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Reversal of fortune

Building a successful business was easy compared to overcoming dyslexia

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Eight years ago, when Richard Carey launched his cast-stone business, he had neither a business degree nor a background in structural engineering.

In fact, he had never even read a book all the way through.

Today, he is chief executive officer of Stone Legends, a 9-acre facility in South Dallas with 115 employees.

"If you ask me how I did it, all I can tell you is I don't know," he says.

Mr. Carey belongs to a group of Americans, numbering into the hundreds of thousands, who are dealing with dyslexia, a broad term describing a difficulty in learning to read.

An often misunderstood condition, dyslexia affects up to one-fifth of the population, according to some researchers. The reading difficulties do not affect other types of learning, and in many cases, dyslexics have shown an ability to master complex subjects, from physics to fine arts.

For Mr. Carey, his talent emerged early on in the area of craftsmanship. He still has photographs of a finely detailed walnut gun cabinet he made while a student at Irving's MacArthur High School.

"I pretty much cheated and bluffed my way through high school," he says. "[But] the one thing I did learn was that I was good with my hands. To this day I won't let anybody put down people who work with their hands. It saved my life."

It was only a few years ago that Mr. Carey realized why he had trouble learning to read. He had gone to give a home-remodeling bid to a retired schoolteacher.

After talking a while, she began to ask personal questions - whether reading gave him headaches, if certain words looked backward, if he had been disruptive in class. She told him he was probably dyslexic.

"Up to then, I knew I had a problem, but I didn't know why. All I knew was that I wasn't stupid," he says. "I certainly didn't know what [dyslexic] meant. Back then, I don't think hardly anybody knew much about it."

! To compensate, he worked hard. He still does.

Mr. Carey's workday begins around 8:30 a.m., and he is often still at work until 7 p.m. Stone Legends is spread out over several buildings where the various dormers, lintels, columns, finials, balustrades, staircases, window casings, fireplaces, fountains and gazebos take shape.

Customers come from all parts of the country - with all kinds of requests.

Joe Amato, a world-champion drag racer, is building a home with an eight-car garage on a golf course in northern Pennsylvania.

"Their attention to detail impressed me. It's pretty complex when you start building a house. You have to get everything right the first time. And the fact that they had people sitting at computers doing blueprints really impressed me. I told Richard that if he does everything right, he could come out and play golf when the house is finished."

Mr. Carey has a full-time job at home, too: Four years ago he gained custody of his five children after a divorce. He, his daughter and four sons settled into North Dallas.

Nicole, the 18-year-old daughter, has since headed off to work for a military family in Alaska, while Blaine, 21, is learning the family business from the ground up. Richard Jr., 15; Matthew, 12; and Nathan, 10; are still in school. Matthew is also dyslexic, but receiving help for it at school.

"I didn't ever want Matt to go through what I went through," Mr. Carey says. "And so far he's doing OK."

Well, maybe a little better than OK. Initially sheepish about discussing his dyslexia, Matt warms to talking about his accomplishments. He claims physical education as his favorite subject, but it's clear he's also interested in art.

"Well, I did do a painting that got one of the highest bids at a school auction," he says, after some prodding from his brothers. "I was pretty proud of that."

As a young boy, Richard Carey couldn't wait to start school. His mother, LaBarbara Carey, recalls his enthusiasm even on his first day of school.

"Richard always had a mind of his own," Mrs. Carey says. "When he got this idea in his head that he had to have certain crayons and pencils and stuff, I took him to get the things he thought he needed. Then we had to stand in line to wait our turn to talk to the teacher.

"He stood there and fidgeted, twisting this little sack. When we got to the teacher's

desk, he slammed it on her desk and said, "Here's my junk!" He was ready to go," Mrs. Carey says.

"His first-grade teacher was wonderful. And he really liked her. But she retired the next year."

And things turned sour.

"We knew he was having trouble with reading, but we didn't know why," Mrs. Carey says. "His dad was trying to work with him at home, but it made him very nervous. Then, in second grade, he had a teacher who was real young. She singled him out and ridiculed him. She made him feel inferior and insecure.

"He was 7, and I was 26. I wasn't very old, and I didn't know that much about school. When I was growing up, the teacher was always right."

Parents and friends helped him along.

"Until seventh grade I did all of his homework with him. I didn't know what the problem was. I just knew reading was so hard for him," Mrs. Carey says.

But memorizing was easy.

"If he heard something, he knew it," she says.

Mr. Carey managed to get through MacArthur High School despite frequent trips to the principal's office for disciplinary problems. His most notable achievements were in wrestling, diving and vocational education.

"What I do know is I will never forgive the teachers who kept passing me and passing me, knowing I couldn't read. They used to put me up in front of the class and try to make me read stuff. It was terrible. I'd cut up and get in trouble just to get out of class. Teachers started in on me in second grade, and the psychological damage lasts to this day."

Mr. Carey knocked around for years, putting his carpentry skills to work and working for private contractors.

"I worked for people until this one guy screwed me out of some money, and I decided on the spot that I would never let that happen to me again," he says. "He paid me, then stopped payment on the check. I had a lawyer friend take care of it for me, but it was the last time I worked for anyone else."

He went into the remodeling business for himself.

"I lost money, made money and broke even by the fourth year," he says. "I started looking around for something else to do."

He got interested in flying ultralight airplanes and traveled the country flying. He planned to make parts for the planes. Unfortunately, a prospective partner was killed in a plane crash, and Mr. Carey's manufacturing plans died with him.

Mr. Carey was consulting for manufacturing companies when he decided to start his cast-stone business.

"I used every penny I earned on small jobs to expand and take on a little more, and a little more. There were times when I didn't know how I would make my payroll,

and I only had to pay six people."

It's too soon to tell whether any of his sons will follow in their father's footsteps. But Mr. Carey's brother is already on board as president of Stone Legend's sister company, Stone Magic, which makes and markets fireplaces.

Fred Carey, 39, is among the group of schoolmates who helped Richard Carey get through school. They include Steven New, a childhood friend and paralegal who is training to become Stone Magic's sales manager.

"We've been friends since we were about 10, and I used to do his homework. It was just something I felt I needed to do to help him out," Mr. New says. "I don't think when you're that age you give much thought to anything one way or another. We all knew Richard was smart. He was just, well, shall we say, different. Most of all, though, he was my friend."

Right now, Mr. Carey is interested in launching a community project with nearby Lincoln High School: He wants to build a! n off-site factory for kids where they can learn to make cast stone an d get exposed to the world of skilled trades.

"You want to talk about giving back to the community?" he asks rhetorically.

"What better way is there than teaching kids how to earn a living making something lasting with their hands?"

"In a way, I guess I'm still making up for that second-grade teacher. If I can bring other kids along, well, that's the best way to prove her wrong."

"In a way, I guess I'm still making up for that second-grade teacher. If I can bring other kids along, well, that's the best way to prove her wrong."

Caption:

PHOTO(S):(1. - 3. The Dallas Morning News: Allison V. Smith) 1. Richard Carey wrestles with three of his children (from top left), Matthew, 12; Nathan, 10; and Richard Jr., 15. 2. "To this day," says Richard Carey, "I won't let anybody put down people who work with their hands. It saved my life . 3. Kinh Nguyen (left) and Felipe Diaz work at Stone Legends, Mr. Carey's cast-stone manufacturing company. 4. Churchill 5. Goldberg CHART(S): THEYOVERCAME.;

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