

Actor Fred Newman Puts Positive Spin on LD

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Many people have wished at times that they could be a fly on the wall, but actor/writer/composer **Fred Newman** actually has been.

His imitation of a buzzing house fly crashing into a wall has been his ticket to success in situations calling for unpredictability, ranging from TV show auditions to impressing a college professor enough to give him a passing grade.

Fred did not know that he was dyslexic until he was in college, while taking a class that was teaching how to test for dyslexia. Once he knew about his learning disability, he understood himself better and now, at age 51, views it in a positive light.

"Because of memory problems, my dyslexia forces me to continually live in the moment, to be more creative," he said, "and that's essential for performing live comedy."

Fred is currently an ensemble actor and sound effects man for the long-running National Public Radio program "A Prairie Home Companion," starring Garrison Keillor and recorded live in front of a theater audience each week.

He also appears on the PBS children's reading TV show "Between the Lions." On that show, he teaches kids how to phonetically sound out words.

His credits also include several episodes of PBS's "Reading Rainbow" with LeVar Burton and numerous voice-over roles for animated films and TV shows, including the popular Nickelodeon/Disney series "Doug."

"I knew from the get-go that I was an odd person," he recalls. "I didn't quite fit in."

While growing up in predominantly white LaGrange, Georgia, in the 1950s, Fred preferred to hang out with the older black storytellers in places such as Jack Fling's Cash 'n Carry Grocery, where he discovered the magic of storytelling.

"I spent the first 12-13 years of my life on the side of the yard or playground, watching and 'recording' what was going on," he explains. "I was a loner, always the last one chosen when picking teams."

He heard how kids got hurt, and he was like a therapist to them. He, himself, was teased about his "weirdness" and "used humor to deflate the other guy."

In time, he realized that people enjoyed his humor and repertoire of sound effects, encouraging him to embrace his talent, rather than seeing it as a disadvantage.



Fred advises kids, regardless of whether they have a learning disability or not, "Whatever it is that people tease you about, go there. That's where you'll find your gifts. That's where your vocation is. That's where your heart is."

After graduating from Harvard Business School in 1978 with an MBA, Fred worked for Newsweek magazine's new business ventures division in New York City. But he soon realized he was not "a good corporate person."

While still at Newsweek, he wrote a how-to book about noise-making titled MouthSounds: How to Whistle, Pop, Click, and Honk Your Way to Social Success (scheduled for re-release in Fall 2004).

One day, he told his boss he was going to the men's room and then slipped out to audition for The David Letterman Show. He passed the audition and never looked back.

During his career, he has garnered awards including the CableACE and an Emmy for his innovative work in television.

Fred's community and educational involvement includes participation in SPARK (Special Program of Arts for Kids), an annual event for 4,000 fifth-graders in Georgia, as well as programs for LD children sponsored by financier Charles Schwab, who also has dyslexia.

One such Schwab Learning project that Fred contributed to is an interactive Web site called SparkTop.org, where kids can play creative games to discover how everyone learns differently.

Fred got involved with Schwab Learning to encourage kids to explore "whatever makes you special." He says that all of his work with youth "is about finding out what makes you different than the herd."

Delivering this message in an entertaining way makes him feel good because it is the story of his own life. "When I was growing up, I was always thinking about what made me different and how I could approach that and use it."

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