correctly. "What do you do?" Silverman joked.

"Memorize dictionaries?"

"Yes," replied the boy, Justin Chapman.

Silverman felt the blood drain from her face.

Then she administered the abstract-reasoning questions. Again, the boy aced them.

"How does he know this?" Silverman asked Justin's mother, Elizabeth Chapman.

"He likes them," she said. "He plays with them."

Silverman had spent forty years in gifted education. She had given thousands of IQ tests, evaluated thousands of exceptionally bright children. She was so good at her job that she could predict a child's intelligence quotient simply by using the scores of that child's grandparents.

But this boy was different. Not only had he mastered the highest levels of the test, but with each correct answer, he'd grin from ear to ear and slap a "Silly Slammer" toy that proclaimed: "You're a genius! I agree! How *do* you do it?"

Finally, Silverman unleashed a complex algebraic and geometry equation with two possible answers. The boy could not use a calculator. He could not use a pencil. He had to perform the calculations in his head. The time limit: Five minutes.

He took ten seconds

Eventually, Justin -- and Silverman -- needed a break. As the boy ambled away, Silverman turned to her husband. "This is going to be the fastest test in history. This is going to be the highest score in history, and no one is going to believe me," she said.

She was half right. Justin scored off the charts, at 298-plus -- an unbelievable but undeniable achievement that ranks him as possibly the smartest boy in the world.

"When I saw his score, everything I thought I knew went right out the window," she remembers. "I said, 'I know nothing. I am an egg.'"

They are angels, Silverman believes, children so intelligent, sensitive and spiritually aware that they seem otherworldly. The toddler who answers, "Hamburgers!" before his mother asks what he'd like for supper. The five-year-old who wonders, "Who's God's next-door neighbor?" The six-year-old who performs square-root equations.

Silverman has spent her life among them, as a psychologist, educator, author and director of the Gifted Development Center. At her Capitol Hill offices, she has opened doors for thousands of children who might otherwise slip through the cracks of an educational system that does not understand them.

She has helped found over twenty organizations, clubs and support groups for gifted children and the people who work with them. She has published hundreds of articles and two books -- *Counseling the Gifted and Talented* and *Advanced Development: A Collection of Works on Giftedness in Adults* -- and has written yet another, *Upside Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner*. She has edited numerous journals, delivered dozens of keynote addresses around the world and sat on as many boards and committees.

She has been a guide, an advocate and a protector for some of the most brilliant children on the planet. And at the same time, she and her husband of 41 years have opened their hearts and their home in Coal Creek Canyon to wayward teenagers.

At sixty, Linda Silverman has no plans to slow down.

"This is my calling. This is my mission. This is what I was meant to do with my life," she says. "I'm on a grand magic carpet ride."

Now, she believes, that ride is about to take a breathtaking turn. More profoundly gifted children are being born today than ever before. Silverman and her staff have identified 631 children with IQs above the genius level of 160. More than a hundred have exceeded 180; thirty have topped 200. Within the next ten years, Silverman says, these children could change the world. And they won't wait for adults to do it.

"These are not like kids I met twenty years ago," she says. "We call them 'The New Children.' We've never seen anything like them. The impossible is becoming possible. In my heart of hearts, I believe we're witnessing the evolution of human consciousness."

Jay Bevenour



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Practice what you teach: Linda Silverman has devoted her life to gifted kids.



Justin Chapman's Web site includes the picture below, showing him with Silverman.

As a schoolgirl in Buffalo, New York, Silverman wanted to be popular. Not because she really wanted to join the right social circle, date the right boys, attend the right parties and make the right friends, but because she wanted to fit in at a place where she often felt alone. By junior high, she'd succeeded.

"My social life was ten times more important to me than school," Silverman says, recalling passages from her diary. "I never studied until 11 o'clock at night. I talked a lot about hairdos, boys, cleaning the house and my friendships, but not about school. Homework was not important to me."

Even though she herself had tested in the range of what would later be known as "gifted," she teased the students who took school seriously, joining the chorus of kids who called them nerds. But at age fifteen, Silverman started taking classes with the smart students she'd taunted. .

