Three Canadians on what it's like to be an adult with ADHD

"I Never Felt Like I Belonged"

BY LISA BENDALL

WITHIN 30 SECONDS of walking in the door, Doug Lawrie, 48, can cause chaos in his household. "I offer an opinion or suggestion without thinking before I speak," says the father of two, who was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in adulthood. That condition affects his parenting choices: his snap decisions cause conflict with his kids; invariably, his wife, Susan, is left playing peacemaker.

People with ADHD, like Lawrie, experience extreme levels of impulsivity, distractibility or forgetfulness that can interfere with relationships, work and finances. They may have subtle differences that cause inefficiency in areas of the brain that are involved in cognitive tasks like paying attention and planning. This makes it difficult to focus and complete tasks. It's widely accepted that the disorder affects at least one in 22 adults.

ADHD runs in families, but it may have non-genetic causes, as well. Most adults with the condition today have never been diagnosed, though they've likely had it since childhood. Keith Gelhorn, who teaches at ADDvocacy ADHD and Life Skills Coaching in Dartmouth, N.S., says they typically blame themselves for a string of "failures": financial problems, lost jobs, rocky marriages.

"They come in saying, 'My life's a mess. What's wrong with me?'" says Harpreet Aulakh, a Halifax psychologist who treats adults with the condition. Patients often approach her for help with depression or anxiety (about 85 per cent of adults with ADHD have another mental-health issue). They aren't always aware they have the disorder, since symptoms can be significantly different from those present in childhood: an impulsive kid may have trouble waiting his turn; an older person might take risks speeding.

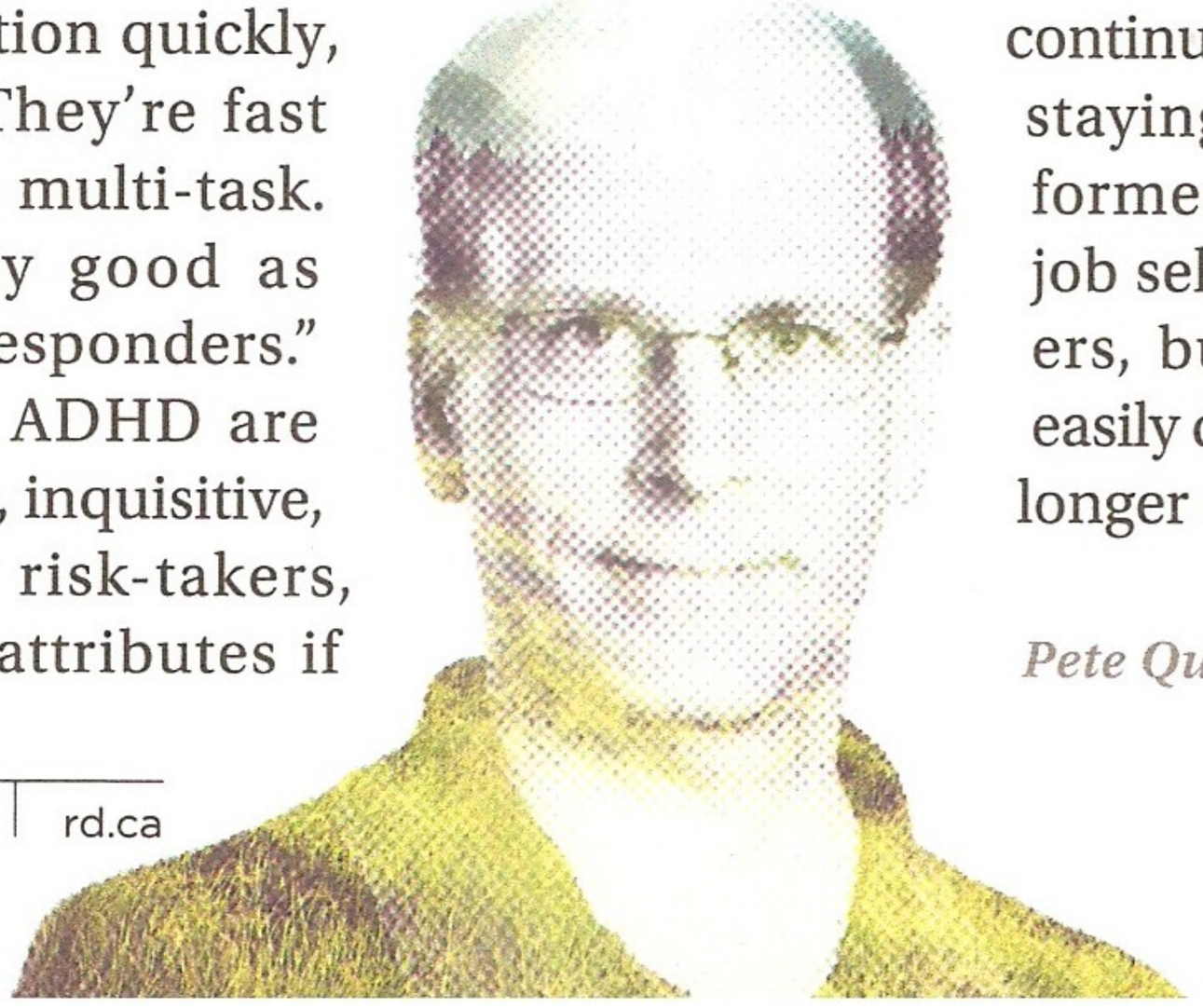
As Aulakh points out, the condition can be an asset for those who have it. "When others can't process information quickly, they excel. They're fast and they can multi-task. They're very good as emergency responders." People with ADHD are often creative, inquisitive, high-energy risk-takers, all enviable attributes if you're an entrepreneur, inventor or entertainer. The list of high-profile folks with the condition includes Canadian comedian Russell Peters, Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps and Kinko's founder Paul Orfalea.

