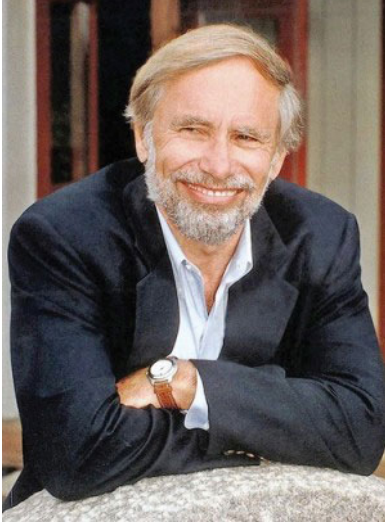


# Memories of Ole Ivar Lovaas

November 01, 2010



Ole Ivar Lovaas

Ole Ivar Lovaas was a trail-blazing scientist/clinician who dedicated himself to improving the lives of children with autism and their families, brought applied behavior analysis (ABA) to the attention of the general public, and inspired many students and colleagues to join his quest for ever-more effective treatments. Born in the small town of Lier, Norway, Lovaas developed an interest in understanding human nature when he experienced the privations of the Nazi occupation of his native country during World War II. Pursuing his academic interest, he immigrated to the United States to attend Luther College on a violin scholarship in 1950. The following year, he entered the doctoral program in clinical psychology at the University of Washington. After completing the program in 1958, he stayed for another three years as a Research Assistant Professor and had the opportunity to work with many of the originators of ABA, notably Sid Bijou, Don Baer, Mont Wolf, Todd Risley, and Jim Sherman.

In 1961, Lovaas accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) where he remained until his retirement in 2003. Shortly after moving to UCLA, he and his colleagues began reporting a seminal series of studies that transformed services for children with autism, who at the time were usually institutionalized and received either psychoanalytic treatment or custodial care. Their studies documented the success of ABA interventions in teaching the children to imitate others, speak in words, and regulate severely aggressive or self-injurious behavior.

Although a follow-up study published in 1973 showed that children's gains often faded after they left treatment, Lovaas continued to work to improve ABA interventions. Together with his many outstanding graduate students (several of whom have contributed to this remembrance), he published a number of important studies that vastly increased the sophistication of these interventions. He also revised the services he provided by delivering interventions in children's homes instead of institutional

settings, involving parents as partners in treatment, and focusing on preschool-age children rather than older children or adolescents.

In 1987, Lovaas published, “Behavioral Treatment and Normal Educational and Intellectual Functioning in Young Autistic Children” in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. In this article, he reported that children with autism who received ABA intervention achieved much better outcomes than similar children who received little or none of the intervention. Moreover, he boldly asserted that 9 of the 19 children in the ABA group became “normal-functioning” and possibly even recovered. Subsequently, he co-authored a long-term follow-up study and two replication studies that confirmed the efficacy of this intervention, and he obtained grant funding to support replications by other investigators.

Despite all of his extraordinary achievements, Lovaas was, as several contributors point out, controversial both professionally and personally. For example, on rare occasions, especially in the 1960s, he used contingent aversives such as mild electric shock to reduce life-threatening self-injurious behaviors that some children with autism displayed. He painstakingly collected data to show that the aversives eliminated such behaviors quickly, but critics persisted in accusing him of being reckless and unfeeling. He was also capable of criticizing students and colleagues bluntly, and he could make statements that struck some listeners as hilarious but that others found to be offensive or outlandish. Nevertheless, the contributors all describe an exuberant, dedicated, brave, and gifted man.

I met Lovaas when I started graduate school in 1983. My Master’s thesis involved the pre-treatment behavior observations for his 1987 study. I was amazed when I saw how much the children had improved between these observations and the time I got to know them. As a therapist in Lovaas’s clinic, I had the immense privilege of following new children as they gradually made similar progress. Lovaas himself was inspirational — outgoing, gregarious, excited about everything he did, full of new research ideas, and eager to jump in and work with children with autism. He was also exceptionally generous. For example, he put me on the payroll during an illness that otherwise would have required me to go on disability, made it possible for me to conduct a randomized clinical trial in his clinic (with Annette Groen and Jacquie Wynn), and encouraged me to be the lead author on many of our collaborative projects. In addition, he was tremendously upbeat about the potential of ABA interventions and the significance of the work we were doing. With a gleam in his eye, he often told me that he looked forward to having the last laugh when others realized that he was right all along about the benefits of these interventions for children with autism. Fortunately for him and the children, he got his wish.