One student had a photographic memory. Another had built a HAM radio and used it to listen to the World Series while his teacher thought he was adjusting his hearing aid. A third started a classroom contest to see how many times students could get the unsuspecting teacher to say a certain word. As she sat among them, she rediscovered a part of herself that she'd sacrificed for popularity.

"It was just amazing," Silverman says. "They were really fun. Before I was a part of that group, I did my share of scapegoating. I felt ashamed, because I had made fun of these brilliant kids. But after I got to know them, I became more interested in classes, because they were more interesting people."

But she struggled, too. Her high school had the most National Merit scholars in Buffalo, and in this group, it was her turn to feel like the outsider. "I knew I was not as gifted as the other students," she says. "I always felt like I was at the bottom of the barrel looking up."

In one English course, which she had to petition to enter, the teacher required students to memorize eight single-spaced pages of poetry, learn 250 vocabulary words a week and complete a college-level research paper. After one semester in this class, Silverman's verbal score on the SAT jumped 106 points, earning her a college scholarship.

From the time she was three, Silverman had known that she wanted to be a teacher. And after spending two years with Buffalo's brightest students, she knew what she wanted to teach.

"That was how I wanted to spend my life," she says. "Nothing could deter me."

At seventeen, Silverman entered the Buffalo State Teachers College, where she proceeded to incorporate her newfound passion into whatever she studied. For a child-development course, she conducted a case study of a gifted kid. In geography, she wrote a paper comparing gifted education in the U.S. and Great Britain.

"My professor gave me an A because it was an A paper, but he said, 'This has nothing to do with geography,'" Silverman recalls. "But wherever I had the opportunity, I created links. I did that all the way through my undergraduate work."

At nineteen, she married her best friend's brother: a serene, compassionate and spiritual man named Hilton Silverman. They balanced each other perfectly. Where she was feisty and headstrong, he was mellow and soothing.

"I think I married a Martian," she jokes. "He's in a whole other place. He changes energy. When he walks into the room, everyone feels calm and peaceful. Everyone wants to hang around with him."

After graduating magna cum laude, Silverman taught second grade for a year. Then she and Hilton headed to Los Angeles, where Linda dove headfirst into her career. She enrolled in a counseling and guidance program with giftedness guru John Gowan, taught math to exceptionally bright students, launched a scholarship-preparation course, formed a teen support group and instructed gifted students while other educators watched. Her work eventually earned her a full fellowship at the University of Southern California.

When she arrived at USC, Silverman didn't know much about feminism. By the time she left, she was practically a radical. During her application interviews, administrators had asked, "Who will watch your children?" and "Does your husband approve of your going to graduate school?"

"I did not take that very well," she recalls.

She also battled with her professors over coursework, telling one statistics instructor that she had a problem with his assumptions: "I don't believe in chance," she told him. She fought to become the first to receive a double major in education psychology and special education. And then, at the height of the Vietnam War, she formed a group called Americans for Peace.

"Organizing groups and fighting for causes became a way of life," she says. "No one ever accused me of being diplomatic. At USC, I came into my own as a rebel."

When she wasn't fighting the establishment, Silverman and her husband were helping troubled kids. They created a group-living project called Kibbutz Shalom and took in two of Linda's nieces.

"I love kids," she says. "I have a great deal of respect for them, and I don't think that's typical in our population. I don't lord it over them because I have a bigger body. Children must be respected. That's the only thing they respond to."

In 1972, the Silvermans moved to Colorado, seeking a drier climate for an asthmatic daughter who'd endured sixteen cases of pneumonia before the age of six. In Boulder, Linda Silverman felt like she "had come home." She accepted a job at the University of Colorado teaching special education -- but although she received excellent evaluations and created new courses, administrators dropped her contract after three months.

Silverman, who says she was "treated like a secretary" by her male colleagues, fought back. She joined a class-action lawsuit that charged CU

with discriminating against women. Eventually, she settled out of court for \$15,000, but she paid a price: Silverman was essentially blacklisted as being litigious.

She fought on behalf of her family, too. While Linda was at CU, Hilton was raising their two children, Miriam and Brian. Even in Boulder, a househusband was a rarity in the early '70s. Their insurance agent referred to Hilton as "Mrs. Silverman." Meanwhile, Sears refused to issue a credit card in Linda's name, and her bank made her sign a document promising that she wouldn't have children for the life of their loan.

