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AP Interview: Malloy overcame dyslexia, physical struggles



By Susan Haigh, AP Political Writer | May 29, 2006

NORWICH, Conn. --When Dan Malloy accepted the Democratic Party's nomination for governor at this month's state convention, he made a point to mention how proud his mother would have been had she lived to see the moment.

As a child, Malloy struggled to read, calculate math problems, tie his shoes and even walk steadily. He suffered from dyslexia and motor control problems at a time when the term "learning disabilities" was uncommon.

Malloy, now 50 and Stamford's mayor, also bounced back from a life-threatening illness as a teenager. A priest offered the 17-year-old last rites three times.

"Realistically, if you asked people about me from my childhood, they would not have predicted the level of success that I've been able to accomplish," Malloy said in an interview with The Associated Press days after edging New Haven Mayor John DeStefano at the Democratic convention. They'll face off in an August primary.

"I think there are times that I'm surprised. I think there are times that I say, 'Wow, you really did it,'" Malloy said. "I said my mother would be proud. I really meant that. There was no bravado about that. That was sincere."

As late as the fourth grade, Malloy's teachers thought he was mentally retarded. He recalls how one teacher posted his failing spelling grades on the chalkboard.

Malloy holds no grudges about how he was treated.

"I think they thought I was a nice kid. But, listen, I had very little coordination. If you can't read, you can't do math and you can't spell, then how is anyone going to assume that you can be successful? That certainly was not how we measured potential for success in the 1960s, I can assure you," he said.

Dyslexia is a learning disability with neurological and genetic causes. People with dyslexia have difficulty decoding and recognizing words. As many as 20 percent of the population have a language-based learning disability, according to the International Dyslexia Association.

Malloy is the youngest of eight children. His mother, Agnes, a school nurse and his father, Bill, an insurance salesman, made a point of focusing on their young son's strengths while finding him the best physical therapy and tutoring they could afford.

When Malloy was about 10, his mother gave him a ring with his birthstone, a garnet, to wear on his right hand. That way, Malloy said, he'd always remember the "ring" hand was his right hand. Agnes Malloy also gave her son a radio because she knew he was a good listener and wanted to encourage that skill. Each night, Malloy would go to bed listening to talk radio and news radio shows.

"I was an oral learner. I have very good recall," he said. "It was a good way to learn, to learn the language, to learn skills, skills that you might use to convince people of your point, your argument, that sort of thing."

Malloy soon began to build talents that would help him compensate for his disabilities. By the end of the fifth grade he could button clothes and tie shoes. By eighth grade, he began seeing improvements with his reading. Throughout high school and into college, Malloy was able to use books on tape that were traditionally

made available for the blind to complement his education.

"You could sense that things were starting to happen, things were becoming easier," he said. "I was really developing the compensatory skills."

A football injury in 1972 became a serious setback. As a junior in high school, Malloy sustained a compressed vertebrae in practice and was prescribed painkillers for months. The drugs ultimately caused ulcers that were not detected and led to pancreatic failure.

Malloy lost 60 pounds over several months and it appeared he would not survive.

Doctors decided that December to send Malloy home for Christmas from St. Joseph's Hospital in Stamford because they didn't think he'd live much longer. But on a hunch, they sent him to Stamford Hospital, where a more advanced X-ray machine was available. That machine ultimately discovered he was suffering from the ulcers -- a treatable problem.

Months later, Malloy happily found himself at Boston College, where during his freshman year he met his future wife, Cathy, a student at Newton College of the Sacred Heart. The couple quickly became a team, with Cathy transcribing Malloy's papers for school.

"He would just sort of speak the paper. He would talk and I would transcribe it on a yellow pad, read it back to him and type it up," Cathy Malloy said.

Malloy graduated with honors and continued his studies at Boston College, where he also earned a law degree. By that time, he had become a good reader but still often relied on books on tape. To this day, he does not take notes because they confuse him. He often plans out speeches in his head and speaks without relying on written text.

"What Dan has done, he really has had to hone a lot of his oratory skills," Cathy Malloy said. "He can absorb a lot of information. He's a great listener."

Malloy graduated from law school and spent four years as an assistant district attorney in Brooklyn before entering private practice. But he said he was drawn to public policy and won election as Stamford's mayor in 1998. He said he sees the governorship as another challenge, an opportunity to tackle big issues that face Connecticut such as traffic gridlock on the highways and the high cost of energy.

Malloy's parents are now deceased. But Malloy said he'll draw on his childhood in his campaign, remembering how his mother fought for him and other children and always encouraged him to give back to the community.

"I think the way I feel about government and the way I understand the potential of government is very much based on the body of experiences that I had as a child and understanding that government can have profound positive impact in people's lives if it is used the right way," he said.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Susan Haigh has covered the Connecticut statehouse and political scene since 1994. ■