

Learning to Learn Again

By Carter Hammett:

Even before she was diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) 15 years ago, Gladys had to endure the humiliation of "nicknames" like "airhead" and "bimbo" from co-workers and classmates. However, despite these taunts, she has chosen to and been able to conceal her diagnosed label because of the invisible nature of her disability, and her fear of rejection by others.

"To this day, I've never disclosed to an employer because my LD and ADD may impact on my ability to perform the job. I want to be able to prove I'm accountable for the work I do," says Gladys.

Gladys' LD manifests itself in numerous ways. A central auditory processing disorder means it takes more time for her to process verbal information. Visual-spatial challenges means she gets lost easily, has problems with time management and perceiving non-verbal, social and cultural cues.

These are just some of the ways learning disabilities impact on one's life, creating consequences on living skills most of us take for granted. The invisible nature of LD often creates misperceptions of laziness or stupidity which can leave the person with LD feeling helpless, incapable and isolated. "Once thought to be a childhood issue, LD is in fact a life -long disorder that has serious consequences for up to ten per cent of the population living with it," says Greg Yarrow, executive director of Adult Learning Disabilities Employment Resources (ALDER).

"The majority of our clients refer to schoolyard incidents that planted the seeds that take years to overcome. Through life skills workshops, positive affirmation and coming to terms with the misunderstandings of their LD and responsibilities and working through these challenges, we are able to make these people more productive members of society," says Yarrow.

"In an increasingly competitive and complex world, people with LD are often at a disadvantage but at the same time offer unique perspectives to enable themselves, employers and society to find new

ways of being competitive and overcome societal challenges, “ he adds.

While the needs of children and families affected by LD were being met by local learning disability agencies, ALDER’s founder Sheri Cohen recognized a gap existed in services for youth and adults. Thus the idea to create a multi-service centre for working-age people with learning disabilities was born. After commissioning a needs assessment which verified her hunches, Cohen, with the assistance of friends and colleagues, went about laying the foundation for the ALDER in 1997.

Two years ago with an expansion in service, ALDER opened its new office at Front and Jarvis. ALDER is truly a one-stop shopping resource that offers a range of services including pre-employment services such as resume writing and interview preparation, employment counselling, job coaching and development, as well as a resource centre with adaptive technology.

Greg Yarrow, who succeeded Cohen in 2005, like his predecessor, sees his primary mission as to achieve sustainability by ensuring that ALDER has a range of revenue and income sources.

Included in this approach are partnerships with other agencies such as Project GOLD (funded by Service Canada), a joint project with JVS Toronto that offers career counselling, workshops, job development and placement. Other opportunities include an increased focus on serving the needs of employers through such areas as workshops, coaching, adaptive technology and accessibility audits.

“With stress –based EAP cases and stress-based leave increasing markedly, cost and productivity issues with employers are becoming huge issues and ALDER has services that can address some of those problems, “says Yarrow.

As a person living day-to-day with LD, Gladys recognizes that one thing that both disabled employees and the people who employ them can help resolve the challenges associated with invisible disabilities. “The way you deal with LD is in the attitude,” says Gladys. “If you see it as a cross to bear, it’s difficult to see the positive. It’s always good to recognize your strengths, which is something we all need to do. It’s

easy to get frustrated, and every so often you have to remind yourself that you are a good person. ALDER has helped me do that.”

For his part, Yarrow looks forward to the day when learning disabilities are no longer an issue and people are seen for who they really are.

“Sustainability is only the first step in developing ALDER. Eventually, we would like to be able to provide broadening and deepening our services so that all our clients’ needs are met. Eventually we would like to create a spectrum of services that uses a more holistic approach to address the complete needs of individuals with LD and see them as whole people. We are more than just our jobs and this gives us vision for the future.”

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