"Demoralizing," she says.

After Linda lost her teaching job and, with it, the family's health insurance, the Silvermans had to apply for food stamps. But adversity only made them more creative. Hilton began working with autistic and handicapped children in their home. He offered a psychic healing course at the Boulder Free School. Hilton and Linda became foster parents to two teenage girls and opened a group home for four more adolescents.

"It was 24-hour chaos," Silverman recalls. "We had ten different girls living with us at various times, plus a college student to help with them. Our home was bursting with eleven people and a dog."

Silverman eventually took jobs as a grant writer, consultant and part-time teacher at Metro State College and Colorado Women's College. She also helped to start the Colorado Association for the Gifted and Talented, coordinated conferences, launched parents' forums and joined committees.

In 1977, she was hired by the University of Denver to teach gifted education. Two years later she launched a testing, counseling and support project that evolved into the Gifted Development Center.

But educating the public was a slow process. One night about 25 years ago, Silverman was addressing hundreds of people at a back-to-school gathering. She was looking for potential members for the Boulder Association for the Gifted, which she'd founded. For an application fee of just five dollars, she would find a mentor for any child whose interests were not being fully developed at school; parents wouldn't have to pay another dime for the service.

No one applied. "They didn't want the stigma of having a gifted child," Silverman remembers.

Even after decades of study and debate, few areas of education arouse more resentment and misunderstanding than giftedness, she says. Everywhere from testing laboratories to teachers' lounges, people disagree on the definition.

Among the most common misperceptions: that giftedness equals elitism; that all brilliant children are rich, white and upper middle class. But in reality, Silverman says, giftedness crosses all economic, social, ethnic and national boundaries. Although affluent parents might be more likely to test their children, tutor them and enroll them in private schools, most exceptional children come from poorer backgrounds.

"If we systematically found everyone in the world who was gifted, we'd see that the vast majority are poor, because the vast majority of people are poor," she points out. "And even though you might see a higher percentage of gifted children in Beverly Hills, you're still going to find more gifted children in Bombay."

At the Gifted Development Center (gifted-development.com), her clients come from all backgrounds and all parts of the world. They come not seeking prestige or ego enhancement, she says, but because they simply don't know what else to do.

When they discover that their son or daughter is a genius, many parents break down and cry. Like fathers and mothers of handicapped children, they worry about having enough money, time and energy to care for their offspring.

Yet parents of gifted children also must constantly battle the stereotype of being seen as stage parents. Although that label seems to fit some parents (see [sidebar](#)), Silverman says that stage parents actually are extremely rare.

Many people also mistakenly believe that gifted-education programs make bright children feel superior. In fact, Silverman says, the opposite is true. When brilliant students are placed with their peers, they discover children who know as much, if not more, than they do, and they're humbled. It's when gifted children are forced to remain with children who do not share their abilities that they become haughty.

"If we really want to create a child with elitist attitudes, all we have to do is place him in an unchallenging program for twelve years and allow him to be the smartest one in the class with no one in second place," Silverman argues. "Let him get by doing his homework in class, never taking home a book and acing the tests without ever having to study. By the time he graduates, he will be convinced that he's the top banana and that his rightful place in the universe is to be number one."

Some educators, usually men, equate giftedness with achievement, defining genius by how many books were published, how many patents were secured and how many prizes were won. Some of these educators, Silverman says, label children as "potentially gifted" until their outside achievements are measurable. "We don't label anyone as potentially retarded," she scoffs.

Silverman defines giftedness very differently. While many brilliant people certainly achieve fame and fortune, most aren't motivated by the traditional trappings of success, such as high grade-point averages, six-figure salaries or celebrity status. Some spend decades crafting brilliant philosophical papers. Others feel compelled to help others, and they do so as social workers or doctors. Still others serve as negotiators or counselors. And many become wonderful parents and teachers.

"My belief is that the trajectory of giftedness is inner development," Silverman says. "Spirituality. Compassion for humanity. Need for service. It has nothing to do with what you achieve or if you are well-known in the world."

