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PETER W. D. WRIGHT - BIO

Peter W. D. Wright was born and raised in Washington, D.C. In 1954, he was diagnosed as having strephosymbolia and severe hyperkinesis. These labels now refer to specific learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity. To help remediate these problems, he received daily individual Orton-Gillingham tutoring for two years and attended a residential camp when he was eight years old.

As he was about to enter the twelfth grade in the D.C. public schools, he had a D average. Concerned about his continuing academic problems and lack of interest in school, his parents placed him in a private boarding school in Rhode Island, where he repeated the eleventh grade and completed his senior year. At the new school, which had a student-teacher ratio of about one-to-six, he experienced academic success and was both “All-State” and “All New England” football team as a linebacker and offensive guard.

Pete Wright attended Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. He majored in psychology. After graduation from college in 1968, he worked for several years in juvenile training schools, first as a houseparent and later as a counselor. Later, he worked as a juvenile probation officer, first in a suburb of Richmond, Virginia, and later in the ghettos and projects of the City of Richmond. In 1972, he was honored as Virginia’s “Juvenile Probation Officer of the Year.”

While employed in the juvenile justice system, Pete also attended evening college in a graduate psychology program at Virginia Commonwealth University where he completed thirty hours of coursework. During this period, Pete became a member of both Pi Delta Epsilon and Psi Chi honor fraternities. Later, he attended the T. C. Williams Law School at the University of Richmond and graduated in December, 1977. He is a member of the American Bar Association, American Trial Lawyers Association, and Virginia Trial Lawyers Association.

Since the early 1970’s, Pete has been active with The Orton Dyslexia Society and the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities, now known as LDAA. In the 1970’s he presented papers about the relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency at the national conferences of both organizations.

As an attorney, Pete continues to be involved in the field of special education. He has spoken at Orton Dyslexia Society, ChADD and LDAA annual national conferences on “How To Secure an Appropriate Special Education for Your Child and Avoid Due Process.” He has

presented a number of continuing legal education seminars in different states to attorneys in regard to the representation of special education children. He is on the Board of the national Council of Parents Attorneys, and Advocates, a special education

On October 6, 1993, Pete returned to his hometown, where he gave oral argument in *Florence County School District Four v. Shannon Carter*, 510 U.S. 7 (1993) before the United States Supreme Court. Thirty-four days later, the Court found for his client, Shannon Carter, in a unanimous landmark decision.

Since then, he and his wife have developed the “wrightslaw” special education law and advocacy website. It is the top ranked website in regard to special education advocacy for children with disabilities. He and his wife have also published the best selling special education law book entitled “*Wrightslaw: Special Education Law*.”

Pete Wright’s Personal History: From Kindergarten to the Supreme Court

Who is Pete Wright? And, what led him to argue the *Carter* case before the United States Supreme Court?

In 1951, Pete Wright’s kindergarten teacher told his parents that:
Peter **does not listen** to his teachers, does **not respond to school rules and definite directions** . . . listen and do are necessary requisites for first grade.

In 1952, his first grade teacher advised his parents that:

. . . he makes most of his **numbers backwards** . . . I am having a little **trouble understanding Peter**, he is a nice little boy, but he does not appear at all interested in first grade . . . I know he has a good mind.

Later, his second grade teacher complained that Peter was:

. . .fussy, too free with his fists . . . I am quite **disappointed in Peter** . . . He does **not pay attention** to directions and he has to be spoken to frequently for **talking** . . . (on next report card) Peter continues to disappoint me . . . He does not do his best at all times because he **does not keep his mind on his work** and **wastes a great deal of time** . . . I hope he will try to improve before the closing of the school year as he is a capable boy.

In third grade, after being taunted by the classroom bully and getting into a fight, Peter held the bully down on the ground by pressing a knife to his throat, afraid to let him up. In addition to being considered “possibly emotionally disturbed,” the public school staff suggested that Peter might be “borderline mentally retarded” or a “slow learner.” By tenth grade, his parents were counseled that it was **unrealistic for Peter to attend college**.