**Tristram Smith**

*University of Rochester Medical Center*

## **Pioneer**

I first met Ivar in 1968 when I was a student working at Pacific State Hospital in Pomona, California. He had come to give a talk and consult on a case. He was charismatic, friendly, enthusiastic, and had an infectious and hearty laugh. I already knew of his pioneering work with children with autism and meeting him only confirmed that he was unique. I met him again in 1970 when I was Nathan Azrin’s PhD student at Southern Illinois University. Ivar gave a talk on autism and showed his film on the treatment of Pamela and Ricky, two youngsters whom he followed up in his classic 1987 film *The*

*Behavior Treatment of Individuals With Autism.* I liked everything about the talk, film, and his approach to treating individuals with extreme behavioral challenges such as self-injurious behavior. After the talk, he and I spent much of the evening talking about behavior analysis and severe behavior. I decided then that he would be my role model, not only because he was the consummate scientist/clinician but because he was utterly fearless and passionate about delivering effective treatment. A few years later, I was asked to fill in for him at a workshop because he had broken his leg skiing. I remember thinking that the participants had come expecting Raquel Welch and were getting Phyllis Diller.

We met many times over the years at conferences, workshops, and conventions. He always invited me to dinner with him and his former graduate students, all of whom had gone on to very distinguished careers. I think both of us thought of me as having been his student even though I had never taken one of his courses. Every time I saw him, we gave each other what can only be described as a Nordic bear hug. Throughout my career he was supportive with his time, recommendations, and praise. One of my best times with Ivar followed a highly charged talk I gave at an NIH consensus conference in Minneapolis in 1991 during the height of the aversives controversy in developmental disabilities. Ivar took me to dinner that night, and we talked about what it was like to be a point man or lightning rod in contentious, ideological times. I was beginning the campaign whereas he had been controversial for years. To me, Ivar was a man of many contrasts and I relished them all. He was sophisticated, brilliant, an accomplished violinist, and multilingual as well as earthy and boisterous.

Many movements owe Ivar a debt including deinstitutionalization, mainstreaming, and inclusion, for he did much to liberate special-needs children from the yoke of low expectations. He was a gifted clinician who would work with an autistic child he had never met before in front of hundreds of people at a conference, and the child would leave the stage having learned a skill. His research is even more noteworthy because it was always cutting edge, important, and lasting.

Ivar left his mark on many of us but more importantly he left it on the field of autism. He was a wonderful combination of pragmatism, creativity, and drive. Having come to the U.S. as a college student from Norway, he was a modern day Viking who explored the mysterious land of autism and left it semi-conquered, but much clarified and civilized. Having lived as an Einherjar, Ivar is no doubt now in Valhalla.

**Richard M. Foxx**

*Pennsylvania State University*

### **Never, Ever Dull**

Paul Williams famously said that working with Barbra Streisand was like having a picnic at the end of an airport runway. He could have been describing the experience of being a student of Ivar Lovaas. It was exhilarating, exciting, often scary, and never, ever, dull. I was an undergraduate in Ivar's autism laboratory for two years before entering the UCLA psychology graduate program in 1968 and continuing my work in his autism lab. I look back on my graduate experience as a wonderful period of my life. The camaraderie of the other graduate students, the excitement of being on the forefront of behavioral treatment of autism, and the mentorship of a true pioneer are all things I remember with great fondness. We were a cohesive and confident group, and I believe this was largely due to Ivar's strong

conviction that we were doing the best autism research in the world. Indeed, my time in the lab coincided with some of the most important findings to come out of the UCLA lab. I was most fortunate.

There is no doubt that Ivar Lovaas was a brilliant scientist. He was also uncommonly creative and brave. He pursued what he viewed as the best approach, the behavioral approach, for teaching skills to children whom no one had any idea how to teach. Of course we know now that he was right. Behavior analysis has proven to be the most effective approach to date. But when he started his work, he was subjected not only to criticism (particularly from those with a psychodynamic bent) but real abuse. And you know what? He loved every single minute of it. Often when I think of him I picture him with a huge smile on his face after hearing of some scathing critique of his work by one of his enemies. Ivar reveled in being controversial and his “in your face” approach to dealing with his critics earned him enemies as well as admirers. He loved them all. I believe that he truly treasured his ability to evoke a response from others. As a teaching assistant in his large undergraduate lecture course, I would be shocked by some completely outrageous statement he would make just to see what the students would do. He loved to live on the edge and shake up things.

