

New reader has advice for public health workers and partners

Jay Cooper*

Archie Willard has dyslexia. This condition, in which written words are difficult to recognize, has presented him with challenges his whole life. But Archie says it didn't pose too many problems when it came to taking care of himself. "I had the same family doctor for years and I always felt very comfortable," Archie said.

Then, Archie had to go to a large hospital for some tests. "I had trouble filling out the forms they gave me. I did not feel very comfortable, and I had to ask for help."

Luckily, Archie is the kind of person who can ask for help. But this wasn't always the case, says the resident of Eagle Grove, Iowa, now in his 70s.

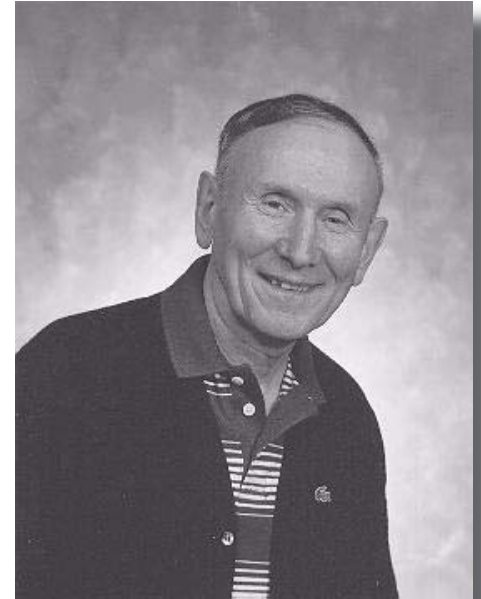
"I was not always up front about my trouble with reading," Archie said. "I served in the National Guard for many years,

Archie said he would use excuses like, "I forgot my glasses." He would even sometimes cause trouble to avoid reading in public.

This seemed to be the story of Archie's life: trying to escape from his inability to read. He memorized words to get by in his jobs, which have included working in a meat packing plant, driving a school bus and working as an insurance adjuster.

Then Archie's wife came across a newspaper article about Olympic decathlon champion Bruce Jenner, who is also dyslexic. This gave Archie, 54 years old at the time, the confidence to make an appointment to get tested for dyslexia.

"When I found out I was dyslexic, it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders," Archie said. "Now, I am very up front with people about my dys-



New reader and literacy advocate Archie Willard lives in Eagle Grove.

and the health care industry to realize that there are many others just like him. "There are a lot of people out there that don't understand forms and instructions," Archie said. "The workers in health care need to know that people with health literacy problems are there!"

Archie added that general literacy may not always indicate how well a person can function when it comes to health communication. "There are many people out there who use public health services and they have different educational levels." Archie said. "Even smart, well-educated people can have

and when they asked me to read, I would create diversions. I would manipulate around reading."

lexia. And I am not afraid to ask for help if I am confused."

Archie says it is important for people working in public health

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Archie believes health literacy awareness is growing among health professionals, but that more can be done. "The language and terms that are currently used in health care and public health are foreign to many people," Archie said. "Public health and health care workers need to work with people with low literacy. Doctors and others should encourage an atmosphere where patients will ask questions."

In learning how to communicate health information more clearly, Archie says it is important to work with people with limited health literacy skills. "The best way to be more sensitive about low literacy is to get to know the people you work with every day," Archie said. "This is the best way to make forms and instructions easier to understand. These are real people, and they are better than any book you will ever read on low literacy."

Archie had the courage to ask for help. Now he helps others with reading problems do the



After working for two and a half years to read, Archie was invited to speak to a group of learning disabled elementary school children. Since then, he's shared his inspiring story with thousands of people in Iowa and around the world.

same. His advocacy for people with low literacy and learning disabilities has resulted in requests to speak at schools, churches, service clubs, and state and national conferences. Archie has visited Russia twice with an education delegation to study the special education system there. He has also been awarded a fellowship from the National Institute for Literacy in Washington, D.C. Until retiring in 2003, Archie worked as literacy recruiter for Adult Basic Education at Iowa Central Community College in Fort Dodge. He remains active with the New Readers of Iowa.

To learn more about Archie Willard's extraordinary life, visit www.readiowa.org/archiew.html.

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