FIGHTING STIGMA: LAWYERING WITH DYSLEXIA

By Salomon Chiquiar-Rabinovich, Esq.

"Reading has nothing to do with intelligence. It's just one way of getting information. The important thing is how a person processes that information, the kind of person we are, the contribution we make, and the kind of utility we have for society".

– David Bois, Esq. *Yale University Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, Dyslexic Attorneys Success Stories*

Standing next to my parents in the office of the principal of the *Colegio Israelita* de Mexico, I realized as a third-grader that my chances of moving on from third to fourth grade were not the only matter to be discussed, but that the school felt that I was holding back the class since I couldn't read at the minimum level expected. Perhaps with the best intentions, the principal told my parents, "It is sad to see someone as intelligent as your son with no prospects of finishing grade school. Parallel to Spanish, we are teaching them Hebrew and Yiddish, and even with private tutors, I don't see how your son will be able to make it."

I remember this conversation vividly. Through the dedication of my parents, tutors, and allied teachers, who strengthened my determination not to give up, I stayed in this school and developed a love for learning through unconventional methods.

In the 1970s, the initial awareness of learning disabilities emerged in Mexico. Educators were puzzled by cases of talented children with verbal abilities and willingness to work but who could not decode language and keep up with the reading fluency of the rest of their classmates. Students like me were characterized as *"Estudiantes de lento aprendizaje"* (students with low learning capacity). Before that awareness, a lack of reading ability would result in expulsion from school and your merit as a student who learned differently was discredited.

Dyslexia, as a label, did not attach to me until I started high school, struggling to keep my head above water in school but learning more effectively from the spoken–not the written–language. Good lectures–that included pictures and diagrams–and primarily what I retained auditorily were my primary medium for building knowledge. After school, I relied on my tutors to duplicate what I was supposed to learn during the day and compensated for my slow reading skills by memorizing and understanding the big picture of what I had to learn. My reading ability eventually improved slightly, but high school seemed to be the terminal point in my education.

My breakthrough came at the age of fourteen when I was finally diagnosed with Dyslexia, a neurologically based physical disorder affecting the decoding of written language and numbers. It is of genetic origin and is not corrected by eyeglasses–there is no "cure" for it. Following my diagnosis, I was sent by myself from Mexico to the Pennsylvania Vision Institute (PVI) in Pittsburgh, a pioneering center for the emerging field of developmental vision training, for the summer of 1977. At PVI, through a sequence of complex "thinking game exercises," I learned how to use binocular vision effectively. My eyes were progressively working as a team, so I could decode language faster and track what I was reading more fluently, with better comprehension and minimal physical exhaustion. I could sustain my energy and attention by reading textbook materials for the first time.

With a follow-up summer of intensive developmental vision training sessions at PVI in 1979 and tutoring at home, I excelled in school. My performance was so improved that I finished first in my class and was 1981 and was admitted to Georgetown University School of Foreign Service to begin my undergraduate degree (in Middle Eastern and Latin American Regional Studies). After that, I stayed at Georgetown to complete a four-year joint JD and Masters in International Affairs program.

Dyslexics need accommodations and strong allies to get through law school. I was fortunate to have the support of the Dean of Students, Everett Bellamy (now Director of Equity and Inclusion) at Georgetown Law School, who offered me accommodations such as time and a half for exams, being able to have the Fact Patterns of the questions recorded for me and being able to tape-record my answers. This outstanding support was so essential to me becoming a

lawyer that I have been privileged to maintain a flourishing mentorship and friendship with Dean Bellamy to this day.

Law school was much more complicated than graduate school because casebooks were not available in audible form, so going through an immense amount of reading than I could handle was unavoidable. I benefited from the support of other dyslexic law students who, like me, found ways to get through despite the challenges of our reading handicap.

Dyslexia, today in academia, is open and much less stigmatized than it was when I was in law school in the mid-1980s. However, once in practice, reading slower and requiring accommodations to produce work (such as depending on assistance in typing and proofreading to meet deadlines), the stigma of being dyslexic can prevent an associate from meeting the minimal budget of billable hours and demonstrate the competitive edge needed to progress onto partnership. The stigma attached to being dyslexic in a law firm devalues one's image and affects one's emotional well-being and level of compensation–the emotional damage is harder to bear than the financial.

