

What It Is Like to Have Dyslexia

by Susan Sliney

When I was growing up, I always saw things differently. Pictures, books, words, letters, and numbers: they seemed normal to me in my own view, but I was really seeing them backwards. For example, when I looked at the letter “s,” I saw “z.” When I looked at the letter “e,” I saw “ə.”

When I started first grade, my teacher noticed that I was writing my letters and numbers backwards. She met with my parents, and they put me on an Individual Education Plan (I.E.P.). When I learned that I wasn't seeing things correctly, I knew I was different from other students. I didn't feel unintelligent, but I felt frustrated that I had to learn a new way of seeing.

My parents were told that I would never learn to read and write as normal children do, and it would take years for me to be able to write numbers and letters in the correct way. This did not stop my mother; she had a friend who told her about some sensory techniques that could help me. So my mother got a small box and put some sand in it, and she placed it on the table with a pencil and paper. Then she had me sit at the table and she drew a letter on my back using her finger. Then I traced the letter in the sand, and then I wrote the letter on the paper. We followed the same steps with numbers and eventually with words. This was how I learned to read and write. After more than a year of practicing, I was writing and reading full sentences. I felt proud of myself for putting in the hard work and achieving this goal.

Dyslexia is not just about learning how to read and write letters and numbers. Dyslexia has a lot to do with comprehension and the ability to understand what you are reading. I have always had a hard time with reading and understanding directions, but when someone shows me how to do something, I can do it. When I cannot be shown how to do something, I have to read and reread the directions until it clicks, and then I understand how to do it. This can take some time and a huge amount of patience, but eventually I can get the task done.

Not surprisingly, I have always struggled with my academics. It wasn't so much that I could not do the work; I just never understood *how* to do it, so many teachers thought I was not capable. My awareness that they thought I was not capable only added to the problem. It made me disinterested in the work sometimes because I felt misunderstood and judged. In junior high, I was placed in smaller classrooms with special education teachers. They seemed to help a little, but I still struggled. I was taught only the basics: Math, English, Social Studies, and Science. I was always in one classroom without the opportunity to engage with peers in regular classes. I felt like an outsider. I almost never missed a day of school, but my motivation suffered.

When I got into high school, I was still in smaller classrooms, but it really seemed that my teachers did not have knowledge about what dyslexia is and how they could help me learn. I graduated from high school with honors only because I learned to teach myself. I relied on

myself. Once I found a certain way of doing the work, I stuck with it and that was how I ended up earning good grades. This experience taught me to not seek help. I developed my own problem-solving abilities because the school was unable to provide the guidance I needed to learn.

I chose not to go to college right out of high school, even though I really wanted to. I was told by my teachers and parents that I was not fit for college. Instead, I went to work until I had my first son, and then I became a full-time, stay-at-home mother. I had three more children, two girls and another son. Still, I wanted to do something more. I did not have the courage until a woman named Molly came into my life. She was a counselor for my oldest daughter, and she said to me, "What do you want in life?" I told her I would like to go to college, and she said "Then, you must apply!" It was hard to believe that I might be able to earn a college degree. But, after some more encouragement, I applied to North Shore Community College (NSCC).

Was I scared? Oh yes, all my fears from high school came back. I was worried that I might fail, but I was excited to be with peers and professors who might see me as a person who was capable of succeeding. A wonderful academic counselor named Jacqui DeLorenzo helped me go through the process. I took my placement tests and registered for the Women in Transition program. I also connected with Disability Services. I was in awe that they offered so much support for non-traditional students and students with disabilities. What I liked most was that there are people at the college who truly believe a person like me can succeed, even though I have a disability.

Today I am still here at NSCC. I have had my struggles along the way, but I have persevered. I will be graduating with a Liberal Arts degree in May 2016, I am an officer in the Delta Alpha Pi Honor Society, and I am proud to say that, even though I have a disability, I have learned to deal with it. I have passed my courses with the same standards as any other student. I have learned to accept help from people here at the college, and I continue to use the skills I've learned throughout my life. Most importantly, I proved to myself that I am most definitely college material.

Although today I read and write letters and numbers the correct way and see things as I have been taught to, I still have the ability to look at numbers and letters backwards. I can even read upside down. I like to think this different way of seeing has reached many parts of my life. I have learned to problem-solve for myself and to take on leadership roles. I have learned to look at people for their hidden strengths and talents. I have learned to look at the whole picture from different viewpoints. This has given me the encouragement to continue with my education and to become someone that I've always wanted to be.