

SPOTLIGHT



Screenings for literacy issues help identify student needs.

Unlock Literacy

Hope exists for those who struggle to read

Story and photos by Theresa Sterling

Adults who struggle with reading typically excel at working with their hands; can create, build and make repairs with great skill; and have strong memorization abilities. They often gravitate to manual labor jobs and are masters of the work-around.

At a restaurant, to avoid stumbling through reading the menu in front of others, they might say something like, “I’ll have the same thing as my wife.”

At the doctor’s office, it’s, “This writing is really small, and it gives me a headache to try to read it. Could you help me fill out this form?”

When applying for a job, “I forgot my glasses. May I take the application home and bring it back tomorrow?”

While there may be many reasons—both physical and social—someone has difficulty reading, a learning disability such as dyslexia is often a factor. Dyslexia means difficulty—dys—with

reading or words—lexia. Various learning disabilities can be hereditary or environmental, such as a childhood lacking in stimulation to the parts of the brain that control language.

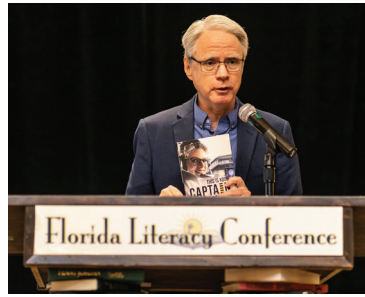
Few know the signs of reading problems in adults better than Greg Smith, executive director of the Florida Literacy Coalition. The state organization headquartered in Maitland focuses on adult struggling readers and the programs that serve them.

“Adult literacy is a significant problem that doesn’t get lots of attention, yet more than 20% of the population in Florida struggles with reading,” Greg says.

Adults with the lowest literacy levels are the most neglected in the workforce and in reading programs, perhaps because the job application process presents a barrier. It’s difficult to recruit a population who can’t read advertisements, or they may have other challenges beyond what volunteer-based literacy programs can address.

“We surveyed community-based literacy programs last year and found that more people are accessing services better than the year before, but there’s a great need for volunteers,” Greg says. “There are waiting lists of learners in various programs across the state.”

Greg says programs are still rebuilding post-pandemic, and rural areas have service gaps. It’s harder to access programs when transportation is a problem, and sometimes there just isn’t a live program, which many adult learners prefer. Learners often seek private one-on-one learning environments, but word travels in small towns. The stigma associated with having difficulty reading is real.



Greg Smith, executive director of Florida Literacy Coalition addresses conference attendees.

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— **Tim Conway**, creator of the Neuro-development of Words — NOW! company—as well as The Morris Centers clinics

Coping With Dyslexia

Tim Conway has a deeply personal understanding of the challenges of dyslexia, and it has fueled his efforts to create the Neuro-development of Words—NOW!—company, as well as The Morris Centers clinics in Ponte Vedra Beach and Ocala, Florida; Birmingham, Alabama; and the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago.

His aunt, Patricia Lindamood, founded Lindamood-Bell Co. and created a method to help children cope with dyslexia. His mother traveled to California to get Patricia’s help for a young Tim and his older brother. Both of Tim’s children, now adults, have dyslexia.

“Dyslexia doesn’t just run in my family,” Tim says. “It gallops through the Conway family.”

A neuropsychologist, Tim spent 10 years practicing post-stroke rehabilitation and researching reading difficulties brought on by brain injury. He co-founded The Einstein School, a tuition-free charter school in Gainesville, for children with dyslexia and other



learning disabilities. He serves as president of the board, and the school uses his programs for daily reading instruction.

“For a reading program to be successful, it must be based on scientific evidence and provide frequent, explicit, targeted instruction with fidelity,” Tim says. “School districts often choose nonevidence-based reading programs that seem easy but don’t help dyslexic students.”

Tim, a coauthor of National Institutes of Health-funded dyslexia research and an affiliated research assistant professor at the University of Florida, says it is important to get kids to master reading skills early.

It’s important, he says, that dyslexics know their difficulty is not their fault.

Brain-wiring pathways in dyslexic learners are less efficient than in other brains. Information travels via circuitous routes rather than the most direct pathways, and Tim’s program—live online or in the clinic setting—works to rewire and reroute neural pathways in the brain.