She believes giftedness emerges in early childhood, as some infants zip through developmental milestones with extraordinary awareness, responsiveness and intensity -- an indication of the complex nervous systems that complicate their interactions with the world. Gifted children

display many of the 25 traits she's identified, including a vivid imagination, rapid learning ability, perfectionism, extensive vocabulary, strong curiosity, long attention span, a love of reading, a preference for older children or adults, an excellent sense of humor and a high degree of compassion. Many of these children are "visual-spatial learners" who think in images instead of words. They solve problems in unusual and creative ways. They see the big picture but miss the details. They learn in huge intuitive leaps instead of step by step. They also tend to be disorganized.

But gifted children do not advance equally in all areas, Silverman says. An eleven-year-old boy might carry a calculus textbook in one hand and a *Curious George* toy in the other. Another might read Shakespeare but struggle to tie her shoes. Many gifted children also have learning disabilities such as dyslexia or attention deficit disorder, or difficulty with handwriting -- problems that are often overshadowed by their talents. Others are hyperactive, inattentive or uncoordinated.

The greater the discrepancy between the child's strengths and weaknesses, the harder it is for him to fit in. And these differences make gifted children especially vulnerable. Silverman once spoke to a group of three dozen gifted children in New Zealand; one third of the boys said they had been beaten up just because they were smart.

Gifted girls, meanwhile, go into hiding, as Silverman herself did, trading their abilities for a desire to fit in. Girls become chameleons, pretending to be interested in subjects they could not care less about and acting less bright than they are. "It is not smart to be smart," Silverman says. "If they are different in any way, they will not be accepted."

It's also not safe to be smart. "We're threatened," she adds. "You talk about gifted people and you push a button that says, 'I'm not as good as...' or 'I'm not as smart as....' We live in a competitive society where we feel these kids have an unfair advantage. And if someone is smarter, you've got to knock them down a few pegs."

And if they're not being bullied on the playground, exceptionally bright children are being ignored in the classroom. During the educational reforms of the early 1990s, gifted programs were routinely attacked and dismantled. One reformer wrote that gifted programs "provide a way to resegregate schools without requiring people to move." Another suggested that providing advanced subjects to bright students would make their classmates feel inferior.

"What kind of nonsense are we allowing in the name of egalitarianism?" Silverman asks. "Had we substituted the word 'disabled' for gifted, 'black' for gifted or 'Hispanic' for gifted, none of those books or articles would have been printed. But gifted programs were fair game. They were wiped out in school district after school district. Every principal for ten years was influenced by this."

Silverman sees giftedness as a mirror image of mental retardation. Where a seventeen-year-old handicapped boy has the mind of a six-year-old, the six-year-old gifted boy has the mind of a seventeen-year-old. Both have special needs. Both require special teaching methods. Eliminating programs for one child is as unethical as eliminating programs for the other, she says.

Nothing is gained in the name of democracy by making a third-grader who reads at the eighth-grade level reread the third-grade reader, she argues. Educators cannot pull the bottom up by pushing the top down. By teaching to the lowest common denominator, teachers have whittled away the rights of gifted students under the rationale that "the cream will rise to the top on its own."

"Well, the cream doesn't rise to the top on its own," Silverman says. "Some of these kids commit suicide. Some reject their giftedness because it is too painful. Lots drop out. Most learn to underachieve. Most are systematically suppressed."

Which is why Silverman continues to carry their banner. "They need protection," she says.

Silverman, too, has come under attack -- specifically, for using a version of what some colleagues consider an antiquated IQ test: the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, first developed in 1916. Silverman uses it because it is the only instrument with a high-enough ceiling to assess gifted children whose scores exceed 160. Yet her critics have accused her of being unethical and inflating scores. Some joked that parents could "buy their kid's IQ at the Gifted Development Center."

"I was badmouthed by the whole psychological profession," Silverman says. "In Denver, I was laughed at."

Her work was later validated by the testing company, however. And Silverman has other supporters as well. Barbara Mitchell Hutton, director and founder of the Rocky Mountain Center for the Gifted and Creative in Boulder, says Silverman has "really moved the thinking forward," particularly in raising awareness about the problems of gifted girls and fighting those who equate giftedness with achievement.

