



By Lisa Crawford Watson
Special to The Herald

Shirley Kurnoff was at a loss. She had just learned that her daughter, although intelligent, healthy and seemingly well adjusted, was not keeping up in school. Not just wasn't, but couldn't.

Writer, and mother, Shirley Kurnoff goes to the source to learn how to deal with learning differences

During her first few years of school, the child had masked whatever differences she brought to learning by listening well and memorizing everything. But, by fourth grade, she had hit a wall. She continued to contribute in class, but she was not writing. "Your daughter has dyslexia," her teacher said. "There's really nothing you can do about it, but she's going to struggle throughout school."

Dyslexia is a language-based developmental disorder manifested through difficulty in reading, writing and spelling. Between 15 and 20 percent of the population experiences a "learning difference," of which dyslexia is the most common.

In an attempt to explain dyslexia, T.R. Miles, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Wales writes: "For neurological reasons ... there may be an anomaly of development which sometimes gives rise to an unusual balance of skill. This anomaly is sometimes, but not always, the result of hereditary factors.

"Reasoning is not affected and, in some areas, such as art and engineering, there may be exceptional talent. There are weaknesses, however, which may show themselves in spoken language. Many of these



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weaknesses are overcome by practice and suitable training, but the processing of symbolic material at speed remains difficult."

Dyslexia is neither a disease nor a death sentence. It can, however, feel like either. Especially if you don't know how to deal with it. Kurnoff was devastated. She doesn't believe she took it personally, but she was caught off guard. She knew her daughter was bright and had expected her to overcome any obstacles to learning. She didn't understand this "invisible disability" called dyslexia. She needed to know what impact it would have on her child and her family. She needed to learn what to do. She needed help.

"I wanted to know more about the journey our family inevitably was going to take," writes Kurnoff. "What I found, though, was a plethora of information on how the student learns, suggested medication, multi-sensory programs, the legal system, scientific studies and academic analyses. But there wasn't a book written on what really matters most: the human side of dyslexia."

IS YOUR CHILD DYSLEXIC?

The warning signs below are sometimes indicators that a child needs to be evaluated by a professional to find out whether he or she is dyslexic.

PRESCHOOL AGE

Child speaks later than most children

Trouble making speech sounds

Slow vocabulary growth

Difficulty rhyming words

Problems learning numbers, letters, days of the week

GRADES K-4

Slow to learn connections between letters and sounds

Consistent reading and spelling errors

Transposes number sequences, confuses signs for plus, minus and times

Problems remembering facts

Trouble remembering sequences and telling time

Source: Information provided by Schwab Learning

Until now. After interviewing more than 200 area residents affected by dyslexia, Kurnoff has published, "The Human Side of Dyslexia," a compilation of 142 of those interviews with children, teens, college students and parents, "real people telling real stories" about their challenges and triumphs with dyslexia. It is the book she wishes she'd had while her child was in school.

First published in the United States by London Universal Publishing as an e-book in 2000, this 353-page text not only chronicles the experiences of her subjects but includes their suggestions, as well as Kurnoff's summation of each section, suggested coping strategies and various resources which may serve as a kind of compass throughout the educational journey.

"Throughout the early '80s," said Kurnoff, who earned her Master's degree in Education from Stanford in 1997, "learning differences were not on the table. Parents were left to forage for information that might help their child as they struggled with each obstacle in school. We had no Internet and very little access to information. What answers we found were geared for the medical or academic communities and were very off-putting to families. We needed something in layman's terms that could actually, practically assist us."

She believes her book fills the void. So do her subjects. "I knew something was wrong," said Maureen Richards of Carmel, "when our son was in kindergarten. He came home and said, 'Mommy, my brain isn't working.' Most of the time, people dismiss these kids as having a learning disability. It's so tough for them in school; we just wonder how they're going to survive it. Our son is so wonderful and has been able to achieve so much through early intervention. It made all the difference in his life. He worked harder than anybody else, graduated from high school, went off to Boston College and graduated cum laude.

"I participated in Shirley's book because I thought it

would be nice for people to hear a wonderful success story, especially after all our son went through, to show that with support, encouragement and tutoring, these children can find their way and do very well."

This Saturday, in keeping with "Teacher Appreciation Days," Kurnoff will sign books and respond to parents, educators and students about the plight of dyslexics and the benefits inherent in her book at Border's Books, Music & Cafe in Sand City.

"Twice a year," said Border's corporate sales rep Candice Sciortino, "all Border's across the country honor teachers with a 25-percent discount for themselves and their schools as a way to say thank you for all they give of themselves to students. Teachers are the backbone of this country. Without them, we wouldn't have anyone to teach our history or teach us how to read.

FINDING OUT MORE

Here are some resources for finding out more about dyslexia.

Shirley Kurnoff will be at the Stanford Bookstore Art Alcove at 7 p.m. at 519 Lausen Mall at Stanford University on April 16 to sign "The Human Side of Dyslexia." For more information on the event, call (650) 725-6136, extension 359. The book can be ordered online at www.edyslexia.com, or through major bookstores.

Schwab Learning, a free information and resource center for parents and kids, supported by the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, 1650 S. Amphlett Blvd., #300, San Mateo, Calif. 94402; www.schwablearning.org.

"**Misunderstood Minds**," a PBS documentary on learning issues, aired Wednesday as part of "The Developing Minds" library. These videos are based on the work of Dr. Mel Levine, founder of the All Kinds of Minds Institute. For more information on the tapes, call (800) 949-8670.

"When I learned that this local author had published a book on the human side of dyslexia, I was excited to have her come to our store to do this talk; it's a perfect topic for Teacher Appreciation Days. Besides, I can relate; her book enables me to look back and recall my own experiences with dyslexia."

Sciortino is not alone. In fact, she's expecting quite a turnout at 5 p.m. on Saturday at Borders Books, Music & CafZ, 2080 California Ave., Sand City, among a wide audience seeking support and, perhaps, a little appreciation, as well as the human side of dyslexia.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Some famous and inventive people have overcome dyslexia to find extreme success:

Charles Schwab, investor

John Chambers, CEO of Cisco Systems

William R. Hewlett, co-founder, Hewlett-Packard

Paul J. Orfalea, founder and chairperson emeritus, Kinko's Inc.

Jay Leno, host of "The Tonight Show," NBC

Craig McCaw, chairman & CEO of McCaw Cellular Communications; chairman & CEO of Teledesic

John Lennon, musician