

## **Arrowsmith School: Exercising the brain**

**Lauren Gilchrist**

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Imagine getting lost inside an apartment building and not being able to find your way out, having to read something 15 times before understanding it or only being able to spell simple words like 'the, at, I.'

This was Bronwyn Scott's world for the first 13 years of her life before she became a student at Peterborough's Arrowsmith School.

When Bronwyn talks about growing up with a learning disability her voice bubbles over with emotion. It's not sadness in her voice or regret but frustration. Complete frustration at having spent so many years not understanding.

"The world is a completely different place, you don't understand anything. I didn't feel like I fit in at all," says the outgoing 15-year-old.

While attending James Strath Public School in Grade 1 Bronwyn's parents Ray and Lois had her tested privately and she was identified as having visual and spatial dyslexia.

Bronwyn's dyslexia doesn't mean she isn't smart. In fact, her overall intelligence tested above average. But the dyslexia meant she wasn't able to succeed in a regular classroom setting and needed extra support.

Bronwyn was placed in a composite classroom at James Strath for four years where the student-to-teacher ratio was 10 to one.

"We were told Bronwyn had the best the school had to offer," says Mrs. Scott.

Even with that added help from supportive teachers she wasn't making any progress. Her parents knew she was sinking fast and they didn't know where to turn.

"When you've got a child like this in the school system it's very stressful for the child and very stressful for the home. But you're struggling because you think that's the only way to do it," explains Mrs. Scott.

Her parents knew that having made no progress in elementary school, high school for Bronwyn would be a complete nightmare. Something had to change.

In April 2005 they pulled her out of the public school system and placed her in Arrowsmith School.

At first glance the one-room schoolhouse on Chemong Road looks like any other classroom. But a closer look reveals it is much different. First, there are only 11 students. Some sit quietly at their desks neatly tracing shapes over and over again with a patch covering one eye, while others work on computers. Instead of learning academic subjects like math and history, these students learn to strengthen weak brain areas.

The Arrowsmith School was first established in Toronto in 1980 by Peterborough native Barbara Arrowsmith Young. Like many of the students she now helps, Ms Young also grew up with a learning disorder.

The philosophy of the Arrowsmith program is that it's possible to treat learning disabilities by identifying and strengthening weak brain capacities. Ms Young developed specific exercises for 19 brain areas that underperform in people with learning disabilities.

"It's a completely individualized program," explains Jill Suggitt, principal of Peterborough's Arrowsmith School.

From 8:45 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. each day Ms Suggitt's students make their brain's weak areas stronger by repeating the same exercises.

The goal of the program is to have students return to a regular school at their appropriate grade level after completing either two or four years at Arrowsmith.

Bronwyn has been at the school for a year-and-a-half. She beams from ear to ear when talking about her results. In that short time her reading comprehension has gone up 3.5 grade levels, her reading speed up one grade level and her word recognition and phonics up two grade levels.

Before joining the school Bronwyn says it took her months to read one book, now it only takes a couple of weeks.

"Now I love reading, which sound like a quote from a commercial, but it's true," she says laughing.

Her attention span has also changed remarkably as well as her ability to organize.

"I can do more than I ever imagined before," she says.

Mrs. Scott says so much of Bronwyn's energy in the public system was spent on just surviving.

"For a lot of these children it's so stressful trying to keep up on all the pieces of school life," she says.

Although her parents say the school is worth every penny, their daughter's success comes with a hefty price tag. One year at the school is approximately \$17,000 a year. Mr. Scott questions why the local public school board will not offer the program to its students when other boards, like the Toronto Catholic school board are doing just that.

Cathy Montreuil, principal of special services for the local public school board, says the board has looked at the program, but there is not enough hard evidence to show the program will benefit the majority of their students.

"What we do is we offer a variety of services based on assessed strengths and needs of a student," she affirms, noting the board spent \$600,000 last year on specialized equipment for special needs students.

Ms Montreuil says this year's Education Quality Accountability Office test results for elementary students show the board's special needs students are above the provincial average.

"We're dedicated to making sure every student shows growth over time," she says.

Ms Montreuil says if parents are not satisfied they can ask for more support from special services at the board office. But Mr. Scott disagrees.

"There's been absolutely no interest shown and a fair amount of criticism for the Arrowsmith program here. It's the Arrowsmith program they question. They've been presented the evidence yet they proceed to deny its [effectiveness]. They're just refusing to consider that because of their biases," he says.

"It's really a moral issue because students are going down the drain."

Ms Suggitt has all the hard numbers to show the Arrowsmith program is working and more than that, the evidence is all around her.

"These are bright kids, that's what we get them to realize," she says.

"Their gifts are now able to shine through."