"She isn't afraid to speak truth to power," Hutton says. "And that's very intimidating to a lot of people in education and people who do counseling. Linda has challenged us."

Nancy Golon's two sons, ages six and eight, have tested within the gifted range. Before she met Silverman, Golon spent many frustrating hours trying to figure out why her perfectionist son had to have his sandwich cut in a certain way, consoling the other son when he returned from preschool, crying because he was the only one who could read.

"She's my savior," Golon says of Silverman. "If it weren't for Linda, we'd be a family pulling our hair out. All the doctors scratched their heads trying to figure them out, and it wasn't until we had them tested at the Gifted Development Center that we were able to understand and say, 'Oh, this is normal for our kids. We're not wacko parents.' She has put so much of our lives at peace."

According to Marlo Payne Rice, psychologist and director of the Brideun School for Exceptional Children in Lafayette, Silverman helped educators see giftedness in new ways. "We're not talking about average kids who do it faster, but a whole different type of kid," Rice says. "These are kids as far from the norm as profoundly retarded kids are. Linda is the first one who helped me see that."

Just as important, adds Rebecca Odoardi, director of the gifted and talented programs for the Davis school district near Salt Lake City, Silverman not only opens her heart to children and parents, but to educators as well. "Sometimes in this field, it can be so lonely," Odoardi says. "I can call

her any time, and she'll give me the best advice and we can speak heart to heart. She is absolutely magical."

Leta Hollingworth was the first educator to counsel gifted children, the first to study their emotional and social development. She taught the original gifted-education course in 1922 and initiated an experimental program for gifted learners.

Silverman calls Hollingworth "my matron saint. Everyone who has been touched by her feels the immense power of her personality and wisdom," she says. "We're connected. Deeply and spiritually."

One night in 1983, Silverman was working late in her home office, writing an article on perfectionism. Suddenly she had a feeling "like someone was using my mind." A word kept popping up: "Crucible."

That's odd, she remembers thinking. "Crucible" is a very Christian word. And she's Jewish. It wasn't part of her everyday vocabulary. She wasn't even sure what it meant. Yet there it was: "Crucible."

"My husband is the channeler. I'm not," she thought. "I'm not going there."

She flicked off her computer.

A week later, she resumed work on the article. And it happened again. But this time, an entire sentence emerged: "The pursuit of excellence is a personal journey into higher realms of existence, a journey that enriches the self and the world through its bounty. It is the crucible that purifies the spirit, the manifestation of life's longing for evolution."

"It had come out of my fingers. It was on my screen. And I had no idea where it came from," she says. "But it was powerful. I'm good, but I'm not that good."

Later, she asked a friend, Kathi Kearney, a giftedness consultant and "Hollingworth fanatic," to read the passage. "That sounds a lot like Leta," Kearney told her.

"That was the first time I felt the depth of the connection between us," Silverman recalls. "Those were her words, not mine. She was speaking through me."

Even though it occasionally inspires snickering in professional circles, Silverman embraces her spirituality, which she believes helps her better understand gifted children.

"I see a bright, beautiful shining light in these children, and I respond to that energy," she says. "They are magical. I'm able to see and experience who they really are. And I think it's because of my spirituality, not my intelligence. I've never felt anywhere near as intelligent as the majority of the kids I've worked with. I've never felt, 'My God, I don't know as much as the kids I'm teaching.' That's never been an issue. I'm very child-centered. I relate to them person to person, soul to soul, not adult to child. I respect them. I value them. I listen to them."

What they say often astounds her. A nine-year-old girl asks, "How do we know we're not part of someone else's dream?" A seven-year-old boy wonders, "Is this going to be the year I learn something new?" A three-year-old girl grappling to understand death and dying proclaims, "People become angels just like caterpillars become butterflies."

"This is more than just intelligence," Silverman says. "It's an obvious spirituality, consciousness, emotional awareness and zeal to make a difference. They feel the injustice in the world and are determined to do something about it."

