

More than Meets the Eye

Arlington siblings want to provide support and insight for other dyslexics while having fun.

BY AMBER HEALY
THE CONNECTION

Jack and Sara Jane Owens are like many brothers and sisters. They get along, they help each other out, they playfully tease each other and know when to let the other shine.

They share one more thing that other people can't tell from a quick glance: They're both dyslexic.

Jack, a junior at Yorktown High School, was diagnosed with the learning disability at the end of third grade, and Sara Jane, an eighth grader at Williamsburg Middle School, just two years ago.

"Once I was diagnosed, we knew we needed to do something to teach me differently," said Jack, a teenager with a fondness for technology.

Dyslexia is a neurological condition that some people are born with, said Donna Owens, Jack and Sara Jane's mother. People who have it tend to have difficulty with reading, spelling and speaking, but are highly intelligent and very capable in other ways. For many parents and children, until there's a diagnosis, it's hard to understand why a bright child who excels in other capacities struggles to read or write, she said.

She and her husband, Jeff, had a little difficulty getting the help Jack needed in school upon his diagnosis, so they removed their children and she taught them at home for a year.

"That was an adventure," Jack laughed. He was a year ahead of his age group at the time, so the year he was homeschooled focused mostly in reading and language ability. Then he and his sister spent two years at Edlin School in Reston where both benefitted from the small class sizes before returning to public school.

Students with dyslexia have a harder time with the way school subjects are traditionally taught and tend to be "very three-dimensional thinkers," Jack said. "A page of words is not 3D."

Dyslexics also tend to be very creative people and excellent problem solvers.

"NASA has a lot of dyslexic people there because of how they think," Sara Jane added.

Dyslexia is also more common than most people might think. An estimated 20 percent of the population has struggled with it, but it's possible many dyslexics don't know they have the condition because they



PHOTO BY DONNA OWENS

Sara Jane and Jack Owens have started a group, More Than Dyslexics, for other children and teenagers who, like themselves, are thriving with dyslexia.

feel embarrassed or ashamed by their learning difficulties.

Sara Jane's own diagnosis came at the end of sixth grade but might've come later, if her parents weren't already watching for symptoms. Given the accommodations already made for her brother's learning challenges, there were learning tools in abundance in their home, including learning apps and books on CD that were available.

"We used to joke that she was our undiagnosed dyslexic," Donna Owens said. "We knew how to compensate so much for Jack. We were just doing that automatically for Sara Jane."

Now both are doing well in school with the help of assistants and in-class support, along with individualized education programs (IEPs) and teachers who are aware of what it takes to help them learn, she said. And the family, which includes a younger daughter, knows how fortunate Jack and Sara Jane are to have each other to rely on and learn from, something other students might not have.

"Watching Jack, that helped me figure out everything," Sara Jane said. "I've always felt like I was like Jack but I never figured I was exactly like that," struggling with dyslexia.

But now that she knows, she wants to help other children in their position.

Last spring, Jack and Sara Jane decided to start a group, More Than Dyslexics (MTD), as a way for other dyslexic students to know they're not alone and to learn from each other while having fun. Jack knew other students his age who were dyslexic, but Sara Jane didn't know anyone, other than her brother.

"It's something people hide," she said. "You can't tell by looking at someone [that they're dyslexic]. People don't like to share that about themselves. But you can't be yourself if you're hiding yourself."

There's a website and a Facebook group the Owens teenagers have started, and Sara Jane is working toward having shirts made with the group's logo, which she designed.

Jack went with his mom to a meeting for parents whose children have learning difficulties over the summer to talk about MTD, and other children are starting to respond.

The first event the group had in the fall had about 10 attendees; the second had 20. Nearly a dozen have already RSVP'd for the third event, scheduled for this Sunday, Feb. 22, in Arlington.

It's sometimes more difficult to get students to want to participate or talk about their dyslexia, Donna Owens said.

It's part of the reason Jack and Sara Jane have told MTD members to bring friends with them, to help bring them out into the open. Having friends around makes it easier to open up and talk about what's going on without being self-conscious, they said.

Already, parents are appreciative of what MTD is trying to do for dyslexic children.

Cloe Chin, who organized Decoding Dyslexia, a group for parents with dyslexic children, said she thinks knowing Jack and Sara Jane is beneficial to her son who is dealing with the condition as a fourth grader. The group has grown from 20 members to more than 110.

Chin has been advocating for better training and education for teachers who might have dyslexic students to help them understand how those students learn, but said that in many cases, teachers or others inside schools might not be able to use "dys-

lexic" when talking to parents about their child's struggles. Allusions can be made to having symptoms similar to dyslexia, but drawing a direct line is advised against unless an expert is called in for consultation.

Her own son is very bright but was reading well below grade level before his diagnosis. "It's tough because kids don't ever want to be labeled," especially as different from their friends, she said of her family's experience.

For Jack and Sara Jane to step up is empowering, she said.

"Kids need to step up and advocate for themselves," Chin said. It could be easy for teachers to pass judgment on a student who has trouble reading or spelling without understanding the education difficulty they're facing.

At the beginning of this school year, she had her son write a letter to his teachers explaining his dyslexia and how he learns. She's also proud he has Jack and Sara Jane to look up to as he moves through school.

"I think it's phenomenal," she said of MTD. "Lots of the kids that have dyslexia don't know other kids with dyslexia. I look at Jack and Sara Jane and how they make this out to be a positive thing. We are not misfits, we're cool, look how creative we can be."

That creativity came in handy for Nancy Van Doren when she was running for election to the Arlington County School Board. Knowing the Owens family from Donna Owens' work on special education issues — Van Doren previously served as chair of the school district's special education advisory committee, a position Donna Owens now holds — and their work on her campaign, Jack volunteered to help with the new media portion.

"Jack is a real wiz with computers and software," Van Doren said. "He offered to start a website for me and I wanted to learn."

Within a couple of days, he had a website, a logo for it, content pages posted. He set up the back operations for it, a database that collected the information people provided, and he also set up PayPal so people could make contributions. It was all so seamless. I was unbelievably impressed and thrilled."

As the mother of a daughter who has some special education needs, Van Doren said it's important that dys-

lexic children and others are mainstreamed in classrooms and not relegated to separate classrooms. That's part of the reason she asked Jack to introduce her during an important campaign event, even if others had suggested she not make special education issues a keystone of her campaign.

"Arlington is blessed to have them move here," she said of the Owens family. "I'm really grateful they're here."

"People don't like to share that about themselves. But you can't be yourself if you're hiding yourself."

— Sara Jane Owens

More Than Dyslexics

To learn more about the group and get involved, go to <http://www.morethandyslexics.com/> or www.facebook.com/morethandyslexics. MTD is hosting an event for students with dyslexia this Sunday, Feb. 22, at a Pinzimini restaurant inside the Westin Arlington Gateway Hotel, 801 North Glebe Road, starting at 12:30 p.m. The event will include a guest speaker, author Gary Karton, followed by a discussion on technology and skating at the Kettler Ice Rink. More information on the event is available on MTD's website.