“It’s a big myth that people with dyslexia learn differently,” Tim says. “Human brains all learn the same way, all over the world. We can rewire our brains and learn new things even when we’re old. It’s called neuroplasticity.”

Hands-on Help

Maegon Gilliam came from Walnut Ridge, Arkansas, in February to The Morris Center Ponte Vedra Beach for a six-month stay so her daughter, Gracie Mae, 10, could undergo intensive treatment with Tim’s transdisciplinary staff of clinicians, reading interventionists, speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists.

“Gracie is going into fourth grade next year,” Maegon says. “When we came here, she struggled to read on a second-grade level. “She now reads at a sixth grade level, like a sixth grader at the end of the school year. Dr. Conway and this program changed everything for her and for our family.”

Tim says it is common for dyslexics to be unaware of what their mouth is doing, and are often unable to visualize or feel what the lips and tongue do when making sounds. His treatment starts with oral awareness, not with letters.

“Dyslexics are often the kids who don’t feel food on their face or around their mouths when they’re eating,” he says. “Dyslexics confuse, say, the letters b and d and their sounds, a result of the inability to realize that one sound is made by lips popping open and the other sound is made by the tongue tapping the roof of the mouth. Many people mistakenly think readers cannot see



Occupational therapists at The Morris Center strive to help students improve in a fun environment.



LEFT: Gracie works with shapes. RIGHT: A tutor works with a student at The Morris Center.

the difference between the letters b and d, but research shows dyslexia is a difficulty with language processing, not vision.”

Creating Hope

Stephen Yearout calls himself the poster boy for dyslexia. He went to dark places, felt shame and was his own biggest bully.

“I did everything short of going to prison,” he says.

While lurking around social media sites for dyslexia, Stephen noticed posts about Tim’s efforts to treat dyslexia and improve reading skills in both children and adults.

Stephen, creator and host of the podcast Empower Dyslexia, invited Tim onto his live show, and challenged him to prove his techniques by putting Stephen through the program. At age 45, Stephen completed the remediation program via live remote instruction in his home in Garland, Texas, and is now an adept reader, public speaker and a recognized advocate for early dyslexia diagnosis.

Stephen has interviewed his wife, sister and mother on his podcast. It wasn’t easy for them to agree to revisit the pain of those years when he couldn’t read, when his mom couldn’t get help from his school, and his sister felt ignored.

“My whole family suffered with my dyslexia,” Stephen says. “My wife had to proofread simple emails that took me hours to write. She didn’t have time for the hours of back and forth during the workday, and it was exhausting. Think of parents—a family with a special needs child. All the energy goes to the care of that child, and siblings often get less attention.”

A Network of Support

Organizations such as the Florida Literacy Coalition want people to know there is help throughout the state for those who struggle

with literacy. The coalition provides training for volunteers and paid practitioners, shares resources, guides communities in starting programs, and supports programs by connecting them with funding opportunities and with each other.

The organization hosts the annual Florida Literacy Conference each spring, a gathering of programs and experts integral to adult literacy practices statewide. Next year will be the 40th conference, and it is open to anyone interested in the success of adult learners.

“There is a renewed focus on true family literacy programs, thanks to the support of our newest partner, the Kislak Family Foundation,” Greg says. “Through the foundation, we have funded new programs and expanded others and hope this support will help fill some service gaps.”

Family literacy is defined as serving the children and adults in a family separately through literacy remediation, then having them come together for parent and child together time in an interactive, meaningful way while supporting literacy development.

Perhaps one of the most important services the Florida Literacy Coalition provides is helping learners find a program. Calls to the state literacy hotline are confidential. Where no community-based programs exist, staff can help find digital programs or tap into other connections in a specific location to pinpoint help.

Each year at the conference, on adult learner day, the Florida Literacy Coalition shares the new edition of the “Adult Learner Essay Book,” a collection of essays by Florida’s adult learners. The title of the 2023 book is “It’s Never Too Late.” ■

To learn more about The Morris Center, visit themorriscenter.com. For more information about Florida Literacy Coalition, visit floridaliteracy.org.