One nine-year-old boy was so moved by the plight of the homeless that he picked fruit and vegetables, sold them and donated the money to shelters. Another eleven-year-old boy spearheaded an international anti-violence campaign from his home computer. Still another gifted teenager launched a fundraising campaign to build a monument to a cellist who played for 22 days straight during the bombing in Sarajevo.

"Yes, these children inhabit nine-year-old bodies and twelve-year-old bodies, but they are not nine and twelve," Silverman says. "The knowledge. The awareness. So much awareness. Leta Hollingworth said they were 'old heads on new shoulders.' It's my feeling that these kids are angels. They have incredible wisdom. We need to learn from them."

When Justin Chapman was a baby, the only way his mother could quiet her little bundle of energy was by reading to him. So she read to him until she was hoarse, anything and everything from *Little House on the Prairie* to adventure stories. To squeeze in a little study time, Elizabeth would even read from her college textbooks. No matter the subject, Justin sat quietly, listening intently.

When he could walk, Elizabeth took Justin to class with her. He'd bring his magnetic drawing board and pretend to take notes. He'd listen to the professor. And when the class took an exam, he meticulously colored in the test bubbles with crayons.

During one quiz, Justin noticed that the students were filling in only one bubble by each question, and he asked his mother why. "Because there is only one right answer," she said.

Justin pondered that for a while, then began filling in one bubble at a time. When he finished, the pajama-clad toddler padded up to the teacher and handed in the exam. The professor patted him on the head and smiled.

Since most of his students hadn't finished, the professor killed time by grading the toddler's paper. After scanning the quiz, his jaw dropped. Justin, at age two, had scored a 76 on a college-level behavioral-modification quiz.

"I read the questions," the boy explained.

That was how Elizabeth learned he could read.

Justin was born on July 17, 1993, in Rochester, New York. He is Elizabeth's only child; she never married his father, who lives in North Carolina.

Early on, Elizabeth knew her son was special. He began talking at four months, walking at eight months, tidying the house at a year. He was very independent, too, his mother recalls, always wanting to dress himself and make his own meals. He was neat and orderly as well, and would get upset if unwashed dishes filled the sink. And he loved exploring.

"I had a backpack, and I'd take him different places to see things," Elizabeth recalls. "A museum, a concert or a park. Even the laundromat or the grocery store. He had to be learning something. It got to the point where he'd literally wait by the door for me."

When Justin was eleven months old, she enrolled him in a Montessori school. Even though he zipped through the toddler programs, Elizabeth had to fight to get him placed with older children. But eventually he got bored of that, too. When Justin was three, she slipped him into kindergarten by leaving the year of his birth off his application. But even kindergarten wasn't enough to keep him occupied. Justin was light years ahead of the basic word games, counting exercises and playtime activities that enthralled his classmates. He already played the violin and the piano and competed in chess tournaments. When the class spent nearly a week searching for Eeyore's tail, Justin was ready to leave. And he did, as soon as kindergarten officials discovered his true age.

Elizabeth then tried to enroll him in elementary school -- Justin had tested to the eight-year-old level -- but New York law prohibited anyone from starting a formal education until age five. So she began home-schooling her boy, who soaked up the material, completing an entire grade in four months. When Justin turned five, Elizabeth tried traditional school again -- but administrators who'd said they would place Justin according to test scores balked after discovering that these scores put him at the ninth-grade level.

Elizabeth and Justin resumed home schooling. But now Justin was taking the lead, selecting his own courses, writing his own education plan. His thirst for knowledge was insatiable. He once compared it to the robot in the movie *Short Circuit*, which demanded: "More input. More input." The only way his mother could keep up was to continually buy and sell used curriculum online. And still, Justin spent hours conducting his own research and special-ordering more material.

"My mom would get the idea that I needed more to do when the mailboxes were overflowing," he once wrote.

While others his age were entering the first grade, Justin audited a physics course at the University of Rochester in New York; he'd already taken a high school correspondence classes through Cambridge Academy in Florida and done courses through Stanford University's gifted-education network.

By age seven, he was a full-time college student at Rochester. Because Justin was a minor, Elizabeth accompanied him to campus, lugging his books, opening heavy doors, walking twenty paces behind her mortified son. During lectures, Justin made her wait in the library until he rang her cell phone.

