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‘One...word ... at...a...time’

Henry Winkler tells kids how he copes with a learning disability

BY BEN HOROWITZ STAR-LEDGER STAFF

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In the world of special education, Henry Winkler is as big a hero today as he was on television’s “Happy Days” 30 years ago, when his role as the leather-jacket-wearing, motorcycle-riding “Fonz” made him one of the nation’s most popular actors.

Winkler had to overcome a case of severe, undiagnosed dyslexia to pursue his career.

“Every one of you has greatness in you,” Winkler, now 63, said recently in Short Hills, at a talk sponsored by The Winston School, a private school that serves students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t get a subject,” he told the audience, which included many of the school’s first-grade to eighth-grade students. “How you learn has nothing to do with how great you are. Your job is to find out what your gift is, what your contribution will be.”

Winkler has continued his acting career since “Happy Days” ended its 10-year run in 1984, with dozens of roles on television and in movies. But Winkler’s prominence of late has come as co-author of the Hank Zipzer series of books, which chronicle the misadventures of “The World’s Greatest Underachiever,” a boy with a learning disability similar to his.

In Short Hills, a crowd of about 550 packed the sanctuary at Temple B’nai Jeshurun to hear Winkler. Speaking in rapid-fire, clipped tones that often recalled the cadence used by the Fonz,



Henry Winkler speaks to a packed house recently at Temple B’nai Jeshurun in Short Hills. His talk was sponsored by the Winston School of Short Hills, which serves students with dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities.

Winkler came across as a combination of motivational speaker, concerned parent and stand-up comic.

During his childhood in Manhattan, Winkler recalled, his German-Jewish immigrant parents didn't understand his learning problem. Their nickname for him was the German expression for "dumb dog."

"I was very bad in math, science, spelling, reading, writing and social studies. I was very good in lunch," he said.

And he wasn't much of an athlete, either: "In tetherball, I always got smashed in the face."

"My parents and teachers told me I was stupid, lazy and not living up to my potential," he said.

Winkler, who had wanted to be an actor since he was 7, never attended special education classes, but he managed to make it through high school. He went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Emerson College in Boston and a master's degree in fine arts from the Yale University School of Drama.

At age 31, Winkler said, "I found out, I ain't stupid, I have something with a name — I was dyslexic."

It was a huge relief, Winkler said, and today, he feels grateful for his disability, because it made him work harder and achieve more.

Pamela Bloom, Head of The Winston School, also located in Short Hills, said Winkler was an important guest speaker because her students have a lot in common with his younger self — and that his success can serve as an inspiration.

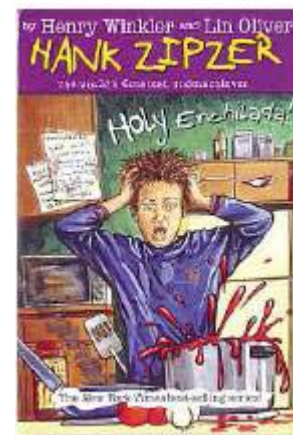
"It's just pencil-and-paper tasks that are difficult for our kids," she said. "The rest of them is fantastic."

During a question-and-answer period, several students asked about the Hank Zipzer books. They were especially interested in knowing if any of the characters were based on real people.

Winkler said he used the real names of two teachers, Ms. Adolf and Mr. Rock.

The hard-hearted Adolf "was an actual teacher," he said.

The kindly Mr. Rock said, " 'You're going to be okay,' but he was the only one," Winkler said.



In U.S. public schools, dyslexic students are classified under the category “specific learning disabilities” when they are recommended for special education programs. About 80 percent of students with a “specific learning disability” have a “primary disability” in reading and language processing — with dyslexia the most common source of that disability, according to the International Dyslexia Association, based in Maryland.

Of the nearly 1.4 million students who attended New Jersey public schools from kindergarten through grade 12 in 2007, there were 90,356 students enrolled in special education programs for specific learning disabilities, or more than 6 percent of the total school population, according to data provided by the state Department of Education.

“There is no difference between a reading disability and dyslexia,” explained Kathleen Selvaggi Fadden, a neuro-developmental pediatrician and medical director in the Child Development Center at Morristown Memorial Hospital. Students thought of as dyslexic generally have a “severe” reading disability, which shows up in several symptoms, Fadden said.

Although the popular perception of dyslexia involves reversing letters, or reversing words, that’s just one of the symptoms, Fadden said.

Dyslexic children are slow to learn the sounds made by letters. After they learn to “tap out” words phonetically, they may find it difficult to remember words without tapping them out each time they see them. Also, they have trouble reading and remembering words that don’t follow phonetic rules.

Winkler and his wife, Stacey, raised two sons and a daughter. Winkler said he decided he would be different from his own parents and he made a point of constantly praising his kids and listening to what they had to say.



Henry Winkler signs an autograph for Winston School student Brianna Ennis, left, shown with her mother, Lisa Ennis, center, and Pamela Bloom, Head of the school.

Winkler's learning disabilities persist to this day, but he said he's learned to deal with them. When he accepts a new TV or movie role, he said, "I get the script early and I read one . . . word . . . at . . . a . . . time."

Also, he said, he enjoys reading mystery novels and thrillers, even though reading remains a challenge. "I keep every book I have read on a special shelf," he said. "Every book I have read is a triumph."