Although Peter spent twelve years in public schools – and private sector testing showed that he had a high IQ – he was never seen as having college potential. Instead, the educators placed him in the “general track” where he took touch typing – for two years!

Who is Peter? He is a “special ed” child.

Elementary School: Intensive Remediation

From elementary school to the third grade, I not only reversed my spoken speech (pasghetti, for spaghetti), I also reversed concepts – “over-under,” “in-out,” “up-down,” “left-right.” My reading and writings were filled with reversals. I had what was called “mirror writing”.

My teachers in the Washington D. C. public schools told my parents that I could do well if I would only try harder. But, as the teachers said, I had “ants in my pants” and could not sit still. Eventually, I was diagnosed as having “strephosymbolia” or “word blindness.” These are old terms for the conditions we now call “Learning Disabilities,” “Dyslexia,” “Dysgraphia,” “Dyscalculia. “ I also had a “Minimal Brain Dysfunction” more commonly known today as an “Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.”

Beginning in third grade, I received individual tutoring after school -- every day. My tutor was Diana Hanbury King. Diana King later founded The Kildonan School in Amenia, New York. Kildonan School is known as one of the top schools in the country for dyslexic children. It is referred to in several landmark cases that were prior to and after *Carter*.

In 1954, after a year of intensive one-on-one remediation, I was sent to a residential special education camp at the base of Mount Mansfield, Vermont. I was eight years old. During that summer, my tutor and counselor was Roger Saunders, who is a former President of the Orton Dyslexia Society.

During my elementary and junior high school years, I was placed on medication – including Dexedrine - to reduce my hyperactivity. Ritalin was not used during those years.

The tutoring technique used with me in 1953 and 1954 is what is known today as the Orton-Gillingham multi-sensory visual auditory kinesthetic tactile (VAKT) approach to the learning of language. I was very fortunate to have this early remediation that focused on the acquisition of sound-symbol relationships in the early 1950’s. Because they focused on that, rather than compensatory techniques, I was taught and learned how to read, write and do arithmetic.

Failing in Public School, Succeeding at Moses Brown

By the end of eleventh grade, I had a D+ average in the Washington D.C. Public Schools – and I was in the General Track, rather than the Honors or College Preparatory Tracks. My parents knew that I would never be able to succeed in a college – even if a college would accept me.

After I finished eleventh grade, my parents sent me to a small New England Quaker boarding school in Rhode Island that provided lots of structure. It stayed at Moses Brown School for two years –I had to repeat the eleventh grade. Moses Brown is a college prep school that had a low student teacher ratio – about 6 to 8 students per class. The professors knew that I had dyslexia and was bright. They had high expectations of me.

After graduating from Moses Brown, I attended Randolph Macon College in Virginia. While I was still in college, I began working in Virginia’s juvenile training schools and juvenile courts. I was a houseparent, then became a counselor, and later worked as a probation officer. During that time, I also took thirty graduate credit hours in psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. In order to graduate with a Master’s Degree in Psychology I needed to take a “practicum” – hard to do when also working full time. I decided that I didn’t want to become a psychologist.

While I worked as a probation officer, I became involved with the Orton Dyslexia Society and an organization that used to be called the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, (now the Learning Disabilities Association of America.) Many of the youngsters I worked with in the training schools and juvenile courts had undiagnosed, unremediated learning disabilities.

I used educational remediation to reduce delinquent behavior. In 1974 and 1975, I spoke at the National Conferences of the ACLD and the Orton Dyslexia Society about the relationship between Learning Disabilities and Juvenile Delinquency.

In 1975, I entered Law School. After passing the Bar in 1977, I quickly became involved in special education litigation. By the early 1980’s I was handling a large number of special education cases.

In the Fall of 1984, I was asked to be a primary speaker at the National Orton Dyslexia Annual Conference which was being held in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I taught a training session for lawyers and parents about special education law and trial tactics in the litigation of special education cases.

This led to my speaking at the Annual North and South Carolina Orton Conference in the spring of 1985. Emory and Elaine Carter, Shannon Carter’s parents, were in that audience.

