

# MOUNTAIN OUTLAW

SUMMER 2017

**MAX  
BAUCUS**  
*finally walks home*

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Yellowstone  
embraces China

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**NICARAGUA**  
Discovering 'Tranquilo'



## WHITEWATER REBIRTH

MIDDLE FORK  
METAMORPHOSIS

KAYAKING WITH  
WOUNDED VETERANS

# TO FIND A VOICE

FOR MOST OF HIS LIFE, 14-YEAR-OLD PAYAM KHOSRAVI HAD A VERY POWERFUL MESSAGE WITHOUT A WAY TO SHARE IT. HIS NAME, IN FARSI, MEANS “MESSAGE.” ■ BY AMANDA EGGERT

Parisa Khosravi spent nearly three decades covering major world events, closing her career with CNN as the network’s head of international newsgathering. She directed coverage of the Arab Spring, the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the tsunami in Japan, among other breaking news stories. The most challenging responsibility she’s undertaken, however, wasn’t in a war zone or at ground zero of a natural disaster, but at home.

Giving a voice to the voiceless was Khosravi’s joy and passion as a journalist. During a January 28 TEDx event in Big Sky, she gave voice to someone very close to her: her son, whom she calls her “ultimate teacher in life.”

Khosravi, a U.S. citizen who moved with her family from Iran to Chicago in 1979, became concerned when her only child Payam started disengaging and remained silent leading into his second birthday. Diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder by age 3, Payam Khosravi was unable to express himself fully for more than a decade.

Payam is verbally limited to just a few basic words, which left Parisa with little information about what her kind and gentle son—she thinks of him as “my little Buddha”—was thinking or feeling.

At one point, Payam worked with dozens of teachers and educational therapists per week as part of his mother’s commitment to help him meet his full potential. A given day might include swimming, speech, music therapy or horseback riding. “You name it, he did it,” Parisa said. “He’s the hardest-working person I know.”

Then, in a turn of events Parisa calls serendipitous, Payam was introduced to the Rapid Prompting Method at age 14. RPM helps nonverbal individuals share their thoughts letter-by-letter on an alphabet board. “From the very first session, Payam started showing

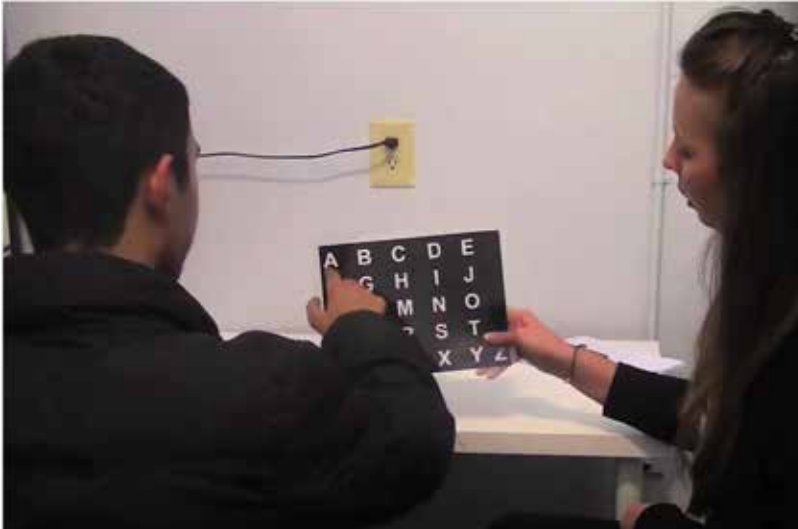


us that he understood everything and comprehended everything that [his teacher] was reading to him,” Parisa said. “Finally, finally we were getting a glimpse inside his thoughts.”

Once he had the means to unlock his inner world, Payam revealed a depth of compassion that lives up to his given name and his mother’s little Buddha characterization. His letter board writings appear below in all caps.

