

Where Are They Now?

Honors Student Addresses South Dakota Reading Recovery Conference

Pat Fostvedt-Oxendale, Reading Recovery Teacher Leader, Western Hills Area Education Agency, Sioux City, Iowa

Jessy Ohl, a 1992 Reading Recovery student from Denison Elementary, addressed The University of South Dakota's 8th Annual Regional Conference this fall. Now a high school junior, Jessy is still the talkative, positive, polite, outgoing student he was when I visited his lessons ten years ago. He was a first-round student in a school with full Reading Recovery implementation. His scores on Clay's Observation Survey placed him as the third lowest for literacy development of the four first-grade classrooms.

Mrs. Nelson, one of Jessy's first-grade classroom teachers, described him as "a high-level thinker with a large vocabulary who had difficulty putting everything together with print." My notes from school visits early in his program indicate that he had a difficult time with one-to-one matching and using known words to help monitor his own reading. After a full program, Jessy's intervention was discontinued when he demonstrated successful reading on higher-level texts and the ability to write a story consisting of several sentences.

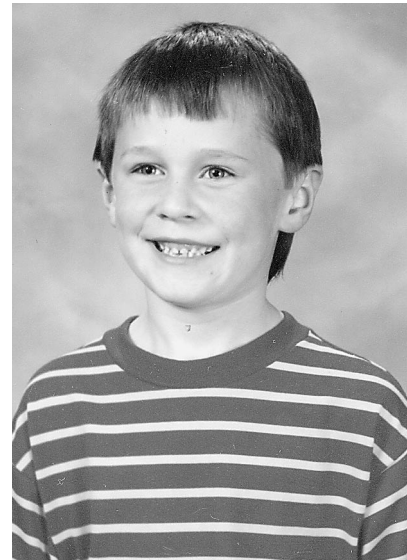
I recently visited with Jessy and his teachers. I asked Jessy if he remembered coming to Reading Recovery lessons. He smiled and said, "Yes, I liked going to reading with Mrs. Baughman because she made it fun!" He added that his lessons were at the same time as gym class. "Imagine a first-grade boy missing gym!" While he didn't remember any specific books, he thought they were all fun to read. During writing, he loved to orally compose long, involved stories.

His teacher's task was to edit the story to encourage Jessy to write most of it himself.

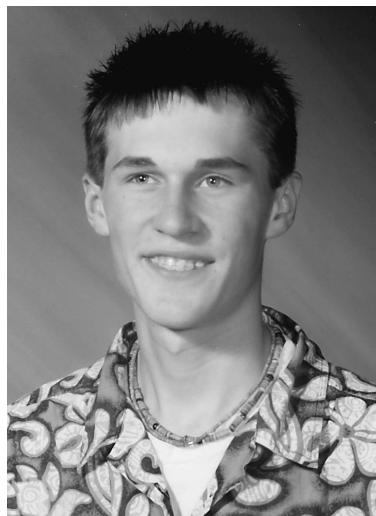
Mrs. Nelson, Jessy's afternoon first-grade teacher, reminded him how much he liked dinosaurs and how he had dominated the classroom discussions during science with dinosaur facts. She jokingly admitted that she did evening research to check his facts. "They were always correct!" she said.

Mrs. Wiebers, his morning first-grade teacher, shared a piece of his classroom writing: "We are going to the zoo. We are trine [trying] to do are [our] best to help the anms [animals] hat [that] are going astenct [extinct]." Jessy commented that he is interested in many different fields such as evolutionary biology, paleontology, acting, and writing.

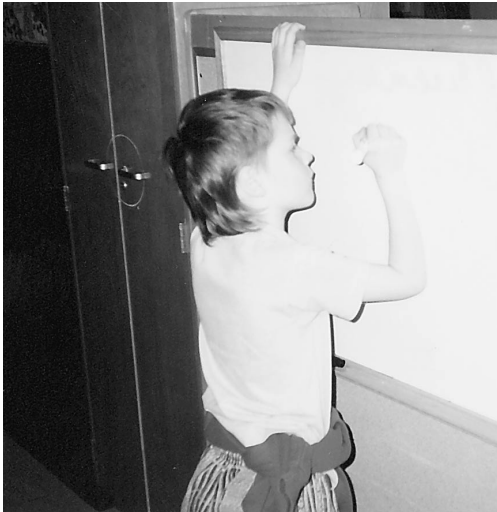
I also learned that in first grade, his classroom teachers had recommended him to the extended learning (talented



Jessy Ohl, age 6, Reading Recovery student.



Jessy Ohl, high school junior.



Jessy Ohl wrote on a white board during his Reading Recovery lesson in 1992.

and gifted) program. He was denied acceptance because of the perception that Title I and Reading Recovery

students would not qualify—a belief that has since changed.

Jessy’s academic abilities, enthusiasm, motivation, and excellent verbal skills have earned him a place in the high school honors program. He has earned letters in academics, choir, and tennis. He is a member of the National Forensic League and Iowa Speech Association. He participates in speech, debate, and poetry contests as well as original oratory. His Destination Imagination team has received several Division I ratings for their performances in improvisational skits at the state contests.

Jessy’s teachers were in unanimous agreement that parental support and Jessy’s motivation to learn were integral to his literacy development. Jessy’s success story is a model to encourage

future Reading Recovery students to access the academic support opportunities available in their schools.