The biggest challenge may be the stigma that people with ADHD often face. Their symptoms are blamed on laziness or immaturity rather than a proven brain disorder. But with the right tools, adults across Canada with ADHD are living happy, successful lives. Here are three of their stories.

Pete Quily

Almost 20 years ago, a display at the library caught Pete Quily's eye. A local group had assembled a collection of books on ADHD and listed common adult symptoms, such as forgetting appointments, difficulty organizing tasks and making careless mistakes. Quily, who lives in Vancouver, recalls thinking, "My God, that's me."

Although he'd done well in school, he'd struggled to complete assignments on time. University work was stressful. As an adult, he continued to have difficulty staying focused. He performed well enough at a job selling Apple computers, but because he was easily distracted, tasks took longer or were forgotten.



Pete Quily

He didn't understand why he had trouble doing things everyone else seemed to find simple—until he saw that book display. "It was an explanation, and it was such a relief," he says. A doctor confirmed the diagnosis, and Quily began researching ways to manage his condition. Still, he wondered why someone hadn't figure this out for him earlier. "I was angry that no one had spotted it."

Now in his early 50s, Quily has dedicated himself to learning everything he can about his condition. "One of the advantages of ADHD is curiosity," he says. "If we're interested, we can focus for hours, better than anyone in the room." As his understanding deepened, Quily began training to become an ADHD coach, a process that included a course with Coaches Training Institute. (The profession is not regulated, and only a few Canadians specialize in it.)

