

Wayland Town Crier's people of the year

By Susan L. Wagner
STAFF WRITER

"The test was on antonyms and one of the words they gave me was 'thin.' I chose 'viscous' as the right answer," he recalled recently. "The previous evening, I guess, I'd been reading something in the encyclopedia about the properties of oil, which can range from very thin and watery to quite viscous. So it was a natural, if – under the circumstances – incorrect, choice."

There had been other signs. Like the time, at age 3, he tore his sister's pillow apart to try to count the feathers inside. Or when, a year or so later, he dumped soap powder in the middle of the living room floor and turned a hose on it.

But it took nearly two decades after the "viscous" incident – some 20 years of special education classes, deep discouragement and sheer frustration – to finally get a diagnosis of what is now called "NLD," short for "nonverbal learning disability."

NLD, which is still not officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in its "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders," has a spectrum of manifestations, including precocious reading and vocabulary abilities, delayed motor skills, discipline problems, social awkwardness, and a tendency to perfectionism despite confusion and disorganization.

"One of the problems," said Murphy's mother Gail Shapiro, "is that there's no authoritative diagnosis."

In the midst of the uncertainty that surrounds the condition, Murphy's recently published book, "NLD From the Inside Out: Talking to Parents, Teachers and Teens About Growing Up with Nonverbal Learning Disabilities," will likely bring considerable relief to those affected – victims, families and friends alike.

After graduating from Wayland High School in 1999, Murphy went to Framingham State College, then to Mass. Bay Community College and finally Clark University, where he received a BA "cum laude" in psychology.

In order to write the book, Murphy designed an online survey that contained about 80 very detailed and open-ended questions. Of the 107 people responded, about 40 did so thoroughly enough to warrant inclusion of their experiences, thoughts and suggestions in the book.

"I wanted to find out what NLD was like for them and what they wanted to tell parents, siblings, teachers, friends and psychologists. I also wanted to measure the degree of severity of the symptoms over time. And what I found out there was that, while the younger people, those in their teens and early 20s, often felt helpless and hopeless, older respondents were more optimistic. So one of the messages of the book is that, if you're an adolescent with NLD, don't give up hope. It does get better."

Michael Murphy

One of the first times that lifelong Wayland resident Michael Murphy, now in his late 20s, realized that he might be a little unusual was when he was 5 and taking the first in a battery of tests designed to determine just how different he was.