Attorneys with different abilities can thrive if adequately accommodated. In addition to keeping up with my regular caseload, I was able to add value to my performance at the firms where I worked in business development and leveraged my international affairs training and multicultural competencies in collaborations and alliance building with foreign law firms. These are not areas where junior attorneys typically are involved. Fortunately for other attorneys with dyslexia and me, problem-solving and interpersonal skills vital to client relationships are not debilitated by dyslexia.

My leadership role in the Hispanic National Bar Association (HNBA) and the Massachusetts Association of Hispanic Attorneys (MAHA) has not only been a source of personal satisfaction but also translated into providing added value to the firms where I have worked in establishing their visibility in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within the profession. Following my tenure at MAHA in 2015, I became involved in founding the Attorneys with Disabilities Committee of the Boston Bar Association, where I continue to serve as the co-chair. In close collaboration with the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Standing Committee on Lawyer Well-Being, the BBA Attorneys with Disabilities Committee has brought forward colleagues' struggle within the legal profession for equality and inclusion. Integrating attorneys with visible and nonapparent disabilities is not simply about employers checking boxes to satisfy DEI quotas but instead achieving the inclusion of attorneys in the workplace with different abilities who feel they belong and are as valued as their neurotypical colleagues.

The post-pandemic return to the new normal offers opportunities for a long-overdue progressive change for neurodivergent attorneys with a shift in the current mindset from awareness of thinking and performance differences to an appreciation of the great value neurodivergent attorneys can bring to the legal community. Parallel to my practice as an immigration attorney, I enrolled in a master's program in Leadership and Administration at Boston College, with a concentration in Diversity and Inclusion, to deepen my understanding of the theory-growing DE&I professional field.

David Boies' success story as an outstanding attorney is featured among the public figures who self-identify as dyslexics by the Yale University Center for Dyslexia & Creativity. The sincerity of his success story and his empathy toward his dyslexic children strikes a personal chord with me. In his own encouraging words, Boies relates: *"I tell them, 'I know what you're going through, for I've been through that myself, and let me tell you from my own experience, it gets better.'"*

The writing of this article coincided with the beginning of the Passover (Pesach) holiday, which invariably I cherish but also brings the memory of growing up afraid of reading out loud from the Haggadah (retelling the story of the emancipation from slavery in Egypt) when it came to my turn to read during the Seders with errors that would denote my dyslexia. I was so proud to watch my three children (Hayim, 7, Ilana, 12, and Gabriella,16) actively participate in the two Seders' readings. Fortunately, each has had developmental vision training interventions that are far more advanced and effective than were available to me at an earlier age. I call my children's attention to the story of the advocacy of Moses, who felt he was not fit for his lawyering role when God selected him to take the case before Pharaoh to gain the freedom of his Jewish slaves. He argued that his speech impediment would prevent him from performing his job. Not accepting his objections, God provided him with the accommodation of his brother Aaron to speak for him, making Moses the first accommodated advocate from time immemorial. If he could do it, you can do it as well.

Salomon Chiquiar-Rabinovich *practices business immigration law in Boston and organizational DEI consulting. He is the chair of the Hispanic National Bar Association (HNBA) Section for Attorneys with Disabilities and their Allies, founder and co-chair of the Boston Bar Association (BBA) Attorneys with Disabilities Committee, and a BBA DEI Section board member. He has served as president of the Massachusetts Association of Hispanic Attorneys, regional president of the Hispanic National Bar Association (for New England 2006-2009), and first chair of the HNBA International Business Law Section (2008-2011). Salomón holds a BSFS (1985), MSFS, and JD (1989) from Georgetown University. He was a Junior Fellow at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service Institute for the Study of Diplomacy(1988-1989). Salomón completed 2023 an MSLA, specializing in DEI, from Boston College.*