

# I Was 59 When I Said, “I Want to Learn To Read”

*Terry Terflinger*

## Multiple Head Injuries

There are three major head traumas I can remember in my life that hurt my ability to learn. The first was when I was five years old. I was walking on top of an old wooden bridge and I fell 25 feet off the edge onto a dry creek bed. I was in a coma and I got 152 stitches in my face. They said it was a miracle I lived. The second time I hurt my head was in the third grade. I was walking along a brick wall, tried to jump across the gate, and fell head-first into the concrete. I was unconscious for three days. The third head trauma I had was when I was in 5th grade. I was on a skateboard and my brother pulled it. I fell backwards onto the corner of the porch. It split open my head.

## Quitting School and Finding Work

I didn't do well in school. I was held back in fourth grade. The other kids mocked me and teased me, and that got worse each year. In junior high, they put me in a class of kids with disabilities. I became a fighter. When kids teased me I would fight them, so I spent a lot of time in the principal's office.

Then I got fed up with it. I quit school at age 15. I went to work and lied about my age. I worked hard all my life and I learned by asking questions. My grandfather told me, “The only dumb question is the question you don't ask.” I

started asking. I'm a visual learner and a hands-on learner. People would show me how to do things and I learned by

watching them. I worked in restaurants washing dishes and mopping floors. I worked in a factory too. I worked my way up. I was dedicated to what I did. I just worked and worked and got better jobs a little bit at a time.

My brother taught me how to drive an 18-wheeler. It was hard to do a log book. It was hard to read a road atlas. But I learned, and now I've run a truck for 28 years and have gone 5 million miles, all around the country.

## “I Can't Read”

The federal government changed the Commercial Driver's License tests, so the questions went from 25 questions to 158, all in paragraphs! I took a week off and my wife drilled me for days. It took me 4.5 hours to take the test and I failed. I told the examiner I couldn't read. She had me re-test by listening to a cassette, and I scored 98 percent!

Then I got a disease called Meniere's disease. It causes vertigo and dizziness. It meant I would

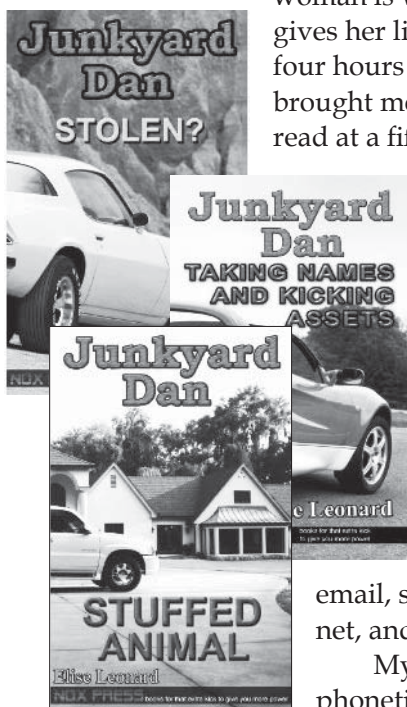


never drive again. Tests done by a neurologist showed that I had damage to my brain. My wife helped me file for disability status with Social Security. They sent me to see a psychologist. He couldn't believe how I'd compensated for not being able to read. The psychologist was just overwhelmed at all I've accomplished despite my disabilities. In 2005, I won my case and got Social Security.

### Finally Learning to Read at the Age of 60

In 2008, I moved to Oklahoma and got into a literacy program. The coordinator asked me what I wanted to get out of the program, and I said, "I want to learn to read!" I was 59 years old and had never read a book in my life. After she tested me, she said it was clear that I was an "overcomer" because of the things I've accomplished in my life despite not being able to read. I've bought and sold homes (without a real estate agent), sold stocks and bonds, and learned from Christian financial counseling how to manage my life. The Lord's been good to me.

I have a tutor, Catherine Blakley, and this woman is wonderful. She gives her life to help me four hours a week and she's brought me a long way. I read at a fifth grade level, and I've read seven books. I am just overwhelmed. I learned to read at the age of 60! I am so blessed. I read everything I see now. I learned how to work a computer and can email, search the Internet, and read the news. My spelling is phonetic. I write how the



words sound, and I've done it all my life. We have to re-program my brain so that I can learn how to spell right. I'm up to second grade in spelling. My reading comprehension is ninth or tenth grade. I really like these Junkyard Dan books I've been reading. I was Outstanding Student of the Year for the Oklahoma Literacy Conference a year after I moved to Oklahoma. They put my picture in the paper, and now I am a student representative on the board of the Oklahoma Literacy Coalition.

### Be Persistent! Don't Be Embarrassed!

Oklahoma is the fifth lowest in the nation for literacy. Adults are afraid to tell their stories but there's help out there for you. I am living proof of that. Try to learn and challenge yourself, don't just sit back and say, "I don't know how." Through the public library there are facilities that can help. You can accomplish all things. You just have to have faith and be persistent. Don't be embarrassed.

*Terry Terflinger is a student in the Bartlesville, Oklahoma, Literacy Program. He volunteers in the community with Bartlesville Area Habitat for Humanity and Mary Martha's Outreach Center. He currently serves on the board of the Oklahoma Literacy Coalition as the student liaison.*



### Resilience in Action!

**List some of the ways the author has shown resilience:**

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