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Plenty of 'Zipzer' found in Henry Winkler's book series

BY EVAN HENERSON, Staff Writer

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For many years, Henry Winkler believed himself to be stupid and lazy. This was both as a boy and years after he epitomized coolness for 11 seasons as the star of TV's "Happy Days."

A lifetime of contending with a learning disability such as dyslexia can do that to a person no matter what the world says about him.

"You don't necessarily take your self-image and align it with what you're doing," says Winkler, 62, TV's erstwhile Arthur "Fonzie" Fonzarelli. "It took me a long time to figure out I wasn't stupid long after 'Happy Days' had come and gone."

Hank Zipzer, on the other hand, may come to a similar realization much more quickly.

Like Winkler, the hero of the best-selling "Hank Zipzer: The World's Greatest Underachiever" series isn't so hot with words or numbers. Also like Winkler, Hank is a popular class clown whose adventures - and misadventures - revolve around the fifth-grader trying to compensate for his learning disabilities.

Hank Zipzer is Winkler's literary alter-ego.

Drawing from his own childhood, Winkler birthed Hank with co-author Lin Oliver in 2002's "Niagara Falls or Does It?" Thirteen Zipzer books later - and with more than 2.5 million copies sold - Hank is still muddling through.

Whether he's disconnecting the cable box to try to slow down the "crawl," boning up on math in order to be allowed to act in the school play, or grinding his appalling report card into a soy-salami mix, Hank's learning difficulties are a veritable fount of comic story ideas, say the authors. (The series' most recent entry, "The Life of Me (Enter at Your Own Risk)" hit the shelves in May.)

And young readers and their parents are laughing and relating.

"Kids write in and say, 'How did you know me so well?' or 'I've read seven of your books,'" says Winkler. "One little boy wrote, 'I laughed so hard my funny bone fell out of my body.' That's a great compliment."

Laughter, not confession, is meant to be the hallmark of Hank's stories. Winkler has long discussed his difficulties in school and about being diagnosed with dyslexia at age 31.

But he wants to keep the dialogue angst-free, if you please.

"It's something I talk about, but through this glass-is-half-full prism," says the actor, whose grown children have the condition as well. "I didn't know any different, and I didn't realize it

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was something people didn't talk about or were embarrassed about.

"Just writing it down or telling these stories and incorporating it into Hank's life didn't seem that much of a stretch," he continues. "Only afterward I realized, 'Whoa! This is really connecting!'"

By far the most common learning disability, dyslexia is a language-based condition which causes a person to have difficulty with specific language skills, particularly reading. Dyslexics often struggle with writing, spelling and speaking.

The condition doesn't go away. To this day, Winkler says he can't spell and has never written a letter the way he composed it in his head.

"I am now perfectly OK with this," he says. "It's still very frustrating to me, but I'm very grateful for this journey I've been on."

The Baltimore, Md.-based International Dyslexia Association estimates that 15 to 20 percent of Americans have some type of learning disability and of those, 85 percent have dyslexia. In a 2001 report to Congress, the U.S. Department of Education approximated that 2.9 million school-age children - 5 percent in all public schools - had some form of learning disability.

There are 900 students registered with the California State University, Northridge, Center on Disabilities. Dyslexia is the most commonly displayed trait, reports Dr. Jennifer Zvi, a learning disabilities specialist at the Center.

"One of my students is preparing to take the MCAT exams in preparation for going to medical school," says Zvi, president of the IDA's California branch. "Despite the fact that they have dyslexia, they're going on to professional schools and becoming very successful."

Winkler is hardly alone in being a well-known public figure who has confessed to having a learning disability. According to Zvi, other celebrities who have graced the IDA's calendars or admitted to having dyslexia include Keira Knightley, Whoopi Goldberg, Edward James Olmos, Cher, Tommy Smothers, Robin Williams and Harry Belafonte.

Artist Pablo Picasso had the condition, as does clothier Tommy Hilfiger and Hall of Fame fastballer Nolan Ryan. The late George Burns once quipped that the toughest thing about having dyslexia "is learning how to spell it."

Although the author began the Zipzer books during an acting lull, dyslexia has done nothing to curb Winkler's career. His post-Fonz roles have included parts in "The Waterboy," "Holes," "Click" and the TV series "Arrested Development" and "Out of Practice." He recently joined the ensemble of the Fox animated show "Sit Down, Shut Up."

Zvi has seen Winkler speak at IDA conferences and talk about how, during his years at Yale School of Drama, his entire sense of self-image dropped from his shoulders to his ankles when the actor was asked to do a cold reading.

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"He'd have to pull it up, pull it up," says Zvi. "I think there's more understanding and acceptance that it's not a terrible thing to have a learning disability. People can still be very successful and meet their goals even though we learn differently."

"Thank goodness we learn differently," she adds.

Zipzer co-author Oliver echoes the sentiment. Her oldest son, Theo, who has Attention Deficit Disorder, returned from his first break from college - where he is studying film - and announced, "I'm not stupid. I'm right-brained."

"The system mitigates against them believing that," says Oliver, a veteran children's book author who also has worked on numerous family-related film, TV and video projects.

"For a lot of kids, it's in college where their talents or intelligence in a specific area are rewarded rather than having to be good at everything across the board."

That might be a comfort to Hank Zipzer, who still has seven or eight undoubtedly mayhem-filled school years ahead of him.

"He tries a little harder, and he finds another route," Oliver says. "He's going to have to choose a different road to get there instead of (saying), 'Poor me, I have a disability.'"

"We chose the comedy medium so that kids can read and laugh and be lighthearted. If you have a proper diagnosis and proper remediation, it's not

tragic at all."

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