Being a part of the Lovaas autism lab was overall a great experience. I also remember Ivar for some of characteristics we students teased him about. We teased him about his fractured version of English colloquial expressions; “Beating a dead horse” became “beating up old horses.” “Shirking your responsibilities” became “shrinking your responsibilities” (although this last one does make some sense!). We teased him when the psychology department students voted him “Male Chauvinist Pig.” He could not have been more delighted by the designation. Yet no one could ever take away the fact that he was a courageous, dedicated, and brilliant scientist who had a huge positive impact on the lives of children with autism and their families. And as I said, he was never, ever dull.

**Laura Schreibman**

*University of California, San Diego*

### **‘Hemingway Would Be Jealous’**

I had the pleasure to get to know Ivar Lovaas in the early 70s. Like many other students of psychology, I had viewed the “Teaching Language to Autistic Children” video and it seemed to me a perfect blend of science and service. Enthusiastically, I began working with Bob Koegel, upon his arrival at the University of California, Santa Barbara, on the development of school programs for children with autism. Bob announced one day that together with Ivar, he was developing a new lab at Camarillo State Hospital, half-way between UCLA and UCSB, to continue their studies of autism. Wednesdays became the magic day of the week, when Bob and his students arrived from Santa Barbara and Ivar and his students came up from UCLA. It was an exciting time of applying the science of behavior to better understand how children with autism learn. From the very beginning, wonderful ideas and a string of publications emanated from the lab. I remember our weekly meetings, the review of data, and the development of new ideas very clearly. Ivar, tireless, magnetic, and brilliant, was at the center of this activity, his energy and creativity fueling our efforts.

Over the course of these encounters, our group, including colleagues such as Laura Schreibman, Ted Carr, Buddy Newsom, and James Varni worked diligently on basic research as well as applied studies

aggregating basic findings into effective treatments, developing effective environments of care in homes and schools, and making initial steps into intensive early behavioral intervention. I remember one such instance in which one of our number had worked and reworked a paper, anguishing over each draft late at night and laboring to make it perfect. The process dragged on, with Ivar urging its completion weekly. When the article was finally completed, exhausted and anxious, our fellow student sent it off to Ivar. In short order, a telegram arrived that read, “Received your valuable manuscript. Hemingway would be jealous. Regards, Ivar.”

Ivar was a unique and complex individual, a creative scientist, and his perspective and research led the way to the development of new scientific understanding and effective treatment for thousands of children. His life and his science were approached with a ferocity and intensity that was always tempered by self-reflection. Together with a small group of colleagues, a number of whom have passed before him, he changed forever our understanding and treatment of children with autism.

In later years, I came to know Ivar even better, and my fondest memory is of a sailing trip with Ivar and Brad Bucher in the Virgin Islands. I remember him standing tall at the helm of a Morgan 38, the sun at his back and the boat hard on the wind, laughing in the wild, triumphant (and Norwegian) way that only Ivar could, as we sailed into whatever the day would bring.

I miss him greatly.

**Dennis C. Russo**

*East Carolina University*

## **Genius**

The clinical psychology program at UCLA, where I was a first-year graduate student, had a series of brown-bag lunches featuring various faculty who came to pitch their pet research projects, hoping to snag a recruit who would help in the grunt work necessary to keep the publication millwheel turning. After Ivar’s appearance, many of the listeners shared disapproving looks. One was even bold enough to say what the others were thinking, “Can you believe how crazy that man is!” Not wishing to be the tall poppy, I could only think to myself how intriguing the man’s work sounded. I was aware of his early work with autistic children, but had arrived at UCLA with only general interest in the field of psychology and had not realized that Lovaas was still there and as active as ever, developing a treatment program for children with autism. I recall watching a documentary of his work with Pamela and Ricky, and how I literally jumped out of my seat when a man with a thick Norwegian accent jumped in from out of frame and admonished Pamela, “You tell!!” Pamela’s face snapped out of reverie as she responded to the instructor that the crayon was purple.

