



Pepper Golesh, struggles for hours on end to understand mathematical concepts.

Diane Varni

## Group helps dyslexics, others

By CANDACE ATKINS  
LIVING PAGE EDITOR

**B**Y THE END of the film, several people in the audience had pulled out their handkerchiefs. Others nodded their heads in sad agreement. A few stared at nothing.

The film was "I'm Not Stupid," a documentary on learning disabilities narrated by race car driver Jackie Stewart and featuring children and adults who struggle every day with senses that can distort the written and spoken word.

The hourlong presentation was sponsored by the local chapter of the Learning Disabilities Association of California. The 75 people who attended was the group's largest audience so far.

"It was wonderful," said founding member Pepper Golesh. "After starting out by the seat of our pants, to have 75 people at one of our meetings is just wonderful."

Golesh said she wasn't surprised at the strong reactions to the film, which is more upfront than emotional in its presentation. When people with learning disabilities realize for the first time that they aren't stupid, lazy or crazy, she said, their reactions can range from a feeling of numbness to relief to burning anger.

She's had them all. Golesh has several learning disabilities, including dyslexia, a condition that causes the brain to scramble letters and words. For example, a dyslexic may see "bird" as "dirb." Even in mild form, learning disabilities have enormous negative impacts on people's lives, she said.

As with others who have learning disabilities, Golesh didn't know she couldn't distinguish certain sounds, letters

and numbers — that her brain was filled with what amounts to static when she tried to study. She simply believed what people had told her since she was a child: She was dumb.

When her three children were raised, Golesh, at "50 plus" in age, decided to give school another try. She enrolled at Cabrillo College through the Women's Re-Entry program. As part of her educational plan, she was tested at the college Learning Skills Center for placement in certain classes. The test results showed that Golesh had learning disabilities.

For the first time, she had a name for what was wrong with her. She also found there were a number of other students at the campus who, like her, struggled just to get through the rigors of registration, much less pass college-level classes.

They were a determined bunch, Golesh said. Two of them, Golesh and Karen Sutton, decided to form a support and educational group to help themselves and others, in her words, "jump through the hoops of fire — get through the system."

That was five years ago.

For months, the group was small, but they kept meeting regularly and inviting experts in medicine, education, vocational skills and counseling to speak. They passed the word and attendance grew.

Parents of children who have learning disabilities started attending; teachers and counselors showed up. People from Monterey and Carmel heard about the group and joined. Occasionally, people from as far away as Palo Alto would attend.

Group members had formed a board of directors and organized an advisory board of experts.

Eventually, they went through a name change and became affiliated with the Learning Disabilities Association of California and the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities.

On Saturday, the group will celebrate its fifth birthday from 7 to 9 p.m. at Loudon Nelson Center, 301 Center St. There are now more than 70 paid members, and a mailing list that exceeds 500 recipients, including schools, individuals and service groups.

"The group has evolved from our own needs," she said. "Educators and the general populace need to have a better understanding of what we struggle with. (A person with a learning disability) is perceived as 'someone who should be able to do it.'"

One of the biggest services the group gives, Golesh said, is dispelling such myths.

"People think it (learning disabilities) just affects children," Golesh said. "Children grow up."

People who have learning disabilities aren't retarded. They are often, she said, highly intelligent individuals who need a different way of getting their information.

"But the (educational) system isn't too good at giving us other ways," she said.

A successful teaching technique used with some students is a "multisensory technique" that involves more than listening, reading and writing skills. Students learn by a combination of hands-on lessons that are more activity oriented — they "experience" the information they set out to learn as opposed to traditional passive learning involving only eyesight or hearing.

The method can be time-consuming, requiring extra teaching time and effort. Some schools just can't afford it, or don't even know about it. Students must cope with the traditional educational system of learning. The lucky ones have tutors and extra classes.

Some learn to compensate. Others become isolated and refuse to take part in a world they can't decipher. Still others keep hitting brick walls, becoming aggressive and hostile in their efforts to get what they need — or from sheer frustration.

"Eighty-five to 87 percent of the inmates in prisons have learning disabilities," Golesh said.

Through groups like LDA-CA, the Orton Society, which has a chapter in Monterey, and ACLD, people with learning disabilities and those who work with them have access to information and support. Golesh said it is estimated that one in six families have at least one member who has a learning disability.

"We're trashing so much potential," Golesh said. "I'm one with persistence. But we don't see as many adults with dyslexia (for example) in our group as I know are out there. They don't come. Their energy is (already) drained."

**The LDA-CA, Santa Cruz Chapter, is open to anyone. Dues are \$30 per year, which includes a quarterly magazine from the national organization and a quarterly magazine from the state. Following Saturday's meeting and anniversary celebration, the group's next meeting will be Nov. 15 at Aptos Library. Details are available by calling 459-9672 or 662-0964.**

New Meeting Place: Twin Lakes Baptist Church, 4105 Cabrillo College Dr., Aptos



# Learning disabilities take many forms

**A** CLASS IN ALGEBRA is all that stands between Pepper Golesh and a diploma from Cabrillo College.

But that class looms before her after repeated and failed attempts at the course, even when aided by tutoring, workshops, seminars, and in her words, "thousands of hours of studying."

Golesh has "dyscalculia," a condition that inhibits her from understanding mathematical concepts and relationships among numbers. It has made her life hell, she says, trying to pass her required algebra course.

Dyscalculia is common among people who have dyslexia, a condition that causes them to confuse letters and words. The manifestation of the learning disabilities can take the appearance of an illit-

erate, stupid or lazy person who can't or won't complete the simplest tasks.

Learning disabilities take many forms. They're often mistaken for a lack of intelligence or social skills.

In children, signs can include trouble expressing themselves or a delay in learning to tie their shoes or tell time.

Children with learning disabilities have trouble paying attention and are easily distracted. They can't seem to follow directions, they may confuse left and right and have trouble learning to read.

They might mix up the order of their letters or numbers in written work.

They get in trouble in social situations, such as recess or lunch time at school. They may have a hard time making and

keeping friends.

As a person with a learning disability grows up, symptoms can change, but the disability remains.

The adult may have a hard time processing verbal information. A simple story may be impossible for a dyslexic to follow.

Learning disabled adults may have chronic problems losing things. They don't organize their time, home or work efficiently.

If they've learned to read, they're slow readers with poor comprehension. They may have trouble remembering names of people and places.

As with children, they have a hard time talking and expressing themselves with the appropriate words.

Letters or reports they've written are often chaotic with misspelled words, little organization of thought and grammatical errors.

They may not be able to recall numbers in a proper sequence.

But some days are better than others, which is a mixed blessing. Some days a learning disabled person has an almost easy time deciphering numbers and letters, but this can lead teachers and family members to think he or she is faking the disability on a bad day.

In addition to getting educational help, experts say those who work with the learning disabled will have more success using a gentle and patient approach, since most learning disabled individuals have poor self esteem as a result of their condition.

—Candace Atkins