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LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

STEVE SARKISIAN did not show up for a midday practice Sunday.

USC COACH PUT ON LEAVE

Steve Sarkisian, under scrutiny for erratic behavior, 'is not healthy,' university's athletic director says.

By GARY KLEIN AND LINDSEY THIRY

Football Coach Steve Sarkisian, who has been under scrutiny since August for his sometimes erratic behavior, was put on indefinite leave Sunday, once again throwing USC's powerful program into turmoil.

Athletic Director Pat Haden announced the move, saying he made the decision after calling Sarkisian when the coach failed to show up for a midday practice.

"It was very clear to me that he is not healthy," Haden said of the conversation. "I asked him to take an in-



LAWRENCE K. HO Los Angeles Times

MONICA ROMERO high-fives volunteers after completing a 16-week course that helps young adults with autism, who often have trouble reading the emotions of others, navigate social interactions.

COLUMN ONE

A BRIDGE TO NEW RELATIONSHIPS

Class helps those with autism build social skills

By AMINA KHAN

Standing in front of a conference room table on the UCLA campus, Albert Miranda fixes a wide smile on his face and stares at Elina Veytsman, giving her the once-over. Elina fidgets, growing increasingly unnerved.

help them navigate the treacherous waters of social interaction, and on this Monday night, week 11 of the session, they're diving into the perils of dating.

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Brown looks ahead to next agenda

Amid decisions on a final slate of bills, he signals new priorities: healthcare, water costs, criminal justice.

By MELANIE MASON AND CHRIS MEGERIAN

SACRAMENTO — Capping a year dominated by uncommonly personal and emotional debates in the Capitol, Gov. Jerry Brown ended his work on legislation Sunday by banning the use of "Redskin" for school mascots, refusing to bar Confederate names on public buildings and declining new access to experimental drugs for the gravely ill.

Announcing his decisions on a final cornucopia of bills, the governor also prohibited baseball players from chewing tobacco on the field and made electric skateboards legal, among other actions.

Brown kept California on a largely liberal path this year, drawing national attention for enacting automatic voter registration at the DMV, imposing more stringent equal-pay laws on employers and allowing terminally ill patients to end

Science / Science Great Reads

Great Read Young adults with autism work on building social skills — and dating



Monica Romero high-fives volunteers during her graduation ceremony from a 16-week course held at UCLA that helps young adults with autism build social skills. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)



By **Amina Khan** · Contact Reporter

OCTOBER 12, 2015, 3:00 AM

Standing in front of a conference room table on the [UCLA](#) campus, Albert Miranda fixes a wide smile on his face and stares at Elina Veytsman, giving her the once-over. Elina fidgets, growing increasingly unnerved.

The students around the table giggle as the tension rises. Then Elizabeth Laugeson steps in.

"OK, time out," she says. "What did Albert do wrong?"

"The evil grin," says Peter Moore, 22.

"What was that like for Elina?" Laugeson asks the class. "Creepy?"

"Uncool," Breanna Clark, 20, says emphatically.

Albert is no creep, and this is no ordinary class. The nine students around the table have a variety of developmental or mental disorders; the majority of them have autism. They've enrolled in a 16-week program to help them navigate the treacherous waters of social interaction, and on this Monday night, week 11 of the session, they're diving into the perils of dating.

Elina, the program's coordinator, and Albert, a PhD student trainee from the American School of Professional Psychology at Argosy University, then act out a slightly more successful scenario: Albert glances up with a brief smile, and looks away. He does this a few more times. Elina, charmed, returns the eye contact and smiles.

The class spontaneously breaks into applause. Laugeson, an assistant clinical professor at UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, laughs and turns to the whiteboard to go through the dos and don'ts of "flirting with your eyes:" Don't smile with teeth; don't stare. Glance up briefly — but repeat the process a few times. She goes around the table, and each of the young adults — four women and five men — practices with either Albert or Elina.

Autism is often thought of as a childhood disease, Laugeson says, and very little research has focused on adults. Resources for young people on the spectrum plummet after they turn 18.

"It's almost as if we forgot that these kids grow up," she says.

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People with autism often cannot easily read the emotions of others. Tone of voice, facial expression and other verbal and nonverbal cues can be as inaccessible as a foreign language, turning the most ordinary social interactions into minefields.

This, coupled with other symptoms of autism, can have serious ramifications for young adults. Eighty-one percent of autistic people between high school and their early 20s have never lived independently; 68% have never lived apart from their parents; 64% have had no education after high school; and 42% aren't employed, according to the 2015 National Autism Indicators Report published by Drexel University's A.J. Drexel Autism Institute.

