



Academy of
Orton-Gillingham
Practitioners
and Educators

Remembering Miss Gillingham

by Diana Hanbury King, Founding Fellow/AOGPE

Excerpt from AOGPE Newsletter July 1996

I began teaching at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. At that time what we called the Language Training Program was directed by Helene Durbow under the aegis of Anna Gillingham. Miss Gillingham visited the school for several days four times a year. She trained teachers and supervised the tutorials designed for dyslexic students enrolled in the program.

I remember her as an imposing figure dressed in a black skirt and white blouse and given to strong expressions of opinion phrased in such a way as to be unforgettable.

She made teachers feel accountable. A left-handed teenager who wrote with a hooked wrist was “a monument to the ignorance or laziness of his teachers.” To a teacher who would protest that she had taught a certain skill, Miss Gillingham would retort, “What the child doesn’t know, the teacher hasn’t taught.”

I recall a dialogue with Jane McClellan, a teacher she was training. It went as follows:

“I see,” said Miss Gillingham, “your student is scheduled to begin Latin next year. How are you planning to help him?”

“I can’t. I don’t know Latin.”

“Well then, you had better start learning it right away.”

And she did.

To teachers who asked about, what is always the most difficult aspect of tutoring, pacing the material, she would say, “You go as fast as you can and as slowly as you must.”

She was sensitive to issues of fairness and always upset by teachers who refused to make concessions to dyslexic students on the grounds that “it wouldn’t be fair.” To make her point, she would tell the following story. As an undergraduate at Radcliffe she remembers watching a group of students standing outside a closed door. They were muttering among themselves, “It isn’t fair.” “Why should she get to use a typewriter for her exams.” “Nobody else is allowed to.” And, behind the closed door, was Helen Keller taking her finals.

Yes, I remember Anna Gillingham.