

## Misericordia University SLP student works to help people with communication disorders ‘find the voice they deserve’

*Graduate student draws inspiration for career from childhood friend who was born with a cleft palate*

DALLAS, Pa. — Mary Gulotta '14 of Trucksville, Pa., has seen firsthand the enormous toll a communication disorder and the bullying and teasing associated with it can have on an individual. It's one of the reasons she chose to major in speech-language pathology at Misericordia University, so she could help others – like her best friend from high school – find the voice they all deserve.

Throughout her high school years, Gulotta saw how her best friend struggled with his communication disorder – the result of being born with a cleft palate. Post-surgery, her close friend still spoke with a hypernasal voice and nasal emission. By the time they reached high school, he was uneasy when he had to speak in public. At times, he relied on others to speak for him, including Gulotta.

“He used to share with me the reactions he constantly received from people about his voice and mentioned to me that these reactions made him insecure,” says the daughter of Steven and Linda Gulotta. “As a result, he limited his talking. Because of the issues he had with speaking in public, he would often ask me to speak for him when we were together – whether it was flagging down a person in a store or ordering in a restaurant.

“I recognized the impact that his voice had on him personally, his confidence, and his self-esteem,” Gulotta adds.

Tragically, Gulotta's close friend lost his life during her junior year of college in 2012. “I was left with only letters and poems he had written in the last week of his life that depicted how insecure he was,” says Gulotta, who hopes to raise awareness about how bullying affects people by sharing their story. “After this devastating blow of losing my best friend, I channeled my sadness into an even greater resolve to be able to give people a voice and the ability to communicate.”

Gulotta's commitment to her field of study and to people with communication disorders cannot be questioned. She was recently awarded the 2013 Von Drach Memorial Scholarship by the Pennsylvania Speech-Language-Hearing Association (PSHA) at the 54<sup>th</sup> annual convention in Harrisburg, Pa., in April. The 2013 award marks the sixth straight year a Misericordia University SLP student has received the prestigious \$1,000 scholarship, which is awarded annually to an outstanding student from one of Pennsylvania's 14 SLP schools in honor of Dr. Robert Von Drach. It is given to a student who exhibits strong leadership abilities, outstanding academic performance, exceptional clinical skills and scholarship within the profession.

At Misericordia, Gulotta has been a member of the department's National Student Speech-Language-Hearing Association (NSSLHA) since 2009 and the Pennsylvania Speech-Language-Hearing Association NSSLHA Chapter since 2009. She has also maintained a 4.0 grade point average in her academic studies, while also gaining clinical experience at the Misericordia University Speech-Language and Hearing Center on campus and at the Wyoming Valley Children's Association in Forty Fort, Pa., where she received real-world clinical experience working with children with special needs, developmental delays, hearing impairment, autism spectrum disorders, and multiple disabilities.

"A hallmark of Mary's work is that she is an exceptional student who performs in the top 1 percent of my class in all her assignments and academic performance," says Glen Tellis, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Speech-Language Pathology at Misericordia University and interim dean of the College of Health Sciences. "She has a keen intellect and it is apparent from her insights that she goes beyond the textbook to enlighten her peers and to seek clarification of important concepts.

"In my graduate fluency class, Mary developed a stuttering treatment game that incorporated various aspects of stuttering. We plan to test this game in our clinic (the Speech-Language and Hearing Center) with children who stutter. Mary once mentioned to me, 'I was not satisfied with the games that were available for young children so I decided to design one myself,'" Dr. Tellis adds.

Gulotta also has participated in numerous research projects with her mentor, Dr. Tellis, and presented their findings at state and national conferences. She is currently conducting a groundbreaking study with Dr. Tellis and researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Physics and Astrophysics. Together, the team is pioneering a novel Near Infrared Spectroscopy and Diffuse Correlation Spectroscopy approach to determine blood flow and blood concentration changes in the brains of people who stutter and normally fluent speakers.

"The more I become emerged in the field of speech-language pathology, the more my interest for it grows," says Gulotta. "I have come to value clinical treatment as an art form, but realize that I need to merge science into the art form to achieve appropriate clinical results. Each client I receive is a new challenge where individualistic plans are created and implemented to fit both the needs and motivational factors of each client.

"No other experience gives me the joy of knowing that I played a role in helping individuals learn how to communicate effectively," she adds.

The results of this ongoing research have been presented by Gulotta, Dr. Tellis, and their colleagues at the 2012 Pennsylvania Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention in Lancaster, Pa., and at the 2012 American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention in Atlanta, Ga. They also presented their results at the recent 2013 Pennsylvania Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention in Harrisburg, Pa.

The paper also has been submitted for consideration to the 2013 American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention and World Fluency Conference.

Gulotta also was accepted recently to Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center for an adult fieldwork placement for the fall semester.

“The experiences I have gained at Misericordia University have far surpassed my expectations and I have never doubted that I chose the perfect career path,” Gulotta shares. “I have been given the ability to finally help those like my best friend in high school overcome their communication disorder and find the voice they deserve.”



Caption:

Mary Gulotta, a speech-language pathology major at Misericordia University, was recently awarded the 2013 Von Drach Memorial Scholarship by the Pennsylvania Speech-Language-Hearing Association at the 54<sup>th</sup> annual convention in Harrisburg, Pa., in April.

Mary Gulotta, a speech-language pathology major at Misericordia University, poses with her professor and mentor, Dr. Glen Tellis, professor and chair of the Department of Speech-Language Pathology, after being awarded the 2013 Von Drach Memorial Scholarship by the Pennsylvania Speech-Language-Hearing Association at the 54<sup>th</sup> annual convention in Harrisburg, Pa., in April.