Those numbers are steep, and they don't have to be. Laugeson and other researchers say many of the right social skills — for getting a job and keeping it, for making and maintaining friendships, and for dating — can be taught, just as the underlying rules of a foreign language can be broken down and

explained.

That's the goal of the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills, or PEERS.

"A lot of people think that social skills in general are innate, that you're hard-wired in some way and that you either are born with social skills or you're not," Laugeson says. "But I think what PEERS has established is that this is actually a set of skills that can be learned, that you don't have to be born with them."

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A lot of people think that social skills in general are innate, that you're hard-wired in some way and that you either are born with social skills or you're not.

- Elizabeth Laugeson, assistant clinical professor

Part of that, she says, is practicing different scenarios: how to plan a date; how to offer to pay at the end of dinner; how to politely decline spending the night, without reprimanding the person for asking. And she constantly reminds students to think from another person's perspective. What does Elina think of Albert right now? How did that make her feel? Would she want to hang out with him again?

"One of the things I like about this class is it helps one be more in tune to other people's needs and desires," says Joey Juarez, 25.

Some students in the class are quiet by nature; Joey is not. Thoughtful and bubbly, he's often the first to cheer on a classmate or offer an encouraging "wow" after someone speaks.

Many people with autism struggle with issues of personal space and physical touch. Not Joey, his parents say. He's always ready for a hug.

Joey was a quick learner and a chatty toddler. But before he was 3, his parents started to worry that he might have a hearing problem. Soon, he stopped talking altogether.

"He forgot everything. He forgot how to speak. He was a different person," his mother, Margaret, says.

After several rounds of tests and seeing specialists, Joey and his parents were sent to this same building at UCLA, where he finally received a diagnosis: autism. In all likelihood, they were told, Joey would probably not learn how to speak.

His father, Jose, an engineer, approached Joey's education methodically. They pushed to keep Joey in regular classrooms, moving from Downey to Whittier, where they found better support for students with autism. Joey started speaking again about age 10, emerging as a hardworking high school student and earning a 4.3 GPA.

But college life had its own challenges. In his second year, Joey noticed he was struggling socially; in his fourth year, he found himself losing many friends. It was confusing, and painful.

Joey moved past that difficult period, and he's now a student in UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies hoping to research the challenges that college students with autism face in navigating campus life. And he says the lessons from PEERS are already coming in handy.

"I wish I would have had these skills many years ago," he says.

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At the start of class a few weeks later, Laugeson checks in with the students to see whether they did their homework. Did they have a get-together with a friend? If they didn't have a get-together, who could they meet this week?

Then she asks the big one: Did anyone ask someone they liked on a date?

There's silence, and then Peter, the class jokester, quips: "Cricket, cricket."

Most of the class titters nervously, but Breanna cracks up. "Nice one, Peter!"

Laugeson lets them off the hook. "So maybe we're not all quite ready for that," she says.

There's a saying familiar to autism researchers: If you meet one person with autism, you've met one person with autism.

This class seems to bear that adage out. The students are, by any rubric, a diverse lot: black, white and Latino; male and female; some who have finished high school and others who are working on graduate degrees. Some, such as 26-year-old Monica Romero, found out only recently that they were on the spectrum; others, such as Breanna, were diagnosed at a very young age.

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Each young adult brings a "social coach," usually a parent, who spends the session in a separate room. They go over students' progress for the week, and report back on homework assignments.

Many of the social coaches have discovered that the lessons in PEERS are universal.

"It's been so helpful, even for people without disabilities," says Shannon Hahn, a direct support professional who comes to the weekly meetings as one student's social coach. "When the dating stuff came up, one of the moms was like, 'How are any of us married?'"

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On the final night of the course, the students find their classroom adorned with blue, gold and silver balloons and giant banners. When it's time for their graduation party, Laugeson leaves the room.

Tentatively, the students put on some music, and then get to talking. Soon, they're huddling over each other's cellphones, exchanging numbers.

Laugeson pokes her head in the door.

"Do you know what's funny?" she says. "You guys were exchanging numbers, and your parents were doing the same thing."

In the other room, the social coaches are having a little party of their own, passing around sandwiches and swapping stories.

The parents know their job is far from over. Still, there is good news to share.

After a recent social event, Margaret says, Joey and some friends went to a bar.

He even found his own way home using Uber, she adds.

Laugeson gathers the students and coaches together.

"This has been a very special group," she tells them. "I think you guys feel that; I can see how much you guys have connected with each other."

Then she gets their certificates, and as each new graduate's name is called, the students and parents pound the table and cheer.

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