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Dyslexia no barrier to University of Michigan grad's 11 degrees

Posted by [Kristin Longley](#) | [The Flint Journal](#) August 28, 2008 08:08AM

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Photo courtesy of Benjamin Bolger

Benjamin Bolger on the campus of Harvard University, where he earned his 11th graduate degree.

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Benjamin Bolger might very well be the most academically accomplished elementary-school dropout in recent history.

Bolger, 32, who holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan, recently made national headlines when he received his 11th advanced degree - a doctorate in design from Harvard University - even though he's never received a high school diploma.

The Guinness Book of Records doesn't keep track of the most earned graduate degrees (as opposed to honorary degrees), but Bolger believes he would top such a list if it existed.

"They've not been able to find anyone more educated," Bolger said of his degrees. "I've been very privileged to have a wonderful odyssey of learning."

Famous dyslexics include Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Tom Cruise and Cher, according to the Michigan Dyslexia Institute.

An eager student from the start, he started taking college courses at 12 and graduated from the U-M at age 19 with straight A's.

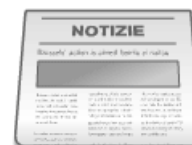
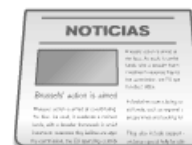
Since then he's collected degrees from some of the nation's most prestigious

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schools, and he's working on graduate degrees 12 and 13.

Such achievements could be considered incredible for any scholar, but Bolger's story has an additional twist: He struggles with dyslexia and reads at a fifth-grade level.

So how does he do it? The Michigan native, who lives in New York but has family in Flint and Durand, says he has succeeded in academia through sheer tenacity. He has people read to him, listens to books on tape and often dictates his papers to people who transcribe them.

If other students spend an hour preparing for a class, Bolger said he spends six.

"I have to take a lot more time and energy with studies and my work," said Bolger, who said he only sleeps about four or five hours a night.

"I have so much to do I need the extra time. I still read very slowly and my spelling is still atrocious."

As for why he pursues degree after degree, the verbose Bolger points to his self-described hunger for more knowledge. He also hints at a career in politics down the road. He told one newspaper that he would like to be governor of Michigan.

And in many ways he already talks with the long-winded, characteristic style of a well-practiced politician.

He said growing up near Flint - what he called one of "the forgotten cities" - he saw economic and racial inequality firsthand that fueled a desire to effect change.

"Flint has been a powerful metaphor for the challenges of our country," he said. "Had I not grown up in Flint I probably wouldn't be studying urban planning. In grad school I was always very mindful of Flint and its struggles."

The academic has chronicled his achievements on his Web site - www.benbolger.com - which also features hundreds of photos of him with politicians, celebrities and other notables.

His unusual story of extensive schooling despite his dyslexia has made headlines across the country, and he was also featured on NBC's "Dateline."

Simply put, dyslexia is a difficulty with words. But its symptoms and diagnosis are much more complicated.

Those who have dyslexia can mispronounce words, have trouble processing the words they hear or struggle with reading and writing.

Famous dyslexics include Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Tom Cruise and Cher, according to the Michigan Dyslexia Institute.

"A dyslexic child is not wired well for working with words, but they come wired beautifully for other things," said Kay Howell, co-founder of the Michigan Dyslexia Institute and one of Bolger's earliest teachers. "Benjamin is very gifted intellectually."

Bolger said his mind is geared toward phonetics. He sees the word "phone" and wants to spell it F-O-N. He wants to spell the word "psychologist" with an S.

"The English language doesn't really make a lot of sense," he said. Though he still struggles, Bolger got help from his parents and the Michigan Dyslexia Institute.

Howell said he left the institute early, and could have gotten farther in his studies

Benjamin Bolger's academic degrees:

• Benjamin Bolger's academic degrees:

- 1992 - Muskegon Community College, associate's degree.
- 1994 - University of Michigan, bachelor of arts.
- 1997 - University of Oxford, master's in sociology.
- 1998 - University of Cambridge, master's in sociology and politics of modern society.
- 2000 - Stanford University, master's in education.
- 2001 - Teachers College, Columbia University, master's in politics of education.
- 2001 - Columbia University, master's in real estate development.
- 2002 - Harvard University, master's in real estate.
- 2004 - Brown University, master's in development studies.
- 2004 - Dartmouth College, master's in liberal studies.
- 2007 - Brandeis University, master's in coexistence and conflict.
- 2007 - Skidmore College, master's liberal studies.
- 2007 - Harvard University, doctorate in design.

Source: News staff research

if he stayed.

"He could read at a college level if he would sit down and do the work," Howell said with a laugh. "He's very busy."

Bolger is the only child of Donald and Loretta Bolger.

His mother was disabled when Bolger was a toddler when the family's car was hit by a drunken driver, severely injuring both parents. Her disabilities forced Loretta Bolger, who has a master's degree in education from Michigan State University, to retire from teaching.

Her son, however, would need her expertise.

The couple divorced in the 1980s and Donald Bolger, an engineer with General Motors in Flint for many years, stayed in Durand.

Benjamin Bolger and his mother bounced from school district to school district, trying to find the right learning environment.

Specialized education for dyslexic students was limited in the early 1980s, so Loretta Bolger took on one student: her son.

He needed highly intensive instruction, and she gave it "at great sacrifice to her own life," said Bolger, who has maintained a strong attachment to his mother.

He and his mother traveled, living sometimes on a wing and a prayer, visiting museums and galleries and he learned by seeing and doing.

His mother read to him continually, taught him his elementary school subjects and eventually went to college with him to take notes.

But when Ben was 12, she pushed to get him enrolled at Muskegon Community College, where he earned his associate's degree three years later.

He graduated from U-M after another three years and went to work in Washington as an intern during the Clinton administration.

Then came his highly touted enrollment at Yale Law School - at 19 - one of the youngest students ever admitted. He lasted a semester and a half.

It was "definitely a failure," Bolger said.

"I wasn't prepared," he added. "I felt I had conquered my dyslexia, but there was a huge reading load in law school. You must be able to skim 500-page books and get key information. I couldn't do that."

He left New Haven and went to Europe to study for three years. Then it was on to Dartmouth for five summers to earn a degree there, while also earning degrees from Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture in New York and from its teachers college. He also has degrees from Stanford University and other colleges.

But Bolger is not just a student and a studier.

He bowls, he loves going to movies, he has a girlfriend, he is a world-class debater, he is involved in community service and travels extensively. He is politically active, donating to both the Clinton and Obama campaigns this past year.

He also is helping to care for his father, who has been battling brain cancer.

In the fall, Bolger will head to the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va., where he will teach full time as an associate professor.

"It is the alma mater of Thomas Jefferson," he said. "It is the second-oldest college in the nation. Harvard is the oldest. So, I am going from the first to the second."

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