

# NOT TAKEN AS READ

To mark Dyslexia Week, Tutukaka's Guy Bowden tells of his struggle with the disability

by Abi Thomas

Guy Bowden doesn't read novels for fun but he has been known to get stuck into a horticulture book every now and then.

It's not that he doesn't like novels — but he read his first one only at age 35 because before then the thought was just too scary.

The Tutukaka man has the learning disability dyslexia. He runs the successful Tawapou Nurseries business, specialising in native coastal plants.

He's lucky that his wife Sandra takes care of the paperwork while he does "the practical stuff".

"But she's got very good at deciphering my scribble," Mr Bowden admitted.

In the interest of improving his skills, he has picked up a few plant books in recent years and mastered some tricky botanical words.

"The Latin plant names aren't too hard though, at least they're all pronounced the same, not like English ... I mean, thought and through, for example? Where's the logic?" Mr Bowden said.

At school, Mr Bowden knew he wasn't stupid, whatever his teachers said. He could do the work — it just took him a little longer to process it. That frustrated him and he was labelled naughty.

"I left school as soon as I could. I couldn't wait to get out of there," Mr Bowden said.

He focused on art instead, scoring around 80 per cent in School Certificate art.

"Because you've got to prove yourselves in other ways, some people see dyslexia as a gift."

His mum had him IQ tested at intermediate school, where he was shunted into the low-ability classes, and discovered what she already knew — her son was no less smart than his classmates.

Primary and intermediate school was a game of sneaky skill, where he learned ways to hide his difficulty.

"I sat next to the smartest kids

## WHAT'S DYSLEXIA?

■ **Dyslexia affects sufferers in different ways and to different degrees. They often have difficulty with reading, writing, spelling and/or mathematical symbols. They can show strengths in other areas.**

■ **Children with dyslexia can have high intelligence despite poor school grades and are often frustrated with school or avoid it where possible.**

■ **It is diagnosed by psychometric test from a learning disabilities official.**

■ **Dyslexia was only last year recognised by the Ministry of Education as a learning disability.**

■ **Famous dyslexics include Richard Branson, Tom Cruise, Alexander Graham-Bell, Orlando Bloom, Paul Henry, Albert Einstein, Cher, Leonardo da Vinci, Walt Disney and Jamie Oliver.**

in class and copied their work. I faked stomach aches for getting out of reading aloud ... I knew all the tricks in the book."

Ways of coping with his dyslexia extended to his adult life, with his disability never exactly a conversation topic.

"For a while, when I was out shopping, the only word I could write on a cheque from memory was 'forty'," Mr Bowden said. "So if I'd brought something for \$80, I'd write out two different cheques, both for \$40 each."

Having a dyslexic dad has made things interesting for Mr Bowden's 15-year-old son Darcy, who is also dyslexic.

"I'm glad and he's glad that I understand where he's coming from, but I also know all the tricks he tries to pull. I say, 'Can't fool me, I did that once!'"



**NURTURING TALENT:** Guy Bowden's dyslexia meant he was labelled stupid at school — but it hasn't stopped him running a successful nursery business.

PICTURE / MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM

Darcy, a talented surfer and artist, now attends Kamo High because the school funds him a teacher aide to be a reader-writer for him, copying down the notes he struggles to complete in time.

He also attended Speld classes, tutorials for children with learning disabilities.

There is no funding for teacher aides and specialist help from the Ministry of Education, which only last year recognised dyslexia as a disability. "I'm really glad for Dyslexia Awareness Week and that it's now formally recognised," Mr Bowden said.

"I'm glad for Darcy as well."

## 'We need properly trained teachers'

A Northland learning disabilities expert is delighted the Government has acknowledged dyslexia but says the solution lies in proper training of teachers.

Debbie Williams, the Kerikeri-based national vice-president of Speld (Specific Education for Learning Disabilities), said New Zealand was the last western country to recognise dyslexia as a disability and more still needed to be done.

Many children became disruptive and frustrated at school, ending up in crime, youth gangs and even prison as a result of their learning difficulties.

"A huge percentage of the inmates in our jails would be dyslexic, I'm sure. If dyslexic children are diagnosed and given appropriate help early, there could be so many more children who succeed in school," she said.

But rather than the Ministry of Education funding extra teacher aides, Mrs Williams said, teachers should be trained how to teach dyslexic children during their training.

"If you're a parent, would you rather your child receive help from a teacher aide or from a specially trained teacher?" Massey University offered six-month distance courses in teaching children with dyslexia but the courses were available only to already qualified teachers.

— Abi Thomas