



H.E.L.P. program founder Bill Hartner.

BILL HARTNER

Opening the doorway for the learning disabled with H.E.L.P.

By Ariadne Buckley

Once upon a time there was a little boy who lived in a small town. Everyone called him Dumb Billy. The reason they called him Dumb Billy was because he couldn't learn to read.

His teachers shook their heads and walked away. The other children wouldn't let him swing on the swings or play games with them at recess. Billy's father was angry because Billy was dumb. Billy's mother told him she loved him anyway.

As Billy got older, he grew big and strong. He started to play football and help his school win games. He still couldn't read, but now his teachers passed him so he could keep winning games. He finally graduated. Then Billy left the small town. He went to places where no one knew him. He pretended to be a smart person. People believed him because he was a good actor. But he had to work hard all the time to keep everyone fooled.

Many years went by. Billy was very unhappy. He kept losing jobs. People thought he was lazy and undependable. Then one day when Billy was 37 years old his whole life changed. He found a way to understand how to learn to read.

When you enter the door of H.E.L.P.—Help Eliminate Learning Problems—located in O'Hare Hall on the Marylhurst College campus, Bill Hartner, 40, founder and president of the non-profit organization to aid the learning disabled, greets you with a warm handshake. His affable manner puts you in mind of a favorite uncle, and soon he is telling you the story of Dumb Billy. You realize he is talking about himself and the painful experiences he underwent as a learning disabled child in the 1950s.

"In those days, no one knew much about learning disabilities," Hartner says. "If a person couldn't read because he couldn't see, then people understood there was an obvious impairment. But if you could see, and couldn't read, then you were dumb. Unfortunately to some degree, that attitude still prevails."

Hartner says that most people have heard the term dyslexia—meaning an inability to read well because of letter reversals—used as a catch-all term for learning disabilities. In ac-



Learning at the H.E.L.P. center is a family endeavor.

grade average my first semester."

Eventually however, Hartner married a girl he met on campus and was forced to give up his classroom helpers. His grades started slipping and he decided to quit school and go to work to support his growing family. He moved to Oregon and his employment record over the next 15 years reads like an index to a career guide: manager of physical fitness facilities, hearing tester, business college admissions director, life insurance salesman, public relations work, and probation officer.

mation to create mental pictures which help us store, remember, and retrieve a myriad of data. When there is a disruption in one of the 43 thought processes, our mental pictures are weak and confusing, resulting in a learning disability, he explains.

"It then becomes a necessity to retrain the mind to use all of the 43 processes effectively to process information," Hartner says. "Dr. Winkelman's technique accomplishes this by using a series of activities that exercise both sides of the brain to make all the senses work together so that information is clear and meaningful."

Hartner's own progress in the program led to so much improvement that after three months he was answering questions about learning problems. "I started to realize I was not only able to do the things I couldn't do before, but that I could do them in a better than average way," he says. At the end of six months, his reading and vocabulary skills tested at college level.

He decided immediately that he wanted to use his new abilities to work with other people who suffered from learning problems. He acquired the exclusive rights to use Winkelman's technique in Oregon, and made it available through a private learning center for several months. However he soon saw a gap between identifying an individual's learning disability and finding the financial means necessary for the person to enroll in the program.

"Besides retraining the mind to learn more effectively, the program helps the student to achieve self-direction and build a positive self-image," Hartner says.

One of Hartner's goals is for H.E.L.P. to establish pilot projects with various agencies to deal with the learning disabilities he says exist among high school dropouts, juvenile delinquents, and those with drug and alcohol problems. Regardless of an individual's age or education, he says it is possible to benefit from the program. "It has been successful for a 74-year-old man all the way down to a 6-year-old child," he says.

But sometimes, especially for adolescents to simply acknowledge that they have a learning problem is a big hurdle.

"I've seen teen-agers almost kicking and screaming dragged by their parents into my office," Hartner says. "Their attitude is 'I don't need this, this is dumb, I don't have a problem.' But I can sit down with them, having been on both sides of the issue, look them in the eye and tell them what it's like to spend a day in their shoes. Often I see tears in the eyes of big, tough teen-age boys. Later on, while they're going through the program, they stop in my office and tell me, 'I got 100 percent on a test today at school and it was like they gave me all the easy questions. You were right, I really am smart.'"

Hartner keeps the door at H.E.L.P. open and invites anyone trying to find a solution for a

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tuality the child may have an auditory or sequential processing problem which is a different kind of learning disability. Hearing discrimination problems, difficulty remembering or concentrating, failure to complete tasks, and difficulty following directions are all ways that learning problems can manifest themselves, Hartner explains. In addition, poor self-esteem is often part of the problem because of the learning disabled person's failure to function at the expected level in the school, home or workplace.

About 60 million Americans are affected by learning disabilities, Hartner points out. He says that this is the number of people who cannot comprehend basic reading at a sixth grade level.

Hartner's method of coping with his own disability was to utilize his verbal skills to create a favorable impression around people who didn't know him.

"I watched and listened to newscasters on TV and tried to mimic them," he recalls. "By doing this I could convince people I was intelligent and carry it off for periods of time. I had to play that role in every situation I was in until I was 37 years old. In order to do it, I buried my true identity. It was like becoming a spy or secret agent constantly living a charade."

He recounts the strategy he used to get through three years of college at Brigham Young University. "I asked them to give me the entrance exam orally," he says, "and I was accepted on probation. Then I found a girlfriend in every class who would read the material aloud to me. This way I managed a 3.5

On each job, as much as possible, Hartner tried to avoid paperwork. When he couldn't, he stayed long after regular hours—sometimes until midnight—trying to decipher and write reports. What he was unable to complete, he took home for his wife to read and help him with.

"But the fact that I couldn't read and write beyond a third grade level always caught up with me," he says. "I couldn't read a joke a fellow worker handed me. If I had to drive somewhere to meet someone I had to leave an hour early because I couldn't read the street signs and always ended up getting lost. Just going to work and trying to do the job was so stressful and such an enormous energy drain that sometimes instead of reporting to my employer, I would hide in a park all day. Then at the usual time I'd come home and pretend everything was fine."

Then three years ago, after losing yet another job, Hartner heard about a technique being used at a private institute in Portland to successfully treat people with problems like his. He enrolled in the program and "After years of failure, I finally found an answer for my problems," he says.

Hartner explains that the technique that helped him was developed by Dr. D.C. Winkelman of Vancouver, Wash. who holds a Ph.D. in educational psychology. In order to understand how Winkelman's program works, Hartner says it is important to first understand how learning occurs.

Research has shown that we use 43 different processes to make sense of information coming into our minds, he says. We then use this infor-

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Out of Hartner's desire, Help Eliminate Learning Problems was born early this year. By setting up H.E.L.P. as a non-profit organization to administer the learning technique, Hartner hopes to be able to access grants and federal money to establish a scholarship fund.

Hartner explains that each student at H.E.L.P. works individually with a qualified professional staff member one hour a day, five times a week, for five to six months. To ease the financial strain of paying for the program, H.E.L.P. currently offers a deferred payment plan as well as an option to cut the tuition in half by training a home helper to work part of the time with the student.

learning problem to make an appointment to come into his office for a free consultation. "Many people feel they have been led in circles trying to find answers. We have an opportunity here to show a little light at the end of the tunnel," he says.

Hartner pauses and then says reflectively, "Learning disabled people live every day of their lives feeling like Dumb Billy inside until they can succeed in the areas other people succeed in, and compete on the same level intellectually. I've gone full circle from being learning disabled to being capable of building a program to help other learning disabled people. I hope that long after I'm gone there will still be a H.E.L.P."