"He pretended I didn't exist," she says.

Justin thrived at college: writing papers on Babylonian creation myths, discussing string theory, dragging his mother to a human-rights "camp-in." He also played pool, video games and Ultimate Frisbee with older students, who had no problem accepting him. "I am in an environment where there is serious learning and serious fun," wrote Justin, whose education fees are usually waived or financed through scholarships.

In April 2000, Justin became a syndicated columnist for the Paradigm news service. His weekly column, "The Justin Report," explores everything from world peace to "What is a bored student to do?" to surviving family road trips.

"Each day I find myself discovering my own path through uncharted territory," he wrote in one column published this past March in the *Christian Science Monitor*. "Everyone and everything in the world should be appreciated and has a lesson to teach, if you take the time to listen. I follow not the 'normal' code of life. I have the courage to be me."

Justin's most ambitious effort is Project FAD: Fix Age Discrimination, which he launched in December 1999. The idea began as an assignment for a class on youth and government but soon blossomed into a full-blown movement based upon the obstacles he'd encountered. FAD's professed goals: eliminate the minimum voting age; place children in grades according to ability, not birthdate; establish a worldwide system of self-paced education; pass laws that include age as a form of discrimination.

Justin has written every member of Congress and discussed his ideas with Hillary Clinton and New York Governor George Pataki. By year's end, he hopes the project will become a nonprofit organization.

Justin and Elizabeth moved to Denver this summer so that Justin could attend the Brideun School for Exceptional Children in Lafayette. By the time he turned eight in July, Justin had written two books, *Education Solutions to the New Millennium* and *It's Okay to Be Gifted*. He's studying twelve languages. He'd presented lectures. His greatest influences are Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King Jr. and Eleanor Roosevelt, who made what's become among his favorite statements: "One of the most important things for young people to learn is the difficult art of being at home in the world. Ahead of them lies the gigantic but infinitely rewarding task of learning to know and understand other peoples, and the equally difficult task of helping other peoples to know them."

Despite Justin's impressive resumé, Elizabeth says her son spends "90 percent of the time doing kid stuff." That includes fooling around with Play-Doh, Legos and puzzles, Rollerblading, watching Disney movies, camping, doing tae kwon do and participating in Boy Scouts. And no matter how hard he studies, Justin makes time to explore museums, visit parks and jump over rain puddles. Mostly, though, he loves to swim. One day Justin hopes to set a world record in the 1500-meter freestyle.

"When you see him, you can see he's a kid," Elizabeth says. "His main thing is to keep having fun and to keep learning. He doesn't see himself as a genius. He's just Justin."

And like any other eight-year-old, Justin is shackled with household chores, including cleaning his room, doing laundry and washing dishes.

"Oh, he lost that childhood sense of orderliness really fast," his mother says. "Just because he's a little more academically advanced doesn't exclude him from chores."

Elizabeth tries not to become overwhelmed by her son's abilities and to keep in mind that he's still a boy. Scholastics are important, she says, but so is pretending to be a spy on the playground, wrestling with his grandpa and attending church group. "The academics will take care of themselves," she says. "He will find a way to learn. It's important to provide him with a balance."

At times, that can be difficult. Justin has a central auditory processing disorder that makes it hard for him to understand spoken language. He also suffers from allergies and a sensory integration problem that makes his skin so sensitive that he often cannot walk in bare feet. Caring for him is a full-time job -- but one Elizabeth welcomes.

"I just try to let Justin follow his interests and goals," she says. "Follow the lead of the child. They'll let you know. Just try and make opportunities available."

And when opportunities don't knock, Justin has another favorite saying: "Build a door."

It began as an Internet affair, Silverman says. She heard about Justin Chapman two years ago, after a friend discovered the boy's Web site, called Knowledge Quest, which he crafted one night without his mother's permission. The elaborate site (JustinChapman.com) features an IQ chart, Justin's best swim times, sample columns, inspirational songs, a list of intellectual virtues and his favorite quotations.