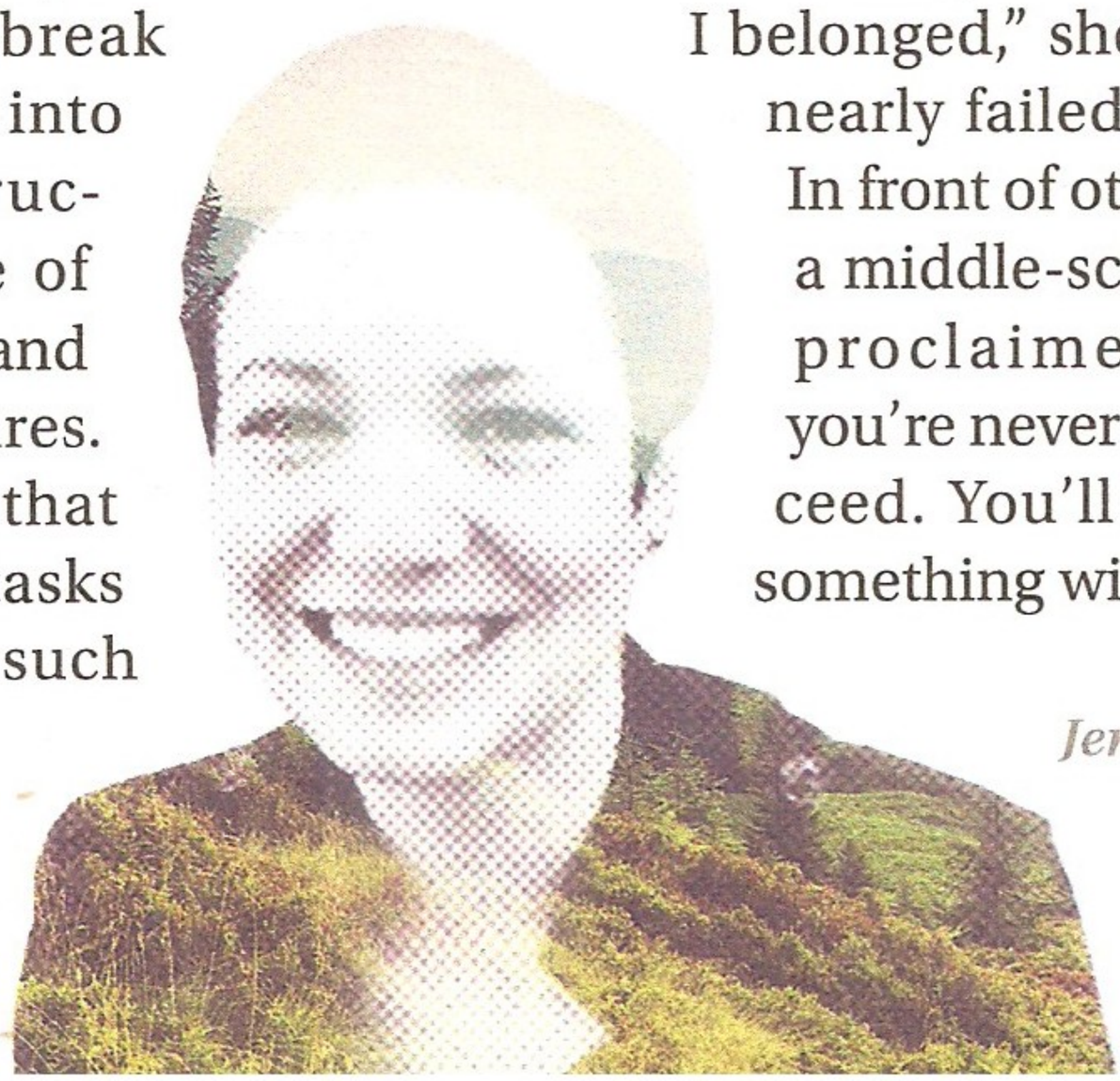
Quily now runs a support group and offers telephone coaching. To date, he's worked with lawyers, doctors, professors and engineers, whom he's taught to break down their to-do lists into steps with clear instructions and an estimate of exactly how much time and energy each item requires. He also recommends that clients outsource the tasks they keep putting off, such as paperwork.

"It's a challenging condition but very treatable," says Quily, who tries to take his own advice every day. He's learned ADHD brings with it a great many rewards, and believes increased awareness of this would help many adults live better lives. "Many people refuse to seek a diagnosis because it's viewed as solely negative."

Jenna Vandal

In the program she coordinated for indigenous girls in Winnipeg, Jenna Vandal taught life skills such as cooking, self-defence and using public transit. "I was patient when they didn't listen," says the 30-year-old, who is Métis and Anishinaabe. "I didn't yell at them the way I was yelled at."

