

Retired Teacher Reveals He Was Illiterate Until Age 48

By: Charisse Yu

POSTED: 1:49 pm PST February 11, 2008

UPDATED: 10:31 am PST February 14, 2008

OCEANSIDE, Calif. -- John Corcoran graduated from college and taught high school for 17 years without being able to read, write or spell.

Corcoran's life of secrecy started at a young age. He said his teachers moved him up from grade to grade. Often placed in what he calls the "dumb row," the images of his tribulations in the classroom are still vividly clear.

"I can remember when I was eight years old saying my prayers at night saying, 'please, God, tomorrow when it's my turn to read please let me read.' You just pretend that you are invisible and when the teacher says, 'Johnnie read,' you just wait the teacher out because you know the teacher has to go away at some point," said Corcoran.

Corcoran eventually started acting up to hide his illiteracy. From fifth through seventh grade he was expelled, suspended and spent most of his days at the principal's office.

The former teacher said he came from a loving family that always supported him.

"My parents came to school and it no longer was a problem for me reading because this boy Johnnie -- the native alien, I call him -- he didn't have a reading problem as far as the teachers were concerned. He had an emotional problem. He had a psychological problem. He had a behavioral problem," said Corcoran.

Corcoran later attended Palo Verde High School in Blythe, Calif. He cheated his way through high school, receiving his diploma in June 1956.

"When I was a child I was just sort of just moved along. When I got to high school I wanted to participate in athletics. At that time in high school I went underground. I decided to behave myself and do what it took. I started cheating by turning in other peoples' paper, dated the valedictorian and ran around with college prep kids," said Corcoran.

"I couldn't read words but I could read the system and I could read people," adds Corcoran.

He stole tests and persuaded friends to complete his assignments. Corcoran earned an athletic scholarship to Texas Western College. He said his cheating intensified, claiming he cheated in every class.

"I passed a bluebook out the window to a friend I painstakingly copied four essay questions off the board in U.S. government class that was required, and hoped my friend would get it back to me with the right answers," Corcoran said.

In 1961, Corcoran graduated with a bachelor's degree in education, while still illiterate he contends. He then went on to become a teacher during a teacher shortage.

"When I graduated from the university, the school district in El Paso, where I went to school, gave almost all the college education graduates a job," said Corcoran.

For 17 years Corcoran taught high school for the Oceanside School District. Relying on teacher's assistants for help and oral lesson plans, he said he did a great job at teaching his students.

"What I did was I created an oral and visual environment. There wasn't the written word in there. I always had two or three teacher's assistants in each class to do board work or read the bulletin," said Corcoran.

In retrospect, Corcoran said, his deceit took him a long time to accept.

"As a teacher it really made me sick to think that I was a teacher who couldn't read. It is embarrassing for me, and it's embarrassing for this nation and it's embarrassing for schools that we're failing to teach our children how to read, write and spell!"

While still teaching, Corcoran dabbled in real estate. He was granted a leave of absence, eventually becoming a successful real estate developer.

It wasn't until he was 48 years old that he gave reading and writing another chance. He drove to an inconspicuous office with a sign he couldn't read. He studied and worked with a tutor at the Literacy Center of Carlsbad. Assigned to a 65-year-old volunteer tutor, Eleanor Condit, he was able to read at a sixth-grade level within a year.

"I'm just an optimistic hopeful person that believes in the impossible and miracles," said Corcoran.

Carlsbad City Library literacy coordinator Carrie Scott said people of all walks of life go through the reading program, including teachers.

Corcoran is now an education advocate.

"I believe that illiteracy in America is a form of child neglect and child abuse and the child is blamed and they carry the shame, if we just teach our people how to read we'd give them a fair chance," Corcoran said.

He has written two books, "The Teacher Who Couldn't Read" and "Bridge to Literacy." He is also the founder of the John Corcoran Foundation. The foundation is state-approved as a supplemental service provider for literacy in Colorado and California – providing tutoring programs for over 600 students in small group settings, and individually in homes through an online program.

Find out more about John Corcoran at his Web site: johncorcoranfoundation.com