Perhaps part of being a genius is being able to see things differently than others— so differently, that others might think you are crazy. Only a crazy person would be so foolish as to believe that autistic children were actually smart and completely rational, even when they were literally giving themselves concussions. By following conventional wisdom, Ivar realized, people might even end up loving these children to death. He always insisted that the answer would be found in the data. Otherwise we could fool ourselves into believing incorrect notions like the sun revolves around the earth, or that cold aloof

mothers cause these children to retreat into a protective cocoon of isolation.

Time and again Ivar was right, maddeningly so. We could be down in the valley where the weather was so miserable that only a crazy person would think of going skiing. Trust me, he said, it will be beautiful up in the mountains. And after dutifully indulging him, sure enough, the sun came out just as we pulled into the parking lot. Ivar was truly masterful at shaping behavior. He did it with his psychology students, whether in the classroom, in the clinic, or on the ski slopes. He could turn inept skiers into increasingly confident schussers, carving turns in the steep slopes of Snowbird, reinforcing us with a big toothy smile. He was even more impressive with the children. By today's standards some of that early work could look crude: trials of shaping "affectionate" behavior, instructing the boys to "hug, hug, hug," and popping M&M's in their mouth as their embrace tightened; telling Ken to "Look!" before he proceeded to model and elegantly shape articulation of his first words. But just as Ivar was shaping others, he allowed himself to be shaped into ever more refined methods of treatment, always guided by the data.

Part of Ivar's genius was shaping in his students a process of critical analysis that made them autonomous. Even when we went on to new things and even when we ended up doing the opposite of what he did, Ivar still deserves credit for setting in motion a mentoring process that has produced amazing results. In 1984, he and his entourage of graduate students presented data on the Young Autism Project at the American Psychological Association Conference in Washington. It was to be an earth-shaking presentation, and we did not doubt that *Time* magazine would pursue us for interviews. *Time* magazine never showed up that day. In fact it has taken another two decades to overcome the general unwillingness to believe that children with autism can actually recover. But Ivar lived long enough to see the world come around, as he always knew it would.

**John J. McEachin**

*Autism Partnership*

## **Making a Difference**

There are so many behavior analysts in the field now who are there simply because they were inspired by Ivar. As a young graduate student, I realized that I wanted to do more than just research when I read Bernard Rimland's quote, "One thing about Lovaas, he's one of the only professionals who really cares about these kids." (Bernard Rimland, 1979, in Donald R. Katz' March 8, 1979, *Rolling Stone* article, "The Kids With the Faraway Eyes.") That one quote told me what I was trying to do — to really care and try to make a difference for the kids.

When I finally met Ivar four years later, he was immediately supportive and was willing to sit down, have lunch at an Association for Behavior Analysis conference, and advise me on a particular case in Minnesota. He was both reinforcing and determined to ensure that I really helped the child— that I took the child's needs seriously. As a result, I began to gradually raise my own standards for quality control. Each time I met Ivar, his devotion and determination to serve children to the best of his abilities always stood out.

One final story, among many others, also stands out. After the Los Angeles race riots in 1992, Ivar changed the topic of his scheduled presentation at the Association for Behavior Analysis conference in

May and spoke instead about the need for psychology to take action instead of talk. “We had a big meeting at the psychology department at UCLA,” he said, “there we were, a collection of some of the greatest minds in psychology, right in the heart of the race riots, and we were going to do something. Apply our great wisdom to solving one of society’s greatest problems. But nobody could come up with any concrete action. The most concrete suggestion I heard was, ‘Let’s hold a bake sale for the victims!’ A bake sale! If that’s the best we can do, then the world is in trouble. So today I’m going to change the topic of my talk, and tell you what I propose we do to really make a difference.” That was Ivar. He cared about being effective and about making a difference. And I hope that I can follow in his example.

**Eric V. Larsson**

*Lovaas Institute for Early Intervention Midwest*

### **Striding Through the Flood**

I remember it as if it was yesterday. In January, 1985, a group of us who were planning the 5th Annual Meeting of the Florida Association for Behavior Analysis (FABA), agreed to invite Ivar Lovaas as the keynote speaker for our conference the following September. Lovaas took a while to respond to our request. This was back in the old days when invitations went out by mail — snail mail, that is. After a few weeks of waiting and hoping for a positive response, I tracked down Ivar’s home phone number, calculated the difference in time zones, and made the call. Ivar picked up right away and in his typical excited, enthusiastic style, he said in a booming voice, “I would love to come to Florida, yes, yes, and I have friends there too! I have data, lots of data, very exciting, VERY exciting, a major breakthrough!”