In February, 1991, I spoke at the South Carolina Annual Orton Conference in Charleston, SC. A couple of weeks before that conference, U. S. District Court Judge C. Weston Houck issued his Decision in Shannon Carter’s case. Again, Mr. and Mrs. Carter and Shannon were in the audience. I obtained a copy of the Opinion, and, with the Carter’s permission, I used it as my primary teaching tool during the sessions.

The Carters prevailed at the District Court level. They were concerned that the School Board might appeal to the Fourth Circuit. Florence County School District Four did appeal and I was asked by the Carters and their counsel, David Burlington with the South Carolina Protection

and Advocacy Office, if I would be willing to assist in the Fourth Circuit appeal. Previously, I had handled cases before the Fourth Circuit, including special education matters.

I agreed to help. I planned to play “Devil’s Advocate” with David Burlington as he did all of the work on the brief. After the brief was filed, David was hired by the Federal Government to be an Administrative Hearing Officer in Social Security matters. I became counsel of record. Nancy McCormick of the South Carolina Protection and Advocacy Office took over on David’s behalf.

I was responsible for arguing the case at the Fourth Circuit level and later before the U. S. Supreme Court.

What Do Children Need?

I was very fortunate. I’d like to share my analysis of what helped me with parents. Maybe this will help you learn what really helps children with learning problems.

First, I had parents who believed in me. They did not make me feel guilty for my problems. Education was very important to them. My mother did research into how to help me and was tireless in seeing that I got the help I needed. In spite of the early school problems, my self esteem remained basically intact.

Second, by sheer good luck, a psychology student who was testing children evaluated me. After she saw that I had significant subtest scatter, she told my parents to have a comprehensive battery of tests done on me. Good diagnostic work must precede good prescriptive teaching.

Third, the professionals who worked with me were some of the best in the country.

Fourth, during early elementary school years, I had intensive individual one-on-one remediation. Without this intensive individual one-on-one help, my reading, writing and arithmetic problems would not have improved. I wish more teachers were properly trained in the Orton Gillingham method. It has a track record of success – which many methods used with children like me do not have.

Fifth, when I was in middle school, some of my hyperactivity ADHD problems got worse. My parents sought additional testing and counseling. By that time, my self-esteem was getting shaky. I felt very dumb and stupid and I was beginning to get out of control at home. There is definitely a connection between feeling like a failure at school and acting out.

As a side note, I was fortunate in that my psychologist understood me. After he tested me, he told me that he had not gotten around to scoring my tests. When he was interrupted by a telephone call from his wife, he passed the scoring instrument over to me and told me to complete the scoring of the tests!

I think he knew that if he just told me I did well on these tests, I would not believe him. For years, I had been told “Peter, you are bright. You could do well if you only tried.” Answer: “But I **am** trying!” After I scored my own tests, I realized my potential. This was a very significant marker in my life.

Sixth, during my high school years, I was very active in contact sports, boxing and football.. This enhanced my standing with my peer group and improved my self-confidence.

Seventh, I was fortunate because I was able to spend my last two high school years in an intellectually rigorous academic program. The school I attended had a low student teacher ratio. The teachers took the time to know and understand their students. They had high expectations for us– even for students like me who had dyslexia, dysgraphia and ADHD.

To sum it up, I learned how to read, write, do arithmetic. Eventually, I also learned to type which helped with the language problems. For our children, touch-typing should rank as high as reading, writing, and arithmetic.

For a number of reasons, my self-esteem remained intact.

END

Bio info:

Orton-Gillingham educated by Diana King and Roger Saunders

Attorney for Shannon Carter in the landmark U. S. Supreme Court case:

Florence County School District v. Carter, 510 U.S. 7, (1993)

Co-Author of ***Wrightslaw: Special Education Law*** and ***Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy***

Website: www.wrightslaw.com

Lead editorial, NY Times 10/7/96 reported that Pete Wright has consulted “in thousands of cases and toured the country, teaching his skills to lawyers and parents alike.”

Member of Advisory Boards and Boards of Director for numerous disability related organizations.