

Where Are They Now?

Bryan Purifoy: Early Efforts Set Stage for Extraordinary Achievements

Harriett Pool, Reading Recovery Teacher, North Little Rock, AR

When I met Bryan Purifoy for the first time 20 years ago, I saw a tiny 6-year-old boy whose electric smile touched my heart so deeply that I scarcely even noticed his wheelchair. His story is an example of how a strong start in literacy can positively affect every aspect of a person's life. Reading Recovery impacts so much more than just reading: It builds self-esteem, self-reliance, and a will to succeed.

Bryan was in my first round of students as a Reading Recovery teacher. I knew all my students would face their own unique challenges in the process of learning to read, but Bryan was faced with even more challenges than the others. He suffered from cerebral palsy, which had confined him to a wheelchair, and motor skills were an issue. Along with his classroom teacher, his physical and occupational therapists, and his mom, Brian and I set out on a mission to eliminate reading and writing as an obstacle in his life. We all were determined to see that nothing—

not reading difficulties, not a wheelchair, not cerebral palsy—would stand between Bryan and a life of normalcy and independence.

As we began lessons, I observed that in reading, Bryan struggled with one-to-one match and monitoring print for known words. He would frequently get frustrated and say, "I can't do it!" Without question, though, his biggest issue was writing, due to the fact that the cerebral palsy had left him with limited control of his fine motor skills. We worked on path-of-movement for forming letters. We used sandpaper letters and sand trays, and Bryan learned to form letters that he used to compose his stories. Day after day, he worked hard; night after night, he read the little books with his mom. After 96 lessons, Bryan successfully discontinued his lesson series and was able to read with the "high" group in his first-grade classroom. Bryan says, "I remember the little books, especially *Spot!* Reading made me feel normal like the other



Teachers worked closely with therapists and Bryan's mom to make sure nothing would stand between the 6-year-old with the electric smile and a life of normalcy. Above is first-grade teacher Dottie Murdaugh with Bryan; at right is Reading Recovery teacher Harriett Pool with Bryan in 2013.



kids — I couldn't run, but I could read like them! Being able to read gave me confidence, and I had constant encouragement.”

Bryan called upon his literacy skills in fifth grade when he entered a nationwide essay contest sponsored by Crayola Crayon. Thousands of entrants were asked to write about their “everyday” hero. Bryan wrote about Gary Woodring, a wheelchair basketball player who had carried the Olympic torch at the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta. They met when Bryan was in preschool at Easter Seals of Arkansas, where Gary was working as a wheelchair repair technician. Gary became a mentor to Bryan. “He taught me I could get a job, play basketball, and get married,” Bryan remembers. His essay was one of eight selected as the best of the best, and Bryan won the honor of naming a new Crayola crayon. He chose “Torch Red” in honor of Gary’s Olympic moment.

Amazingly, it would not be the last time the Olympic torch was to play a major role in Bryan’s life.

In 2002, when Bryan was in ninth grade, Coca-Cola sponsored a contest in which the winner would get to carry the torch through his or her hometown as the Olympic flame made its journey to Salt Lake City for the Winter Games. Bryan was nominated anonymously—to this day, he still doesn’t know who his benefactor was—and out of thousands of applicants he was chosen to carry the torch through downtown Little Rock, Arkansas. Dressed in an official Olympic uniform, Bryan proudly bore one of the world’s most iconic symbols down streets lined with people, just like his hero Gary had done a few years before. “It was cold and rainy, but it didn’t dampen the spirit,” Bryan says. “There were thousands of people screaming and cheering. It was awesome! I still have the outfit, and the torch still has the char on it. I can still feel the energy!”



When Bryan was in ninth grade, he was chosen to carry the Olympic torch through downtown Little Rock as it made its way to the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City.

And Bryan’s successes continue. In 1998, he was chosen to be the Easter Seals of Arkansas Child Representative. Then, in 2010 and 2011, he became their Adult Representative, making numerous public appearances and working on several fund-raisers. They included “Art and Soul,” in which artwork created by the children and adults of Easter Seals was auctioned to the public, and

Bryan’s Mom, Emma, Recalls Her Son’s Reading Recovery Journey

We faced so many challenges early on. We had no idea what his future held. One hoped that he could learn to read like other kids, but that was never a sure thing. With Reading Recovery’s help, though, we were able to overcome that particular obstacle in Bryan’s life. It was exciting to see him really reading, and it became a habit. Today, Bryan is still an avid reader. When he discovered that Blake Crouch’s new novel, *Stirred*, was available, he freaked out. We just had to go to Barnes & Noble and pick it up that day. As the parent of a child with a disability, little steps mean so much. Every little book he finished was like winning a marathon.



Bryan meets with Arkansas Governor Mike Beebe. He has served on the Governor's Disability Council since 2011.

“Rollin’ on the River,” a 2K walk-race for all ability levels through Little Rock’s scenic River Market district. Funds from these events provided scholarships for handicapped students. Easter Seals representatives Sharon Yocum and Linda Rogers had this to say about Bryan: “He is an exceptional young man, articulate, and he speaks from the heart. He did a great job as representative. He has a can-do attitude. He shows our whole mission: living in community, independently. He’s about the ability, not the disability.”

Bryan attended Pulaski Technical College, and in 2011, the Arkansas secretary of state appointed him to serve on the Governor’s Disability Council that works to address issues handicapped people face, such as accessibility in public places. Bryan uses the literacy skills he first developed in Reading Recovery to do research and to present information to the council. His term with the council expires in March of 2014.

Today, Bryan lives independently in his own apartment and volunteers at St. Vincent Hospital in their customer service department. He just proposed to the love of his life, and in typical Bryan fashion, it was done with real style. He has been friends with the legendary singing group The Temptations for several years, ever since they first spotted him singing and dancing in his wheelchair at one of their concerts and invited him to join them on stage. They sang “My Girl” together that night, and over a decade later, he asked the band to help him surprise his girlfriend when he offered to make her “My Girl” for life. They said yes. And so did she.

Bryan attributes his strength of character and his desire to overcome obstacles in all areas of life to the efforts of his mom and his early learning team who, together, provided him with a strong foundation in reading and a sense of self-confidence. On a recent visit, Bryan gave me a hug and with that same mega-watt smile I first saw 20 years ago told me, “Reading skills helped me to be a better person. Reading has helped me succeed in all I’ve done.”

About the Author

Harriett Pool has been an educator for three decades and has spent the past 20 years as the Reading Recovery teacher at Indian Hills Elementary in North Little Rock, AR. Harriett was named the 2002–2003 Indian Hills Teacher of the Year and the following school year was selected as the North Little Rock School District Teacher of the Year. In 2004, she was a finalist for Arkansas Teacher of the Year. She is a member of many reading organizations, including the Reading Recovery Council of North America, International Reading Association, and Arkansas Reading Association. Harriett would like to thank her son, Philip Sherrod, for acting as her co-author and editor. He is a recent graduate of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock with a degree in English.

In His Own Words ...

When I was younger, I struggled to read and understand it. The Reading Recovery program helped me keep up with my classmates. Mrs. Pool made learning to read a wonderful experience. I can still remember reading the *Spot* books with her, and I know I will read them to my children as well. Although it was a struggle at first, my reading improved and reading became more fun. As I’ve grown older in today’s high-tech society, reading has become a must. With Facebook and blogging and the Internet in general, it is important to have good reading skills. Without Mrs. Pool and the help of the Reading Recovery program, I know I would not be able to function very well in today’s society. Without Reading Recovery, I wouldn’t be the person I am today.