1991 was a memorable year for me as a teacher in Denton ISD! It was the first year of implementation of the Reading Recovery intervention, my first year as an in-training Reading Recovery teacher, and my first time to experience working side-by-side with a first grader who needed a boost on his journey to becoming a reader and writer. It was a year of firsts!

— Marcia Kellum, teacher leader

Now a working father with an infant daughter, that first grader and his Reading Recovery® teacher, Marcia Kellum, were reunited 25 years later to share the recollections of their journey.

Tristan Bynum was in first grade at Newton Rayzor Elementary School in 1991. His mother, Lilia, remembers that he was a shy, sensitive, and very creative child, and socializing was hard for him. Recess was stressful, and many times he would just play alone.

“He always seemed bored when we tried to read to him. He was, in fact, much more interested in the stories he had in his head,” his mother said. “He loved playing with his action figures and the storylines he made up for them to play were of much greater interest.”

Lilia and her husband, Scott, both love to read and couldn’t understand why Tristan wasn’t interested in reading. Looking back on it now, Lilia said, Tristan remembers being frustrated.

“Although he could recite the alphabet, he had a hard time identifying the letters or remembering what they were supposed to sound like. “Often times he would just look at them and they just seemed to be these indecipherable shapes. So trying to read was completely overwhelming. He would just shut down.”

His first-grade teacher, Waynette Wallace, recognized Tristan’s reading difficulties when he refused to do his writing homework. Every day she would ask to see his homework, and every day he had a very interesting story to tell about why it wasn’t done.

Because the intervention was new to Denton, the Reading Recovery teachers were working very closely with the first-grade teachers to communicate and explain the purpose, structure, and intent of the intervention and how it would provide supplemental support for children struggling to acquire literacy skills.

“Waynette was a very experienced first-grade teacher and highly regarded by fellow teachers, parents, and students,” Marcia said. Waynette felt that Tristan would be an exact fit for the new intervention and that with a little extra help he would quickly accelerate to the average range of the classroom. She recommended Tristan for assessment, and he began his Reading Recovery lessons in September.
“Waynette and I also knew that he had another vital piece in place to insure his ongoing success — supportive parents who were dedicated to helping him succeed,” Marcia added.

Lilia remembers that Tristan was reluctant to go to Reading Recovery lessons, but that Marcia encouraged him in a very gentle and positive way. Tristan remembers that writing letters was hard for him and that he worked very hard to write exactly as things should be written.

“Tristan had a bit of a perfectionist streak which explains why he has always been cautious in learning new things,” Lilia said. “He wants to get things exactly right, and preferably the first time!” She remembers the very first book he enjoyed in his lessons was George and Martha by James Marshall because he could read it, understand it, and it made him laugh. “He loved reading from that point on,” Lilia said.

Tristan was not only the first Reading Recovery student in the district to discontinue from his series of lessons, but he was the first student Marcia asked to go to Texas Woman’s University for her first behind-the-glass teaching session. He remembers being nervous and slightly embarrassed when he later realized others could see him read, but he was already feeling confident in his reading abilities. He remembered Marcia’s smile and that she looked very proud of him. “I wanted to make her proud again and again,” he said.

He had that opportunity in May of 1992, when the teacher leader was asked to give a report to the Board of Trustees to highlight the new intervention and the results. Tristan was asked to showcase his achievements by reading a book at a Denton Board of Trustees meeting.

“When Marcia asked us to consider having Tristan read in front of the school board, his father and I were somewhat nervous for him,” Lilia said. “This reading and a presentation on Reading Recovery were going to determine the future of Reading Recovery in the Denton ISD.” She remembers Tristan’s initial response was a definite “no,” but a week of reassurance finally convinced him. They decided he would read his favorite book from his lessons, George and Martha.

“He walked right up to the school board president without any hesitation, sat on his lap, took a deep breath, and began to read,” Lilia said. “He not only read, but he would show the audience the pictures after he read a page,” which drew laughter and bolstered his confidence. “We talked about that meeting for weeks afterward,” Lilia continued. “He really enjoyed it and was glad that he finally agreed to do it. As I would come to find out, it was one of the many times that I would be incredibly proud of my son.”

About 3 months ago, Marcia found a little box tucked away in the top of a closet. Inside she found about 20 floppy discs and among them a folded yellowish index card — the actual introduction she had written for that May 1992 report.

Something else Marcia saved is Tristan’s Reading Recovery folder that has all of his lesson records, running records, assessment results, and writing notebook — the only artifacts she has kept from her first years in Reading Recovery.

“I will not part with them because of what is represented there about my time working with Tristan and what it meant to me as a beginning Reading Recovery teacher,” Marcia said. “And still, 25 years later, I regard this training and the opportunity to work one-to-one with students such as Tristan a gift.”

Marcia shared that folder and memories with Tristan and his parents at a 25th anniversary reception during the 2014 Billie J. Askew Reading Recovery & K-6 Literacy Institute in Dallas. “Now with a wife and a first baby on the way, it was so special to catch up and hear about his continued success and to learn that he is still an avid reader,” Marcia remembered.
And this time, Tristan didn’t hesitate to accept the invitation. He was 29 years old, married and about to become a father. He and Marcia had come full circle. Teacher and pupil were reunited. And as Lilia recalls, “there were a few tears in the room. It was a wonderful evening, and I was so very proud of the boy who had become such an amazing man.”

The Bynum family is still closely tied to TWU. Lilia, who graduated from TWU in 1995, is now the Reading Recovery program coordinator; husband Scott is the university’s webmaster. And their support for Reading Recovery continues as well.

“I have nothing but the greatest respect for Reading Recovery teachers, teacher leaders, and trainers,” Lilia said. “We have seen firsthand what Reading Recovery can do for a child and for our family, and we want to continue to see this happen for many more children and their families in years to come.”

Special thanks to Marcia Kellum, Lilia and Scott Bynum, and of course, Tristan, for taking time to remember their journey and share it with us!

About the Cover

Connor Tyler was a shy and reluctant reader when he began his series of lessons at Summit Cove Elementary School in Colorado. His Reading Recovery teacher, Pam Minard, remembers that he showed a lack of confidence and didn’t want to say the words too loud in case he was wrong. After 20 weeks of daily lessons, Connor is reading first-grade books in the classroom, taking on unknown words with confidence. The outdoor enthusiast loves dinosaurs, skateboarding, snowboarding, and biking, and you might guess from the photos that his favorite color is green. *Cooking Pot*, a rhyming book Pam introduced to help Connor with fluency, is still one of his favorite books.

Connor’s mom, Jennifer, credits Pam and Reading Recovery for easing her son’s struggles and changing his future. She shares her thoughts in a Parent Voices letter on the next page. Pam is thankful to Principal Crystal Miller for bringing Reading Recovery to the district and to teacher leader Hollyanna Bates for helping her find a way to make a difference every single day in the reading lives of her students.