

## A Way to Teach All Children to Read *University of Delaware Blue Hen Messenger, 1/2003*

When studying elementary education at UD, Virginia Biasotto, CHEP '59, did not know hardship within her own family would not affect not only her own life, but also the lives of countless children and parents.

When Biasotto and her husband met with their son Andrew's first grade teacher, they were told that although he did not learn to read that year, they should be careful not to let Andrew lose his love for life. Six months later, Biasotto found her son kicking, spitting and throwing rocks at children in the playground.

"I cried all the time," she says. "It's the most awful thing to see your child go off to school every day and come home defeated."

As the years progressed, Biasotto and husband remained baffled by the inconsistency between Andrew's exceedingly high IQ (140) and the fact that at the age of 12 he still could not read. Deciding to search for help, they took Andrew to a psychologist familiar with dyslexia who referred them to the Jemicy School in Baltimore, MD, where he learned to read using the Orton-Gillingham method of instruction. Inspired by his success, Biasotto began to study Orton-Gillingham instruction and special education at Johns Hopkins University. In 1982, she traveled to England to study at the London Dyslexia Institute and focus on the subject of multisensory structured language.

In the kitchen of her Wilmington, DE home, Biasotto created a simple manual based on the insight she had gained from her teachers and began to train volunteers. Her constant enthusiasm and desire to spread the news that dyslexic children could be taught to read finally led to the formation of Project ASSIST in 1983. Sponsored by the Kiwanis Club and housed in Wilmington, Project ASSIST (Alphabetic Sound Symbol Instruction Systematically Taught) is a tutoring agency that visits schools, Boys and Girl's Clubs and churches to offer one-on-one attention to students struggling with the mainstream reading curriculum.

The institute is a volunteer organization with the exception of paid instructors who have bachelor's degrees. There is no charge to parents or schools when volunteers come to teach. If there is no team at a child's school, parents can contact experienced tutors from the agency and arrange private lessons.

Using phonograms, spelling and syllabic division as its central themes, Project ASSIST teaches students to exercise their eyes, ears and muscles when learning to read, Biasotto says. The tutors use music, art, drama and games to promote learning in both the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Students learn how letters look when they are written in the air and how their mouths feel when pronouncing the sounds of the letters.

In 1989, Lisa Simon, AS'66, became the executive director of Project ASSIST. She had brought her son to Biasotto to be tutored after realizing he was dyslexic. After training, Simon was invited to take on the position of director. "I thought the curriculum and [Biasotto's] intent to help children who couldn't afford private tutoring was something that warranted all my energy," Simon says. "We are a wonderful organization. We give people hope."

Project ASSIST was renamed Reading ASSIST Institute during the same year because Simon and the board felt the new name displayed a clearer picture of the organization's objective.

In 2000, the Reading ASSIST Institute moved into the Community Service Building, 100 West 10<sup>th</sup> Street, Wilmington. Currently, 100 volunteers tutor children at the institute, and other volunteers are trained throughout New Jersey, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Delaware's Department of Education has allocated money to support the Reading ASSIST Institute. Support also comes from United Way.

Biasotto says her training and increased knowledge of dyslexia have significantly changed her original perception of the dilemma of dyslexic children.