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U-M grad with dyslexia to get PhD after 10 degrees

BY ROBIN ERB • FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER • JUNE 5, 2008

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Benjamin Bolger admittedly can't read well, but the 32-year-old Michigan native today is expected to walk across the stage at Harvard University to receive a doctoral degree in design -- his 11th advanced degree.

ADVERTISEMENT "I can read at about a fifth-grade level. ... I can sound out just about any word now, but it just takes some time," he said.

Dyslexia -- which affects the ability to read and use language -- is the real story, he's quick to insist.

Not that his mother talked his way into community college when he was 13 even though he didn't have a high school diploma. Not that he graduated with a perfect 4.0 from the University of Michigan at 19.

Not that he has earned 10 advanced degrees -- some two at a time -- from the world's most prestigious universities.

"Look, a lot of dyslexics excel in athletics or business, but you don't hear about them in academics," Bolger said. "I just love learning, and I'm an intense person. ... A lot of people are curious, and they'll read a book. I'll get a degree."

Call it a gift. Call it tenacity.

Call it a refusal to let a learning disability quench a voracious curiosity, even while sleeping just a few hours a night or working as a teaching assistant to pay bills that scholarships and his parents' help didn't cover.

"The guy is brilliant. He's a lunatic," said Andrei Markovits, a U-M professor. Bolger was his teaching assistant in 2002 and 2003 while Markovits taught at Harvard. "Who ever heard of someone getting that many degrees?"

Smart From The Start

"Rain." You probably recognized that word so instantly, it didn't occur to you that you did.

The oversimplified version of dyslexia is that letters get garbled. It's much more than that.



JOSH REYNOLDS/AP

Benjamin Bolger has master's degrees in sociology, politics, education, real estate and others.

ABOUT DYSLEXIA

It's unclear how many people have dyslexia, in part because it varies so much from person to person, said Brett Miller, program director for the National Institute of Child and Human Development's reading, writing and related learning disabilities program.

Some experts have estimated that 15% or more of the U.S. population has some form of dyslexia -- a disturbance in the ability to read or use language -- though Miller said profoundly dyslexic people make up a much smaller percentage.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that 4% of students ages 6 to 21, or about 2.65 million students, were receiving help with specific learning disabilities -- including dyslexia -- in 2006.

In Michigan, you can find help through the Michigan Dyslexia Institute, 517-485-4000. For information, go to www.dyslexia.net.

The Detroit Institute for Children offers services for children with physical and cognitive disabilities. For information, go to <http://www.detroitchildren.org> or call 313-832-1100, ext. 223.

Additional information is available at www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/dyslexia and at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/dyslexia>.

BOLGER'S DEGREES

Benjamin Bolger, who is expected to receive his PhD today from Harvard University, has received 10 advanced degrees:

In the most extreme cases, a dyslexic may see "rain," but have to mentally sift through spelling rules to figure out which applies, work around the silent "i" and finally match it to its definition, said Kay Howell, who with her husband, John, founded the Michigan Dyslexia Institute in 1982, and taught a young Ben Bolger.

"It can be extremely frustrating," said Howell.

Bolger, who comes from Durand, was lucky. His parents insisted their little boy get the best education long before they knew of his dyslexia. They took the toddler to lectures, the theater and museums. They read to him -- so much that his vocabulary and his knowledge of the world astonished others, his mother, Loretta, recalled.

Because his parents were nearly killed by a drunken driver, the youngster researched ways to make highways safer. When he saw a homeless man digging through a trash bin, he wondered how income and education form societal disparities, recalled Loretta Bolger, a former teacher.

Homeschooling Helps

At school, teachers didn't know what to do with the kid who scored high on IQ tests and could do college-level puzzles, but who couldn't master a reading primer. So Loretta Bolger - - disabled by the car accident so she could no longer teach school -- began homeschooling her son.

Just before his 13th birthday, he sat down in his first college class, urban planning.

What impressed the faculty about the thin, blond-haired kid was not his age, said Frank Marczak, then dean of faculty at Muskegon Community College and later its president. "He was a contributor and a thinker and a writer," Marczak said.

Ben Bolger earned his associate's degree at 16, even before he could drive.

He'd move on to U-M, to Britain and eventually back to the United States to study, picking up 10 advanced degrees along the way.

Bolger now has something else: a position at Virginia's College of William and Mary, where he'll teach sociology classes.

"A lot of people say, 'Ben, you've got a lot of degrees, what are you doing with them?' " he said, chuckling.

Teaching, he said, repays the investment that faculty, staff and his parents have made in him through the years.

Contact **ROBIN ERB** at 313-222-2708 or rerb@freepress.com.

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University of Cambridge: MPhil, sociology and politics of modern society, 1998

Stanford University: AM, education, 2000

Teachers College, Columbia University: MA, politics of education, 2001

Columbia University: MS, real estate development, 2001

Harvard University: MDes, real estate, 2002

Brown University: MA, development studies, 2004

Dartmouth College: MA, liberal studies, 2004

Brandeis University: MA, coexistence and conflict, 2007

Skidmore College: MA, liberal studies -- history, philosophy and psychology, 2007

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