



photo by Michael Good

Dyslexic Don Drumm in his Akron art gallery.

A Childhood's Pain

Even at 54, Akron artist Don Drumm still gets emotional when he talks about learning and growing up.

He remembers being pulled out of fourth grade and sent to the school psychologist to be tested. And even though the psychologist declared, "Kid, go back and tell your teacher you're not dumb," the other students knew who the psychologist was and that young Don had been singled out for some reason.

Drumm remembers the kids snickering when he read aloud in English lit class in high school. He was reading things that weren't in the book.

He remembers his love for experimenting with chemistry. But he couldn't get past the chemical equations.

He enrolled in college to become a veterinarian. He switched to art when he ran up against a wall called math.

It wasn't until Drumm was in his mid 30s that he realized he was suffering from dyslexia, a little-understood disorder that causes people to scramble and transpose letters and words.

He was teaching summer art classes in North Carolina and he met a woman at a party. He asked her what she did in the winter. She told him she was a dyslexia specialist.

"I'd never heard of it," he says.

As she began to explain the symptoms of dyslexia, Drumm recalls, "she starts telling me my life story."

Suddenly, he understood why he struggled so much with math and why he hated reading.

"It was like somebody lifted 500 pounds off my back," he recalls.

For years, he had felt guilty that he hadn't fulfilled his parents' expectations and become a

doctor. All of a sudden, there was a realization that "it wasn't my goofing off. There was a medical reason."

Drumm now views dyslexia as "accepting a problem and learning to work around it.

"We're like blind people who learn to hear — who must use our hearing for memorization," he says.

Paying attention in lectures got him through college — first at Hiram and then at Kent State. Then he finished all the work, including a sculpture, for his master's degree in fine art. But his written thesis, which was to tie into his sculpture, was rejected as not complete enough.

Years later, after he understood dyslexia, he petitioned Kent State to reopen his files so he could get his master's.

This time, he made a cast sculpture and hired a photographer to record every step. He hired a stenographer and dictated his thesis. He hired a thesis typist and, only then, was he successful in getting the degree.

There's a stack of tapes on a dresser in Drumm's studio/office. They are books for the blind, available from public libraries. People with dyslexia can qualify to get them, too, he points out.

Drumm likes to talk about dyslexia, because he doesn't think anyone should ever go through what he went through without knowing why.

"It's a deep-seated emotional thing," he explains. "I didn't know what was wrong or why.

"The guilt and the hurt and the pressures that one feels for something they can't deal with . . . It's like beating on a blind person because they can't see." □

— CHARLENE NEVADA