Over the next several weeks, we made all the necessary arrangements including his flight to Tampa. His plane was to arrive in the late afternoon on Tuesday, September 3. It was a wonder that he arrived at all as we were in the middle of a hurricane watch. Hurricane Elena was moving straight from Miami to the Alabama and Mississippi coastline when she made a sharp turn east and barreled straight for Tampa, dumping at least six inches of rain on our conference city: 320,000 people were evacuated.

Fortunately, Elena turned sharply west again and made landfall near Biloxi on September 2. Thinking that no one would be able to make it into Tampa, we were already meeting to decide if we would cancel FABA. Two of my students, Keith Slifer and his wife, Yula Ponticas, were staffing the registration table when one of the bell captains told me I had a phone call at the front desk. I feared the worst, that Ivar had not been able to make it. Instead, I picked up the phone and heard a happy voice saying, “I’m here, I’m here.” I told Ivar to catch a cab to the hotel and that I would meet him outside. “Outside,” all I could see was that North Westshore Boulevard, the street in front of the hotel, was flooded. There were no cars to be seen, the sidewalks had disappeared, and only the top two inches of a fire hydrant on the corner were above water. The rain had stopped, but the wind was whipping white caps in the street. And then, about two blocks away, I could see a tall, lone figure trudging through the water, pants rolled up, clutching his shoes and small suitcase to his chest. As he got closer, I saw that it was Ivar. He had that instantly recognizable huge grin on his face as he said, “Jon, Jon, I’m so glad to see you, have you ever flown through a hurricane?”

Ivar gave a workshop, “Teaching Techniques for Developmentally Disabled Persons,” for FABA on Wednesday afternoon, and on Thursday, he gave the very first presentation of his now landmark study,

“Behavioral Treatment and Recovery of Young Autistic Children.” Even though there was a rousing standing ovation at the end, I don’t believe any of us understood what an historic event we had just witnessed.

For me, the image that will forever be burned in my brain is that of Ivar striding through the flooded streets of Tampa. This was how Ivar lived his life. He was a trooper, always doing whatever it took to get the job done and never letting anything stand in his way. Ivar enjoyed good friends and good times, but he handled stormy weather and difficult tasks with grace and ease and with an attitude that was inspirational.

**Jon Bailey**

*Florida State University*

## **Happy Birthday**

In 1985, when I had finished my undergraduate training in Norway, my biggest professional dream was to work with Ivar Lovaas, who was a hero among behavior analysts in his home country. Fortunately, I got that opportunity, which came to define my life. When I arrived, Ivar and Nina received me as a guest. At UCLA, I was given my own office and a telephone. I felt as if I was a fly on the wall observing history in its making, and indeed, I was doing exactly that. This was at a time when Early and Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) for children with autism was largely unknown, but the first results from the UCLA Young Autism Project were being analyzed. Then came the publication of the seminal 1987 report of these results, and a few years later, Catherine Maurice’s book *Let Me Hear Your Voice*. That, as we now know, changed everything, propelling EIBI into the forefront of treatment for children with autism.

Ivar took great interest in me as a person, giving me support and invaluable life advice. Professionally, I always felt he gave me credit for much more than I deserved, and I have always been extremely proud of being his student. After working with Ivar for two years, he advised me to go to the University of Kansas (KU) to study with Don Baer, another pioneering behavior analyst. At KU, I was known as Ivar’s student, and this gave me high status amongst the students and professors. Despite enjoying KU and Don’s teaching, I returned quite quickly to UCLA to do pre- and post-doctoral training with Ivar.

On May 8, 2010, Ivar’s celebrated his 83rd birthday and I celebrated my 50th birthday. In the afternoon, the phone rang, and at the other end I heard Ivar’s familiar voice singing “Happy Birthday.” It was an emotional moment for me, knowing that Ivar, at that time, was not very healthy. All I could say was that it should have been me calling him. That was the last time I heard his voice. Now, as we celebrate his life, I and many others will work hard to keep his legacy alive and to do our utmost to extend his brilliant work. ?

**Svein Eikeseth**

*Akershus University College*