

Transformative toys were born of brotherhood

By Kevin Miller

Alex Dassise is a driven young man.

The OSU sophomore has the focus of a born entrepreneur and a passion derived from the knowledge that he has invented a toy that can help children like his brother, Stefan Seiji Dassise, make contact with the world despite a severe form of autism.

Autism takes many forms; Stefan's has made him essentially non-verbal. After years of specialized therapy, he can say a few words but cannot carry on a conversation.

"Growing up, one of the first memories I had was of my mother telling me, 'Your younger brother Stefan has autism,'" Alex recalled. "I watched him go through a lot of seizures and yelling and stuff."

As Stefan got older, Alex insisted on making his little brother part of his life, but it was a challenge. "I even had people say to me, 'Oh, it's like you really don't have a brother,'" he said.

In high school in Lake Oswego and as a freshman at OSU, Alex was drawn to the idea of inventing products that people might buy. One was a modified flying disc, the DiscJam, that had flashing lights and could play music over an onboard speaker. It impressed judges at young entrepreneur competitions. Alex expected his fellow college students to love it and buy it.

They didn't, but Stefan loved it. The stimuli of the music — he's a huge Beatles fan — and the lights soon had him playing catch and engaging with Alex as never before, including making eye contact and speaking. Alex worked with another business major, Spencer Kleweno '17, to launch a company, Seiji's Bridge. Soon there was a second toy, the Eli Ball, which is like the DiscJam but in the form of a soft stuffed ball.

These days Alex works with therapists, teachers and others to improve the toys. He competes in (and often wins) pitch competitions to make money to support the business. As a student in the donor-supported Austin Entrepreneurship Program, he assembles the toys order by order, using manufacturing tools provided for student inventors in a high-tech "maker space" in Weatherford Hall. Seiji's Bridge also is a client of the OSU Advantage Accelerator, a program offering expert guidance for startup ventures.

And there have been scholarships, including the Ann E. and David A. Thompson Family Scholarship. Alex met the Thompsons and their three OSU alumni sons, all of whom work for their Portland-based company, TEC Equipment, the largest multi-point truck and trailer dealership on the West Coast.

"They all recommended finance, finance, finance — and math is not my favorite subject, so it was good to hear that," Alex said. "They're super cool, very insightful, very professional. I'm very thankful for that family."

During a break while marketing Seiji's Bridge toys outside a Special Olympics competition hosted by OSU, Alex (left) and Stefan Seiji Dassise play a little catch. (Photo by Hannah O'Leary)

Some of the top autism experts in the world have endorsed the toys. Alex is newly focused on gathering data to help convince schools and other organizations to deploy the DiscJam and the Eli Ball in greater numbers.

At times it's a grind to be CEO, chief marketer and main product assembler, but if he ever starts to lose his energy, Alex can always have a game of catch with Stefan and watch him smile and dance as the DiscJam sails back and forth between them.

Although the company bears his middle name, Stefan doesn't have a title.

If he did, it might be vice president for motivation.

For more about Alex and Stefan Dassise and Seiji's Bridge, visit seijisbridge.com. 🍌

