

## **A Letter from Drs. Joseph Morelli and Barbara Wirostko Morelli**

In hopes of spreading awareness about learning disorders, dyslexia and the struggles faced without early detection, I would like to share the story of our son, Joseph James Morelli, who recently passed away at the age of 20. In celebration of Joseph's life, challenges and amazing accomplishments, we have established the Joseph James Morelli Scholarship Fund. This fund will allow his life and spirit to live on by helping other high students with learning disabilities who are experiencing similar hurdles that need to be overcome.

Joseph was severely dyslexic and, despite showing obvious signs of his learning disorder early on, his dyslexia and learning challenges were not identified until he was a high school freshman. Once he was diagnosed with dyslexia and provided appropriate and effective accommodations in school, Joseph thrived. (We only wish that the struggle had not been so long).

We moved to Park City in 2010 when Joseph was a junior. Joseph had just recently been diagnosed a year prior and came to Park City schools with an IEP in place. His IEP included a foreign language exemption, extra time on tests, test questions to be read to him and the use of a computer. With these accommodations, Joseph earned high honors, a Utah ACT science and math achievement award, and a WUE scholarship to Montana State University for the College of Engineering. Despite these incredible achievements, Joseph was still only reading at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level.

Ever since kindergarten, Joseph was in and out of the resource room. He consistently struggled with spelling, reading, English, history and Spanish; however, he typically excelled in math. Yet, during his freshman fall, his math grades also fell to below-average (going from an A to a C). We later learned – the math was word problems. Not only was Joseph failing scholastically, his self-esteem was nonexistent. He thought he was stupid and a failure. He had trouble sleeping and became withdrawn. He experienced panic attacks, headaches, ringing in his ears, shortness of breath and heart palpitations.

The NY guidance counselor and teachers insisted he was smart, but just was not “trying hard enough.” Furthermore, they would not consider a reading or learning issue as they insisted that they “would have picked it up sooner and he was an ‘average’ student.” The school counselor even suggested to us that Joseph “was not high school material and should be pulled out and placed in technical school.”

Were it not for our pediatrician who knew Joseph from the age of one insisting that “something did not make sense” and encouraging us to look for an explanation of a learning disorder through private testing, we would have continued to trust the school system. Concerned for Joseph's well-being and after several weeks of neuropsychology and auditory testing, and 8 years of

frustration, we FINALLY had an explanation for his difficulties in school. Joseph was extremely intelligent but also extremely dyslexic compounded with an auditory processing disability (he was at the bottom 1% for his age for sound recognition). With the help of the NY high school Special Education teacher we got an IEP, accommodations, and Joseph started to learn “how to learn”. We all became educated.

As we learned more about dyslexia, we realized that Joseph had long displayed typical signs of this common learning disorder, including being slow to speak, struggling to read instructions and maps, and poor reading comprehension. We always knew Joseph struggled more than his peers, which had become more obvious as our next two children proceeded through early schooling and learned to read with ease. We felt like failures as parents. How was it possible that we hadn’t been made aware of dyslexia during all those years of concern, frustration and “roller-coaster” grades?

If we had never learned that Joseph was dyslexic, he easily would have been another statistic and a high school failure. Instead, Joseph went on to accomplish and live life to the fullest. He was killed suddenly in a car accident on September 6, 2014, doing what he loved best – camping. Thankfully, he had learned that he was smart, he had become truly happy and he knew that he could be successful!

We all have to be advocates for our children. We must ask the tough questions and sometimes we become the parent “everyone knows.” Our public school systems are not doing an adequate job in early identification and intervention with respect to reading disorders. Smart children with dyslexia are overlooked. These children develop coping skills and can slide by with passing grades and this shouldn’t be acceptable.

Seeing our youngest daughter experiencing similar struggles, we had her privately tested at age 5. She is also dyslexic. We choose to put her in the Weilenmann School of Discovery in Park City, which uses the Wilson Foundations Program for early literacy, a program proven to be effective at teaching ALL children, including dyslexic learners, reading skills.

Through the Joseph James Morelli Scholarship Fund, we will be able to assist other learning disabled students pursuing a career in science and/or engineering. Such funds can help offset the costs of expensive testing, enable accommodations, and help provide the necessary resources and tools to succeed. We are extremely thankful to all of our friends and community members who have supported us and donated thus far allowing our dear son’s spirit and life to live on. We also want to thank Diane Walsh, Kelly Blase, and Charlie Mathews for taking Joseph under their wing, believing in him, and helping him succeed academically.

Thank you,  
Drs. Joseph Morelli and Barbara Wirostko Morelli