

The Adult Side of Dyslexia

by Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley

Dyslexia Training Institute

I have been asked many times why I am so interested in dyslexia and I always answer with one word, well, one name, Lynford. Before my foray into the world of families and dyslexia, I was deeply entrenched in the world of adult literacy. This is a beautiful world of adults who come to the public library and ask for help with reading and writing – who ever so bravely ask for help. They are adults from twenty years old all the way to ninety years old. They just want one thing... to learn to read and write. These days we spend a lot of time talking about those who are successful either because they are dyslexic or despite their dyslexia and we celebrate what they add to the world and I am celebrating alongside of them. But the reality is that there are three or four generations of adults who struggled through school and were only not identified, but placed in inappropriate placements and deemed ‘not smart’ or ‘not school smart.’ I have had the opportunity to sit and listen to literally hundreds of these stories during my time in adult literacy and I can tell you that each and every one of them weighed heavily on my heart. Lynford was one of those brave souls who walked through the library door and changed my life forever. He touched my life so deeply because he was the first (but certainly not the last) adult learner to cry during our first meeting.

Lynford was a gentleman in his mid-thirties who was married with three kids. He was originally from the English-speaking country of Jamaica. When I met him he was working at a senior retirement community in the kitchen. He was having difficulty supporting his family with his paycheck, but he wasn’t able to get a promotion because he could not pass the written test. As he told me why he was at the literacy program and started to explain why he could not get ahead at his job, he began to cry; not just tears rolling down his face, but full-blown crying. He was so incredibly ashamed of his inability to read and write and he had never told anyone until he was sitting in front of me. He went on to tell me that his mom had actually abandoned him because he was not able to learn like his siblings. Lynford had learned that his dyslexia meant he was worthless. He stuck with the program for many, many, years and he was able to get that promotion with improved reading skills. I did see a happy gleam in his eye return over the years, but he still hung his head a little lower than I would have liked. Although Lynford is a real person, he represents the millions of adults in adult literacy programs throughout this country and the millions more who never stepped forward for help. Many of these adults share Lynford’s story and many don’t know why they never learned to read and write.

The purpose of this story is not only to remind all of us that there are millions of adults who grew up during a time that dyslexia was a word that was rarely used and when it was, it was usually

the privileged kids who got the help – oh wait, not much has changed has it? The moral of this story is that school systems are forgetting that kids with dyslexia become adults with dyslexia. Children who are being marginalized with the wait and see approach, will grow up to feel like they have been robbed because they know they are smart. The longer we wait for the right instruction, the more likely it is that they will not fulfill their immense potential. Lastly, to all of those adults out there who are hanging your head low because of poor literacy skills, chin up, it's not your fault and it's never, ever, too late to learn.