



**This is Connor's story as told by his mother, Corry Miller,
at the Pennsylvania Dyslexia Literacy Coalition's annual
"Dyslexia Awareness Day in Harrisburg"
on October 21, 2015**

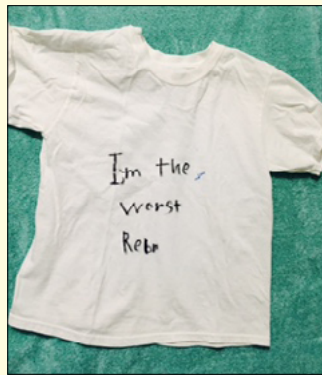
Good Morning. I would like to thank the Pennsylvania Dyslexia Literacy Coalition not only for inviting me to speak today, but for all of the work they do to bring awareness to dyslexia. My name is Corry Miller, and my husband and I live in Erie, Pennsylvania with our eight-year-old son, Connor.

I am here to share Connor's story — the day-to-day challenges and victories we have experienced so far in this journey with dyslexia. I feel very lucky to be able say that Connor's story is in many ways a "best of" scenario but even then — our journey has been filled with frustration, sadness, desperation, and anger.

As early as preschool my husband and I were concerned about Connor's ability to consistently write his letters correctly, remember sight words, and demonstrate any interest or ability in learning to read. There seemed to be a drastic disconnect between his verbal, logic, and processing skills com-

pared with reading and writing. Conference after conference, teacher after teacher, we were told the same things: “You have nothing to be concerned about,” “Kids learn to read at different speeds,” “Everything will magically click for him soon, and he will just begin to read.” After two years of individualized work with a reading specialist at his school and two summers of reading tutoring, he ended his first grade year at the EXACT same level as he entered Kindergarten, with the label of “an emerging reader” unable to read even the most basic words independently.

We were beyond concerned, and Connor was growing more anxious, stressed, and self-conscious. Before he entered second grade we independently attained the services of an education specialist, at a hefty price tag, and after several sessions and a trip to his pediatrician, we were referred to a child psychologist. Connor started second grade extremely vulnerable, feeling like a failure and a disappointment to his family and teachers. He was now well aware of the fact that he was not reading at the same level as his classmates. He was mortified that he was still attempting to read “baby books,” as he called them while his friends were reading chapter books. His inability to read was now impacting his ability to do any of his homework as it now required independent reading of instructions — which he could not even begin to understand. We would spend a tear-filled hour to an hour and a half working on homework that should have taken him 15 minutes. He would repeatedly tell us that he wasn’t smart and was never going to learn to read. Outside of school, he continued to be frustrated and limited in his activities based on his inability to read instructions, labels, and prompts on his iPad, just to name a few. He craved the independence that reading provides children. In my heart I could tell that he was quickly becoming a very sad and defeated child.



The shirt Connor made for himself.

During the first few weeks of second grade, he cried everyday when I dropped him off and every day when I picked him up. At drop off he would tell me, “I know I am not going to get my work done.” Despite my encouragement, I couldn’t help but feel his heartache. The thought of him sitting at his desk, hour after hour, lost and on edge was excruciating. At pick up he would report his perceived failures for the day. One evening, ironically about a year ago — he had a horrible day at school — sobbing the entire 20-minute ride home and much of the evening. And then there was quiet. A few minutes later, Connor appeared

before me, sporting a handmade shirt which read, “I am the worst reader” with of course, the “d” reversed and other misspellings. I couldn’t believe that my bright, articulate, creative son could reach such a low point. What we were to do? We were so lost. The teachers who he spent the majority of his day with were unconcerned, and here was this child — with his heart not on his sleeve, but on the t-shirt

staring back at me. A child from a loving home that had sought only the best for him and encouraged him every day, who felt so worthless he said to me, “I don’t even know why you and Daddy would love me. I can’t read. You probably don’t even want me.”

We continued our work with the psychologists, and after multiple sessions, we were informed — by the psychologist — in his lobby — in front of other families and Connor — that he was dyslexic. We were not surprised, and in many regards despite what we knew was a long road ahead, somewhat relieved to have some answers after two years of struggles. At that point we felt we had a direction. My husband spoke to a coworker whose spouse had helped establish a volunteer-based tutoring program for dyslexic students at a private pa-

rochial school in Erie. We were given the name of the tutor, who happened to live two doors away from us. On what I thought was a limb, I reached out to her and asked if she would be willing to work with Connor. I can honestly say, with that one phone call, my son's life has been forever changed. She is trained in the Barton System, which is a system developed by Susan Barton, and is based on the Orton Gilligham multisensory process.


In the year she has been working with him, two days a week for an hour to an hour and a half, he has moved an entire grade level in reading. He can now read at what I would think is just slightly below grade level. The progress he has made in one year of receiving specialized multisensory tutoring is simply astounding. The light has returned to his world. And while his tutor and the Barton System have made all of the difference, it is not a complicated system, and tutors from all backgrounds have been specially trained to work with students using these techniques.

I know I am running short on time, so I will get to the message I hope you take away from all of this. Connor's story is a "best of" story — he is currently enrolled in a small, private independent school, arguably the best in Erie. He has had amazing opportunities to learn and travel, he has concerned parents, doting grandparents and family members, and the love and support of his friends and their parents and the most amazing tutor. And yet, through all of this, he could have easily become broken. I know Connor's dyslexia will positively shape his life, and that is what we focus on with him, all of the things that he does

exceptionally well because of his dyslexia. The parts of it that are challenging will shape him too. As he settles in every night for an hour and a half of homework after an hour and a half of tutoring, he is learning about hard work, determination, dedication, and hopefully empathy.

The sadness and anger I have now is no longer for him. It is for all the children and adults that don't have a "best of" story. They don't have people fighting for them. The fear, the loneliness, and the sadness that fills the days of the young undiagnosed dyslexic child can, with proper diagnosis and specialized tutoring, be replaced with hope. Many of these children are probably already receiving additional help, but due to lack of awareness from educators, like the early support Connor received from his school, it is likely not the right help. Connor's classroom has 17 kids in it. Since Connor, two additional students have been identified as dyslexic. Many statistics suggest that 1 in 5, or 20% of the population, is dyslexic. His classroom is at 18%. That is too high of a number to ignore. The emotional toll and future financial burden is too costly to ignore. With the answers we now have, these children should not have to

suffer and struggle as they do. With proper screening tools and specialized multisensory training, dyslexics can make great progress in their reading skills. Please support educator training in awareness and support programs like Mission Empower in Erie and the pilot programs across the state. The impact these programs can have is critical to changing the path for our struggling readers.

Thank you very much for your time. 



PA State Representative Ed Neilson (left) and PA Senator Sean Wiley