As a girl, Vandal couldn't sit still, concentrate on homework or make friends easily. She was diagnosed with ADHD at age eight, but nobody knew how to support her in school. She tried meds, but stopped taking them when she developed tics and headaches. She'd dance on her desk to release energy. "I never felt like I belonged," she recalls. She nearly failed her classes. In front of other students, a middle-school teacher proclaimed, "Jenna, you're never going to succeed. You'll never make something with your life."



Jenna Vandal

In her early 20s, Vandal started devouring documentaries about the earth. "Every question led to 10 more, and the amount of learning I was doing was snowballing." Her interest piqued, she went on to take university courses in environmental studies and native studies at the University of Manitoba, getting stellar grades that helped her earn scholarships and bursaries. "If I had believed the teachers who told me I'd fail, I probably would've failed," she says. "But it made me want to prove them wrong."

Today, Vandal's biggest challenges are time management and impulsive decisions. Like other adults with ADHD, her thoughts skip around quickly, making it tricky to complete a task or consider the long-term consequences of her actions. But as she gets older, she experiments with new strategies. "I've found that natural movement helps. A nice long walk focuses my mind, and I can plan more." Vandal also embraced camping a few years ago and has developed a keen interest in nature. She fantasizes about an educational system that fully incorporates the outdoors, with students taking classes in the bush, learning from elders, climbing trees and getting dirty.

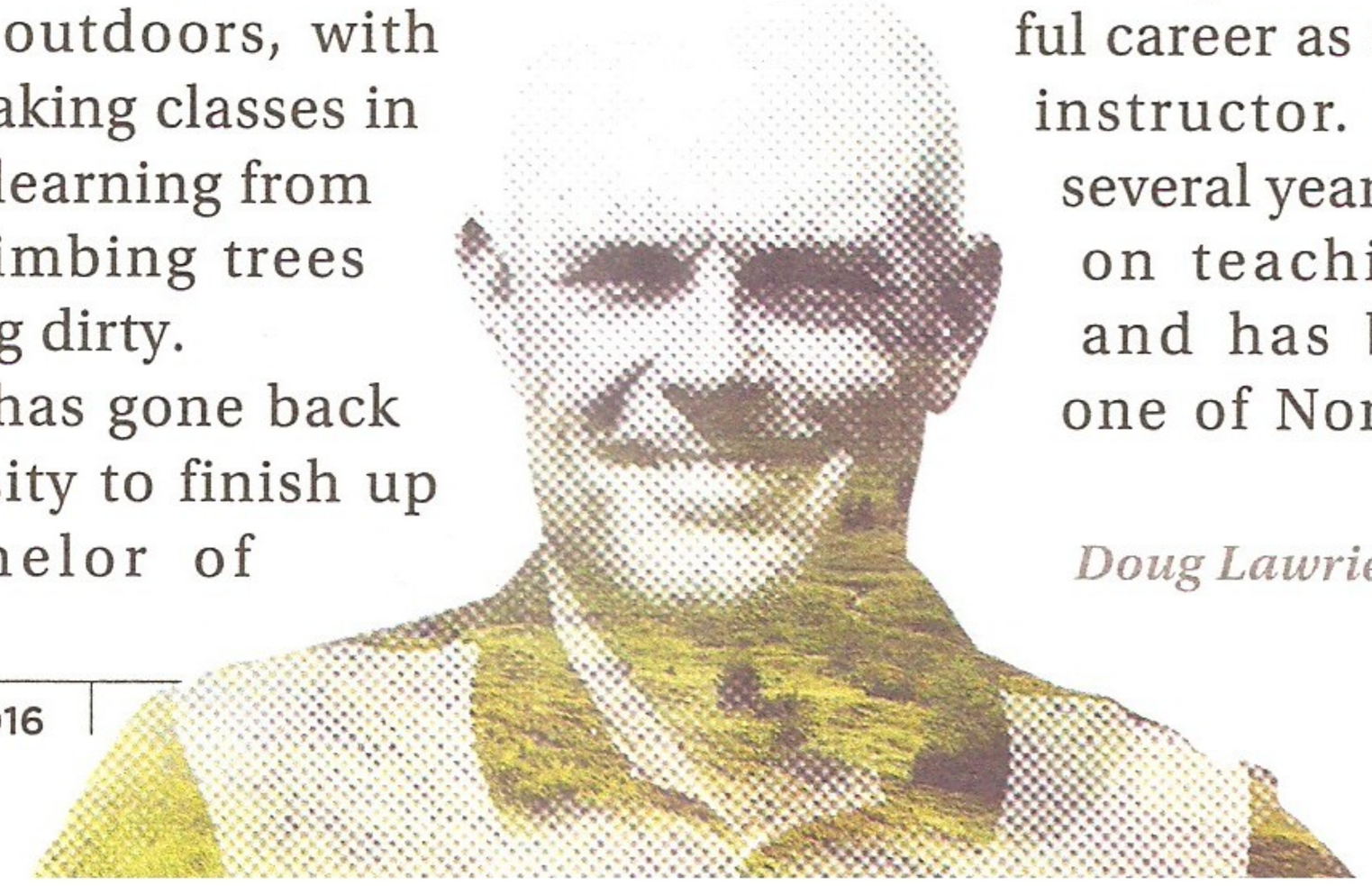
Vandal has gone back to university to finish up her bachelor of environmental studies; she wants to become an urban planner with a focus on green building. "People with ADHD are blessed with intense passion," she says. "I would tell others, 'Strive to explore as much as you can about life, because you will find your calling somewhere, and you can make your own change in that way.'"

