The Exception rather than the rule

Kieran O'Donnell's journey towards literacy is nothing less than inspiring

Retired teacher Dave Clyne, Sardis grad Kieran O'Donnell and mom Tracy O'Donnell forged an eight-year partnership to overcome serious learning disabilities that made Kieran's recent graduation a long shot.

Photograph by: Cornelia Naylor, TIMES

When Dave Clyne first met 11-year-old Kieran O'Donnell eight years ago, he was afraid he'd met his match.

The veteran teacher was just three months away from retirement after a 32-year teaching career that included six years of teaching learning disabled kids to read in the now-defunct District Resource Program.

But O'Donnell would prove to be a special case.

After six years in the Chilliwack school district, the Grade 5 student could only remember the alphabet to the letter E, and tests revealed his language skills were at a mid-kindergarten level.

His mom Tracy, who had tried unsuccessfully to get him into the District Resource Program before, envisioned a bleak future for her son if the program didn't turn things around.

"If you can't read and you can't write and you can barely talk, you're not going to be going anywhere," she said. "He would drop out, get into drugs and go to jail or die early; those were my thoughts."

But things didn't look good even two months into the district's intensive three-month program.

"At the end of two months we kind of figured maybe this boy was one who wasn't going to be able to read," Clyne said.
At that point few could have predicted where O'Donnell would end up today.

In January he graduated from Sardis secondary with his Dogwood diploma.

And reading? "I can only read books I like," he said, "but once I get into them, I don't stop. I read for hours."

For anyone in the public school system looking for ways to help learning disabled students overcome reading difficulties, O'Donnell's transformation is spine tingling.

But it's also double-edged.

On one hand it shows a district program, a parent, teachers, administrators and even school trustees all pulling together to help one student overcome profound challenges.

On the other, it involves such a perfect storm of exceptional circumstances that the people involved can't help but think of O'Donnell's story as the exception, rather than the rule, when it comes to students with severe reading challenges.

"The tragedy is that there's kids that the system can't accommodate," Clyne said.

Even before he started kindergarten, O'Donnell's struggles with memory and language seemed destined to make him one of these.

Tracy remembers one time when her son was four years old and playing with other kids in the neighbourhood. When another mom asked him his name, he ran home to get Tracy to say it for him.

"He couldn't remember his name and he could barely talk," she said.

O'Donnell's inability to communicate took an emotional toll.

"If someone said something to him and it hurt his feelings, he had no words to say 'You hurt my feelings,' or 'No, stop,' or things like that, so he would vibrate," she said. "His whole body would shake with frustration."

Once he started school, it didn't take long for that to translate into behaviour problems.

"I felt like I was trapped in a box," O'Donnell said. "All I knew was basic words, so I got along, but once an argument happened, it wouldn't go well with me because I couldn't express my feelings properly."

He vented his frustration by fighting and screaming, and often he wouldn't do as teachers told him.

He repeated kindergarten, and by the time he switched out of his first Chilliwack elementary school in Grade 4, Tracy says she'd been told he would never learn to read.

Those years are blurry for O'Donnell, but he remembers being pulled out of class a lot for "learning assistance-type stuff."

"What I remember is a room," he said, "and they would just give me stuff, like a word to read, and get me to sound it out, but they were pretty impatient with me. They would try to hurry me, and I kept being frustrated."

Back in class, while other kids read, he remembers looking at books blankly, pretending to read.
"I had a big disadvantage and I knew that," he said. "Students would be doing projects or doing essays, writing stuff or doing some math, and I would be still doing a year or two years behind them, doing stuff like one plus one is two and math books that were pictures, not the actual writing."

While he felt left out, he said he didn't spend a lot of time thinking about it at the time, focusing instead on playing with friends at recess and lunch.

But by the time he was referred to the District Resource Program in Grade 5, however, he wanted more.

He can't remember exactly why, but at age 11, he was gripped by a desire to learn to read.

"Since I couldn't talk that much, I spent a lot of time thinking, and I think at that time I wanted a change," he said.

His eagerness was clear to Clyne and long-time education assistant Carol Frost, who had worked in the District Resource Program for 14 years, but O'Donnell's pre-program tests showed he would be facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Looking over the results, Clyne remembers Frost saying their new pupil had come to them with more reading deficits than any other student she had ever seen in the program.

And by the end of two months of hard work, it looked like those deficits would win out.

But then something happened. "By the third month, he was starting to read," Clyne said.

O'Donnell had barely started to catch on, however, when his time in the program came to an end.

It would take an unusual and enduring partnership to ensure the breakthrough would see him through to graduation eight years later.

? See Part Two of Kieran's story in Thursday's Chilliwack Times.

cnaylor@chilliwacktimes.com

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