

Decoding dyslexia: Quail Creek women create speciality books

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Reading and writing present unique challenges for young people with dyslexia.

The learning disability causes difficulties with misspellings, sound awareness and relating to letters and words.

Author Yasmin John-Thorpe, who winters in Quail Creek, never planned to write specifically for young readers with dyslexia. But, when she met Cheryl Anthony, a dyslexia consultant who has run several businesses catered to people with dyslexia, it opened her eyes.

“In 2019, she approached my table during the craft sale and she bought my books and then she made me do a podcast,” she said. “I asked why we are doing a podcast and she said, 'Well, your books are too hard for my students to read.' And I have to say I went home and it bothered me that there would actually be students who couldn't read my books.”

From there, the pair got to work on creating a series of decodable books — designed to help young people decode words rather than guess.



These types of books are specially designed to just include specific letter to sound patterns that students have already been taught and they contain very few academic words,” Anthony said. “You only give kids the words you've taught them, the patterns you've taught them. We're not going to 'guess and go,' we are actually going to decode or read those words.”

When they reached out to Anza Trail School second-grade teacher Becky Hill, it was a project that spoke to the teacher's heart. She has dyslexia herself.

“I understand the struggles,” she said. “Even though some aren't diagnosed I can tell who's dyslexic in my class. They're my people and I just understand the

emotional struggle they go through. It's like helping them not just with reading, but also the emotional side.”

Through a donation by the Caring Hearts and Hands of Quail Creek, Hill will now have a set of the books to use with her students who are struggling with reading.



Creating the books

John-Thorpe and Anthony have now created several sets of 11 books each, which all build off each other. Their next goal is to get them into the hands of children at local schools.

John-Thorpe said writing the books is a challenge, given the set parameters given to her by Anthony, who created a binder of guidelines for writing with dyslexia in mind.

“It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do because I can sit and write a book in two or three hours and get them illustrated,” she said. “She gives me this binder and I can only use certain words. Sometimes it takes a week to write a line for an eight-page book.”

Anthony said the guidelines are based on a system called the Orton–Gillingham System.

“I took that scope and sequence and that's what I gave her to say we are going to start here at this beginning level and we will follow the scope and sequence of instruction so every new book that comes out is built on a prior pattern,” she said. “Now, we're going to increase the difficulty or knowledge base a bit and continue. It's layered instruction and practice that correspond.”

The goal isn't to have students memorize words or use pictures to guess how a word might sound, it's about learning patterns.

“The brain will map it and retrieve it but we want students to have the letter to sound pattern so whenever they see that pattern or word they can sound it out,” she said. “It's not that they have memorized words.”

Hill knows first hand how important decoding is for a young person who's coping with dyslexia.

“At a young age I started accommodating myself by making little symbols to show me these letters make this sound,” she said. “That's how I taught myself, so I understood how important it was using decodable patterns to read.”

Bigger picture

Anthony, who also lives in Quail Creek, has been working with students with dyslexia for years and runs the Southern Arizona Educational Services, providing screenings for dyslexia, advocacy and training.

She said finding the proper resources for children is a game-changer.

“There’s resistance at first when you’re providing the intervention because they don’t want to show you what they don’t know,” she said. “They’re embarrassed, but very soon, once you start providing support they need the excitement comes and resistance goes...like, ‘I can do it.’”

She said decodable books have been around but are just starting to catch on. And, so is the educational world.

“The decodable books are kind of at the forefront of let’s provide appropriate instruction in our school systems and get more kids to be literate,” she said. “States around the country are passing laws legislatively to say school districts have to test for markers or difficulties. Now we will know there is a percentage of students who have red flags. What are the instructional tools there?”

Sahuarita Unified School District has recently started dyslexia screenings and offering monthly reading connection nights on Zoom to help students and parents.

Anthony has been helping with the reading nights and has also provided training to SUSD teachers on dyslexia.



For Hill, who shares her experience at the district and provides professional development to teachers related to dyslexia, the diagnosis of dyslexia can be a huge help.

“It helps so much when your diagnosed,” she said. “It’s like I’m not slow, I’m trying, oh I’m dyslexic. There’s a process and that’s OK. I need accommodations.”

She wasn’t diagnosed until she was 30 and in college, and said it changed everything.

She's most excited to see her students have that moment of understanding.

“They become so happy and confident and we celebrate,” she said. “To see the growth...understanding the letter and sound pattern, and being able to use that and adopt it and further their reading...they’re like, ‘I remember I know this word.’ They relate the prior knowledge and it's just incredible. ”

They are now trying to drum up support in the community in the form of groups purchasing and donating a set of books.

Along with the Caring Hearts and Hands groups, the Jetsetters of QC have also sponsored a set for Continental Elementary School. They are hopeful to see sets of the books get into libraries and other schools in the area.