“I WANT TO THANK EVERYONE WHO SEES THIS AND BEGINS TO SHIFT THEIR PERSPECTIVE TO HAVE MORE BELIEF IN ALL OF HUMANITY,” Payam wrote during an RPM session before the Big Sky event.

**“ DESERVING THE WORLD SHOULD NOT BE GRANTED TO ONLY THOSE WITH RESOURCES, BUT INSTEAD TO EVERY PERSON THAT EXISTS.”**



**Left:** Parisa Khosravi speaks at the inaugural TEDxBigSky on January 28, 2017.

**PHOTO BY WES OVERVOLD**

**Right:** Parisa's son Payam uses an alphabet board to spell out his thoughts, letter by letter.

The letter board writings of Payam Khosravi appear in all caps in the text of the story.

“How many times have we been told not to judge a book by its cover?” Parisa asked the TEDx audience, the words catching in her throat. “How often do we fail and completely judge others based on what we think is normal?”

Rich Addicks, a friend of the Khosravi family, describes their story as “almost cosmic” in scale, yet Payam nearly missed experiencing the full gravity of its first public presentation that day in January.

Payam watched his mom deliver her talk during a January 27 dress rehearsal. The following day he attended TEDxBigSky to watch the other speakers, but planned to leave the room before his mother presented their story to a full house. Just before Parisa stepped on stage, Payam’s teacher asked one last time if he wanted to stay.

He did, and describes the decision as one of the best he’s ever made. Parisa didn’t know Payam stayed until after she finished speaking.

“For him to witness first-hand the appreciation, the acknowledgement of the audience ... was incredible,” Parisa says. “I could have never described it to him appropriately or fully.”

Back home in Atlanta, Georgia, at the close of a February 22 lesson about Ellis Island, Payam wrote the following to his teacher: “JESS I AM READY TO ENJOY THIS MOMENT OF GRATITUDE WITH YOU. RIGHT NOW I AM

OVERWHELMED WITH EMOTION SINCE EVERYONE HAS BEEN ABLE TO SEE THE TED TALK AND MY STORY. THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING ME TO DO THIS. EVERYONE DESERVES TO HAVE THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES MY GOOD FORTUNE HAS GRANTED ME. DESERVING THE WORLD SHOULD NOT BE GRANTED TO ONLY THOSE WITH RESOURCES, BUT INSTEAD TO EVERY PERSON THAT EXISTS.”

Three months after the TEDx event—during April’s Autism Awareness Month—Parisa spoke about the repercussions generated by the talk, titled “The Power of Finding Your Voice.”

“It’s gone past our borders,” Parisa says. “I’ve heard from people from Australia, South Africa, India, the Middle East, Europe.” Some people contacted her to learn more about the alphabet board method. Others simply want to share how Payam’s message has shifted their perspective.

The YouTube video of “The Power of Finding Your Voice” has nearly 20,000 views. One viewer described Payam as “a prophet of our time.” Another wrote, “I will never look at another person with autism again without remembering this talk and silencing my initial judgment. I will remember the wisdom and love that Payam demonstrated after years without being able to communicate and I will know that a loving, caring

and intelligent person lives inside ...”

Parisa describes Payam as a philosopher interested in the bigger questions of life. “The level of books we read to him now, they’re not only age appropriate, they’re much more thought provoking,” she says. Payam enjoys learning about space, the environment and history, and he’s deeply interested in the experience of others.

He also loves music, riding his bike and breathing fresh air in the outdoors. “I think he’s a Montana kid,” Parisa says.

During their January visit, Parisa and Payam went snowshoeing and spent a clear, cold day in Yellowstone National Park. They visited the Old Faithful geyser, a place whose name holds profound significance for them both.

To avoid disappointment, Parisa set low expectations for RPM. It wasn’t until she observed Payam’s eighth alphabet board session, one about geysers, that she allowed herself to absorb the momentous shift in their ability to communicate, and recognize what had been there all along.

It just needed a key. 🐾