

Remembering David Schenck

David Schenck would be one of the first people to tell you about the struggles he had in school. However, it was not until he and his wife Dee volunteered to work at Camp Waya-Awi, a camp for struggling readers in Rangeley, Maine, that he came face to face with his “disability.” It was also at this time that he realized that his struggles had a name. Dr. Samuel Orton called the difficulty “strephosymbolia,” meaning “twisted symbols,” but later the condition became known as “specific language disability,” then “dyslexia,” meaning difficulty with language or words. The couple who ran the camp, Page and Laura Sharp, trained under Dr. Samuel T. Orton. David and Dee worked at the camp for two summers then came to Atlanta.

In 1959, David and Dee Schenck started The Reading School of Atlanta with seven students in the basement of St. Anne’s Episcopal Church in Atlanta. David noted that “It was an insane idea. [He] had no idea what was involved. All those hundreds of little details a sensible person would solve before starting a business never entered [his] thoughts. For a dyslexic person, it is impossible to keep focused on details for any length of time. You just say, ‘Let’s do it; let’s do it.’”

In 1966, a brick house with three acres at the present location of 282 Mt. Paran Road was purchased. The school became incorporated, and the name changed to The Schenck School. By 1974, the enrollment had grown to 62 students and by 1985 there were 74 students. In the 1980’s additional adjoining property was purchased, and plans were being made to remodel the house. During the remodeling, workmen caught the structure on fire and the building was a total loss. Because of the fine reputation of the school, David was able to raise the money to get the school rebuilt. For the first time, the school was housed in a professional looking building. By the 1989 school year, enrollment had grown to 121 students, and by 1994, the enrollment was 150.

At the time the school began, the Orton-Gillingham Approach was delivered one-on-one in tutorial settings and in a very few private schools that served children with dyslexia. These schools had to limit the number of children who could be helped because of their one-on-one delivery. David’s school went counter to this “norm” in that he believed this approach could be delivered effectively in small groups. He also knew that it was essential that teachers be well trained in the OG Approach and that they must also enjoy teaching the language. In the early 1960’s, Mrs. Samuel T. Orton came to Atlanta and spoke to a group of parents and learned about the work David and Dee were doing. She later sent David a letter commending him on his school. He really was a pioneer in the teaching of OG in groups. Over the years, several private schools for children with dyslexia have adopted the practice of small group OG instruction, and more and more public school teachers are being trained to deliver OG to their entire class.

When you look back on all that came together to make The Schenck School, it really was miraculous. There is no way David could have envisioned the impact he would have. He just “happened” upon a camp that helped children with the same struggles in school that he had.

He just “happened” to start a school for kids with dyslexia. There just “happened” to be a fire that destroyed the school in the mid 1980’s which led to the expansion of the school and the number of children it could serve. And of course, it was just happenstance that drew in many talented people to the school over the years to teach, lead, and expand the school’s outreach and mission. Most importantly, though, has been David Schenck himself with his sweet, quiet, reassuring manner and his love for the school, those who have worked here, and all the children who have attended. His legacy continues through the people who have known and have learned from David, and it will continue for many years to come.