Note: Contributors to this story demonstrated the teamwork that leads to Reading Recovery student success. Though the story was written by Pat Fostvedt-Oxendale, teacher leader at Western Hills Area Education Agency, Sioux City, Iowa, three other teachers provided information to tell the story: Marlene Baughman, Reading Recovery/Title I teacher at Denison Elementary in Denison, Iowa; Sandy Nelson, a second-grade teacher and former Reading Recovery teacher at Denison Elementary; and Sarah Wiebers, a Reading Recovery teacher and former first-grade teacher at Denison Elementary.

Jessy Talks About Reading Recovery and His Life

Speech by Jessy Ohl, a former Reading Recovery student, to the Reading Recovery Conference at the University of South Dakota, October 24, 2002, at Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Jessy is now a high school junior at Denison High School in Sioux City, Iowa.

There once lived a child who couldn’t read very well. He was interested in life but could barely be silenced long enough to understand what the teacher was saying. He was fascinated by the world and knew the importance of knowledge. His goal was to learn everything and be the best he could possibly be.

His vision was a little distorted, however. He just figured he could go through life by talking and writing. He didn’t believe he really needed to

be a good reader, although he hit a snag when he wasn’t actually able to read what he had written.

This child was me, Jessy Ohl. I’ll be honest, I’m sure I was quite the handful for my teachers. They told me years later I was an intelligent, joyful, talkative child. Hmmm...I remember the talkative part.

I was a dreamer from the start. My mind was always off to some far-off land. It was difficult to focus on the task at hand. I was having too much fun to focus on one of the most important things in life, the ability to read. Luckily I had people who saw a grander picture. They understood my dreams and had a vision of how to achieve them. They told me, “Jessy, if you want all those things you have to

be able to read.” (Deep breath!) “Okay, I started reading.”

I was enrolled in Reading Recovery in the first grade. My teacher, Mrs. Baughman, was a gem and I took to her immediately. She was different from other teachers. She was a child at heart, and a kid could relate to her. She was my reading instructor who would write for me since my mind would go faster than my little hands. She was like a tool I loved to use. I knew not at the time what she was doing for me, I just pictured it as a type of playtime. But she was giving me the tools I would need for the rest of my adult life. And unbeknownst to me, my future was being structured.

By the second grade a terrible thing happened. I graduated from Reading

Recovery. Reading Recovery was like playtime, but playtime was over and I rejoined my classmates with my new skills. In every sense of the word I was a romantic from the beginning. I knew the wonders that the world held and didn't want to miss them for anything. So I made sure I wasn't going to be caught reading while some great cosmic phenomenon occurred. I loved so many different things that reading wasn't a priority. I just didn't care for it too much. I couldn't visualize the stories very well, so I decided to go outside and find my own stories.

Years and long summer days moved by quickly, so quickly in fact I have to stretch for the memories. I was beginning to mature and finally settle down—which was good for my Mom since she always kept saying to my Dad, “Honey, how many more years till college?”

Once I finally settled down, a few unforgotten skills began to emerge like grass after the winter snows. The ability to read seemed to have followed me until I needed it. Like a following shadow, the capability followed. The kid who once used books as projectiles in catapults started to read them. Yeah, even enjoyed them. I found that my imagination had no limits if given the right directions.

Books were the direction I needed to take me into the horizons I had dreamed about. I developed a pretty neat philosophy: if I wasn't doing anything I might as well have been reading and improving myself. So I did so, whenever I had a spare moment I would read. Bookstores became a favorite hangout. I felt institutionalized and important in front of so many life stories and souls that were on paper. I wasn't quite aware of it at the time, but the reading made me

stronger. I learned how to improve my life by listening to the events of other peoples. If you let them, books will change you. They all have underlying themes to improve your life: you just have to look for them. This interpretation cannot be learned in school. Before you can feel the books, you need to first have the raw materials, the ability to read. Luckily I had acquired this earlier on. The capacity to read was an essential part of my life. Without it I could not have been moved by the words I saw on paper.

I believe that the people we become are the results of what we experienced, learned, and read. It's scary to think of who I might be today if I wouldn't have been able to learn from books. I realized I owed Mrs. Baughman and my other teachers a great deal, for without them I wouldn't have become the person I was destined to be.

I believe it is important that teachers never lose sight of that. A child will go and search out his or her own destiny. The important thing a teacher can do is make sure that they have what they need when they get there. I might have been lost if my teachers had forgotten this. Luckily they never did, if only everyone else could have been so fortunate. You have to always keep in mind that children don't have the perception to really understand how important reading will be. Since they lack the vision at that age, it is important not to give up, because even if it is not apparent at the time, you are making a difference.

This has brought you up to speed to the time I became a freshman. Like all kids that age, I went through this whole self-discovery thing, not quite sure where I started and the rest of the world ended. Slowly but surely I became acquainted with an old friend,



Success in Reading Recovery means collaboration among Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers. These three teachers met with Jessy recently to recall his early literacy learning. L-R, Sandy Nelson, Jessy Ohl, Marlene Baughman, and Sarah Wiebers.

myself. I really believe reading can be a journey of self-discovery.

I owe my accomplishments to my family and my teachers. I have had nothing but support and was able to grow from this support. My family has been an indispensable factor to my success. I never gave up on myself because my family never did. They stood by me and helped me through my reading troubles from the start. The reading program I was enrolled in has greatly influenced my life and I hope I have shown you how this program has greatly helped this one person. I'm not quite sure what I want to pursue outside of high school yet. But I am certain wherever I go, I will get there from reading and I'll be ready for it, due in great part to Reading Recovery.