

From picture thinking to reading confidence

Kāpiti facilitator Rachel Barwell is continuing Ron Davis's legacy, helping dyslexic and neurodivergent learners turn perceptual differences into strengths.

Leanne Warr

Rachel Barwell was looking for solutions to help young people for whom traditional teaching methods had already failed. "They were coming to us for another chance at a better education and even the good methods that we had from adult education weren't quite reaching all of the learners," she says.

Wanting to help her students, Rachel, who owns Kapiti-based Master Dyslexia, studied adult literacy and numeracy and came back with a postgraduate diploma feeling more informed, but still not at the root cause, particularly with dyslexia. Then she came across a colleague working with the Davis Method, a programme created by Ron Davis about 40 years ago. Davis, who shared his method with educators and literacy facilitators around the world, died in the US in August at the age of 84.

Considered profoundly disabled as a child, Ron was recognised as autistic before autism had a name. As a teen, he took an IQ test and scored 137 – placing him in the 99th percentile. He became an engineer and later a sculptor, known for his ability to visualise and manipulate objects in his mind.

Reading was a different story. Years later, Ron discovered that when he shifted into a purely visual, nonverbal thinking state, he could understand the source of his reading difficulties – a perceptual talent that sometimes caused disorientation. Learning to control that state allowed him to read with ease, and the insight led to the creation of the Reading Research Council in 1982 and eventually the Davis Mastery programmes for dyslexia, ADHD, dyscalculia and autism.

Rachel became a licensed Davis facilitator six years ago and has been facilitating programmes in Kāpiti since then. She says the method has had a profound impact on clients from children as young as six to adults in their 60s.

"It's important for people to understand that there are methods that can help you become a more easeful reader and writer and understander of text." She says the ultimate goal with reading is to understand the communication and work with it.

Research into dyslexia and other learning differences has found that up to a third of people have some kind of dyslexic or neurodivergent brain. "And that it is a natural phenomenon," Rachel says. "Until recently, we haven't had perhaps the language or the understanding or the recognition that that's the case."

She points out that there are about 37 potential criteria for being dyslexic, with some of the top ones around the idea that a person tends to think more in pictures than in sounds – similar to the way Ron described thinking primarily in pictures and shapes for many years.

"In his discoveries of how to connect the visual world – what he calls the 3D world – to the 2D world, he found pathways that allow visual learners to interact with text and the sounds of words and function well in a very textbased world.

"And then he discovered that there's a phenomenon that happens when a dyslexic person is at their creative best." When he was in his picturethinking mind but had to interface with text, he would lose focus and his capacity to study the words on the page. "Then he created a mechanism to stop that disorientation in the moment."



Ron Davis with his wife Alice in the US. PHOTO / SUPPLIED

Experimenting with how to control it, he was able to read an entire book in a week – something he hadn't achieved before. He began working with adults and eventually opened the Reading Research Council, taking in clients and developing methods for others to use, creating the Davis Dyslexia Association.

Rachel has seen the methods become lifechanging for some of her clients, including a child who was behind in reading and, after the intensive programme, is now thriving as a learner. Last year she worked with a university student who was about to quit because she was getting low marks in her written work, yet high marks elsewhere. "Her supervisors had said, 'you are much better than your academic transcript indicates.'"

After getting help for her dyslexia, the student brought up her marks and has

now started a successful career. The programme also helped her in sport, demonstrating that dyslexia is about more than reading and writing.

"It impacts so much of our life because we don't have compartments in our brain, and really what Ron discovered was that neurodivergent people have perceptual differences. Some of us perceive visually, some kinesthetically, some through how we hear the world. And if we embrace those different perceptual channels and maximise them, then we're going to perform all sorts of things much better."

Ron Davis' work has touched thousands of people with autism, but, as noted by Davis International, his legacy is something that can't be measured in books or numbers. "He changed the story people told themselves about who they were and what they were capable of achieving."