Hello. My name is Richard, and I am a dyslexic.

Does that shock you? It might, but it really shouldn’t, since about 15 to 20 percent of the population – up to one out of every five of us – has some form of dyslexia, a learning disability that for many years was not widely recognized or treated.

According to the Hawaii branch of the International Dyslexia Association, dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. It is neurological in origin. People with dyslexia process information in different areas of the brain than do non-dyslexics. The brain sometimes transposes or inverts letters and numbers.

This can make reading, writing, spelling, memorizing, and organizing your thoughts a really frustrating experience … even if you are bright, which most dyslexics are.

While there is no “cure” for dyslexia, people with the condition can learn strategies and techniques and achieve great success — both in school and in life.

I made it all the way through college and medical school before I made a self-diagnosis of my condition. I had known for a long time that learning and reading were a challenge for me. I compensated by working twice as hard as anyone else. I laughingly tell people that I think I made it through college and medical school by reading the textbooks twice – first by reading the sentences normally from left to right and the second time reading them from right to left.

One day in the 1960s, when I was practicing medicine at the Queen’s Medical Center in Honolulu, I attended a conference on the latest research in how the brain functions and was amazed when the lecturer showed a photograph of a bicycle drawn by a dyslexic. Everything was well-drawn and in good proportion except the handle bars. They were placed backwards in the graphic, just the way the artist’s brain processed the information.

I immediately started learning more about dyslexia and applied some of the knowledge gained to my own life. I read that dyslexia runs in families and thought that might be the reason why my son Chuck was struggling with some things in school. When I read that exercises and activities that coordinate hand and eye movement help, I bought a baseball, a mitt, a bat, and a BB gun. Chuck and I spent countless hours in the yard batting and catching the ball or on the seawall shooting BBs at the tiny sand crabs on the beach. Chuck’s grades improved and he, too, graduated from medical school.

Through my research into dyslexia, I also discovered that there are many, many famous people who had the condition. This includes renowned inventors and scientists, such as Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Michael Faraday, Leonardo da Vinci, and Albert Einstein. It also includes many well-known modern business leaders such as Charles Schwab (Founder of Charles Schwab & Co., Inc.), Bill Hewlett (Founder of Hewlett Packard Company), Richard Branson (Founder of the Virgin Group), Craig McCaw (Founder of McCaw Communications) and Paul Orfalea (Founder of Kinko’s). A number of popular entertainers are dyslexic, including Harry Belafonte, Tom Cruise, Whoopi Goldberg, Jay Leno, Keanu Reeves, Robin Williams, Billy Bob Thornton, and Tom Smothers.

Many well-known Hawaii residents are quite open about their struggles with dyslexia, including meetings expert Pris Texeira, who gave me permission to share with you that she was the first Kauai student to be officially diagnosed with dyslexia.

Many theorize that dyslexics learn to process information in different and, perhaps, superior ways. To find out more about this concept, check out a book by Ronald D. Davis and Eldon M. Braun titled The Gift of Dyslexia: Why Some of the Smartest People Can’t Read… and How They Can Learn.

For more information on dyslexia, the Hawaii branch of the International Dyslexia Association has an informative website (www.dyslexia-hawaii.org) and sponsors seminars such as one scheduled next week, on February 25, titled 33 Tips and Tools for Parents and Teachers.

Finally, if your child is having trouble learning to read, you might want to discuss the possibility of dyslexia with his or her teacher. Perhaps you have the next Alexander Graham Bell or Jay Leno living in your household and all he/she needs is a little bit of specialized help.