Silverman was "bowled over," she remembers. Before long, she and Justin were engaging in "heavy-duty, profound and abstract" conversations about reincarnation and the origins of intelligence. Silverman was so charmed by Justin that her husband practically rolled his eyes whenever she emerged from another e-mail session with the kid who'd calculated his mother's taxes at age five. "Okay," Hilton would joke. "What wonderful thing did Justin say today?"

"He just blew my mind," Silverman says. "His sense of humor. The questions he asked. The way his mind worked. I've never seen anything like it."

After administering Justin's IQ test last year, she was forced to re-evaluate much of what she knew about giftedness. At six and a half, Justin had the mind of a person more than three times his age -- and his score might have been even higher, but he was so excited about the test that he'd barely slept the previous two nights. With proper sleep and proper auditory processing, "there's no telling how high he could go," she says. "I couldn't figure out how he knew what he knew. I didn't know intelligence like that was possible. I have no explanation."

But she does know that Justin brought magic into her life at a time when she badly needed some. The Silvermans have always struggled financially, and times are particularly tight at the center these days. So Silverman and Justin attend conferences together and, when time permits, "just hang out," she says. One recent afternoon, Justin was just hanging out in Silverman's living room, rolling around on a large exercise ball, poking his head into her study to announce that he was searching for Shadow, his stuffed dog. Silverman smiled at Justin as though he were her own grandchild.

"I don't know what the connection is," she says. "But it's powerful. It seems like we've known each other many lifetimes."

Silverman found a sponsor to help pay the Chapmans' household expenses; she introduced them to other gifted advocates. "She's gone way beyond the call of duty," Elizabeth says. "She's been a *huge* help. She keeps things in perspective. She shines a whole new light on things."

On his Web site, Justin has dedicated a song to Silverman: "Because You Loved Me." The site includes photos of them jumping on a trampoline, riding in a wagon, laughing their heads off. When he has nightmares, he often discusses them with Silverman first, Elizabeth second. And when he has a particularly difficult problem to unravel, he seeks Silverman's advice.

"She never tells him what he should do," Elizabeth says. "She asks the right questions in the right way so he is able to find his own solutions."

Silverman introduced Justin to Harry Potter, and today his bedroom is crammed with Harry Potter posters, puzzles, bedspreads and pillowcases. "He identifies with Harry Potter," Elizabeth says. "He says people stare at Harry Potter because of the scar on his forehead, and everyone stares at him because of what he's doing."

For her part, Silverman keeps everything Justin has given her: a batch of cookies that spells "Thanks," a Christmas book, those e-mails.

Elizabeth says Silverman's friendship with Justin is just another example of how she supports gifted children with her entire "body and soul." But Silverman has an even simpler explanation: "We love each other."

As another school year begins, Linda Silverman's phone has been ringing off the hook. She's testing more and more children, speaking her mind as undiplomatically as ever.

Last spring, eleven-year-old Julia Musser was dropped midway through a course at Red Rocks Community College because she was too young -- even though the sixth-grader, who reads at college level, had spoken to the instructor. School authorities invoked a state law prohibiting students under sixteen from enrolling at a community college.

"That's blatant age discrimination," Silverman says. "The college itself has a policy saying it cannot discriminate based upon age. We are more willing to hold on to our rules than to look at individual differences and really see what an individual child needs. Why don't we value and nurture our most advanced children? Why do we continuously keep them down? That's the great mystery."

She continues to seek her own answers. Recently, she asked one boy to close his eyes, contact his higher self and contemplate an age when he might be ready for college. The boy thought a moment, shook his head and told her that all he could see was a number twelve. According to his evaluations, that might be just the right age. "I'm surprising myself," Silverman says. "Before, I never would have thought to do that. Now I'm beginning to think that if you ask these children, they know their own answers."

Silverman is also reaching out more to adults. Not long ago, a man arrived at her office seeking advice. A gifted child who'd been rushed from grade to grade, he was still deeply troubled by the experience. He told Silverman he'd spent his life believing there was something terribly wrong with him.

Silverman listened quietly to the man, who had a profound spiritual awareness. Then she told him she could see nothing wrong with him at all -- in fact, she could only see something terribly right. And the man replied: "Thank you for existing. It has taken me forty years to find someone who can understand all that I am. Now I don't feel so alone."