Doug Lawrie

Like many adults, Doug Lawrie of Burlington, Ont., found out he had ADHD only after his son, Alex, now 13, was diagnosed at the age of five. (Daughter Abbie, 18, was diagnosed several years later.) Alex's psychiatrist gave Lawrie a screening checklist for adults, and almost every symptom rang true. As a child, he'd been picked on for his impulsive outbursts and switched schools in Grade 7.

Around the same age, he discovered sports had a calming effect. "I would go outside in March and shoot baskets for three hours in the freezing cold," Lawrie says. "It was my coping strategy. My brain craved an outlet."

Lawrie eventually spun his love of sports into a successful career as a golf pro and instructor. For the past several years he's focused on teaching children and has been named one of North America's



Doug Lawrie

top 50 teachers by the U.S. Kids Golf Foundation for three consecutive years. "Helping kids love a sport they can play for their whole lives is so rewarding," he says.

Creativity is one of Lawrie's professional strengths. He's constantly coming up with new lesson ideas and especially enjoys devising ways to engage students who likely have ADHD themselves. He attributes that quality, as well as his ability to connect with kids, to his condition, which he thinks of as a gift.

For the most part, Lawrie has developed his own coping skills, though he does take a daily medication, Adderall, to help his symptoms, and has read books on ADHD and relationships. He uses time management software and keeps written lists and reminders in notebooks, and often listens to high-energy dance music while he works. "It tunes out everything else so I can start thinking," he says.

Although it's been rocky at times, Lawrie doesn't regret the road that's brought him here, to a loving family and fulfilling job. "I know that I'm *exactly* where I'm meant to be at this precise moment," he says. R

GET SUPPORT

According to Harpreet Aulakh, cognitive behavioural therapy can help people with ADHD put procedures in place tailored to their day-to-day lives. One individual might need strategies to limit impulse buying, while a different person could require help to keep track of her keys.

Drugs such as Adderall and Ritalin can settle racing thoughts by stimulating the part of the brain that isn't working efficiently. A calmer state often makes it easier to learn how to manage the condition. "Medication doesn't treat all the other things that come with ADHD," Aulakh says. "But in combination with other therapy, it can help."

Pete Quily recommends meditation, regular breaks and planning around obstacles in advance. He finds support groups invaluable. "It's nice to meet humans with ADHD," he says, "if for no other reason than to say, 'It's not just me; I'm not a bad person. There are other people with this.'"

BIOLOGY LESSON

Whoever named it *necking* is a poor judge of anatomy.

GROUCHO MARX