

My thoughts on the 54th International IDA Conference November 2003

By Constance Hastings-Clapp

I believe that at least ONE of the important responsibilities we have as parents of children with learning differences is the need to keep ourselves informed. At first thought that would not seem to be too difficult a task considering that we of the 21st century clearly live in the age of INFORMATION. However that reality presents another challenge because, with so much information available we have the additional responsibility of determining whether or not the information is accurate or reliable. And when that information is sought because of its potential relevance to address our precious children's needs we find ourselves with much more at stake.

Twenty-five years ago when I finally completed my five-year teaching program I was so thrilled to be done with my 'formal' learning and eagerly planning my first year in the classroom that the similar responsibility teachers also have to keep **themselves** informed had not yet occurred to me. It wasn't until my own children presented with learning difficulties and I returned to the classroom after eight years that I began to question the validity of the programs I was expected to teach and the principles behind the system I was a part of. I slowly realized that there was much more to being a professional educator than what was printed in the teacher's manuals or was required by my employers. And as the needs of my own children became more apparent, as I began collecting my own information and making my own discoveries I began a journey that would ultimately teach and give me more than I ever could have fathomed.

For several years I learned and benefited from CHADD inadvertently seeking professional development but it wasn't until I attended an Inland Empire outreach workshop in Ontario that I was formally introduced to the IDA. Here I realized was a battalion of individuals networked all over the world with the same common purpose and commitment at the core of their endeavors as my own. Surely it was fate that brought me to one of Regina Richards classes three years ago; before that I had never heard of the Orton-Gillingham {not even at the universities!} or the International Dyslexia Association. In the 2 1/2 years since I first became a member I have lost count of the times I have referred other parents, teachers, administrators and people I don't even know to their publications and website. And what a jewel of knowledge the "Perspectives" has been for me! But having the opportunity to attend the IDA conference in San

Diego this past fall gave new meaning to all I have read and learned in the last three years.

Perhaps in some small way a measure of what I gleaned from attending the conference could be likened to what happens to people who struggle with reading a book when given the opportunity to re-experience the material if presented by a committed and passionate teacher. Listening to the many speakers allowed me to feel connected to the material they presented in a way no book or video will ever touch, and although their brilliance, their discoveries and their hypothesis were their own they each willingly offered up what they learned. I was sitting in Thomas West's session when all of a sudden it hit me I had read several of his articles on line and his enthusiasm was even better in person. Although I have heard Joe Torgeson speak before [at the Inland IDA presentation] his information continues to validate my new professional focus; that I had spent 13 years of my life teaching in Florida's public school systems without once hearing his name still amazes me!

No one could have sat and listened to even half the brain imaging and research material we all heard over the course of the conference without being in complete awe. Not only was it absolutely fascinating by itself but the contributions to the greater picture of understanding the processing components and range of differences of dyslexia was huge! The chance to both experience and hear the passion, dedication and commitment behind the words of Reid Lyon, Louisa Moats, Jack Fletcher, Sally and Bennet Shaywitz and Patricia Kuhl [to name just a few] was both emotionally moving and immensely validating for myself: to know that such a wealth of human knowledge, wisdom and talents not only exists but is working to ensure for our children the right to an education and to experience success gives much hope to what still lies ahead.

This past year have come to recognize that the journey my children first set in motion ultimately prepared me for an even more profound mission that, ironically is so simple that it takes a child to understand but an act of government to make us pay heed. That the public world understands 'difference' is a normal and a natural part of humanity is imperative ...what "we" do with it and how "we" perceive it is key to providing all individuals the opportunity for productive and fulfilling lives. The last time I checked these inspirational judicial words were still there...

[IDEA, Sec. 601 (c) (1)]..."disability is a natural part of the human experience...and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society....

Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities."

The visionary leadership of the International Dyslexia Association as I continue to learn about is in itself a vast infrastructure of amazing human beings whose *collective accomplishments* -and from where I am sitting that would include the Inland Empire Branch's Regina Richards-laid the groundwork long ago, continue to support and drive the research that is opening doors and whose determination and passion will continue to strengthen the future where anything is possible. How does that saying go, "through small acts great things are possible..."

Without the Dovid Richards Scholarship I could never have attended this conference let alone have been able to experience the level of partnership and belonging those four days in November brought to me. For 14 years I have raised my two sons, advocated for their right to have their educational needs addressed, alone and without financial support; conferences were luxuries and secondary to a number of my family's needs. But because of the generosity of those whose contributed to the scholarship fund I was also able to stay at the hotel-a simple pleasure to many was for me a true luxury that further enriched my opportunity to experience my first IDA conference "up front and personal." While I was still at the conference I began to consider how I might best be able to share my newly acquired information, passing it on effectively. I have always felt that good information is destined to be shared with others, however when dealing with mass quantities delivered in a relatively short period of time and the filing system inherent in an AD/HD brain one must plan accordingly. By purchasing audio recordings of specific presentations and downloading their handouts as they are posted on the IDA website I determined I could more accurately and effectively share with the members of my local parent support group. Out of the 16 tapes I purchased I see a three-way tie forming between Gordon Sherman's "Through the Lens of Cerebro-diversity," Jeffrey Gilger's "Superior Non-verbal Abilities," and Reid Lyon's "Can Response to Instruction to Help Refine the Definition of Dyslexia?"