

Professor transcended dyslexia for a life of the mind

By STEPHANIE HAYES, Times Staff Writer
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PORT RICHEY - He was the kid with the butterfly net. The one who could repair the class projector.

As a teen, Ronald Thompson worked at a veterinarian's office. He was washing a cocker spaniel when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He once built a cat skeleton in his mother's kitchen.

He had trouble reading. He couldn't spell or skip or square dance. At one point, he thought he had a brain tumor. Instead of writing things down, he kept information in his head

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He was the student with the dry sense of humor. You'd miss his jokes if you weren't listening.

He joined the Navy and later earned a master's degree and a PhD. In college, he worked as a teacher's assistant, and a group of squeamish female students drove him crazy - they never wanted to touch the dead animals.

But one caught his eye. Lillian, a biology major, wrote everything down in notebooks, something he could never do.

They complemented each other, even decades later.

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He was the dad with the cool job.

He researched human temperature regulation at the National Institutes of Health. He worked on NASA space suits and studied cystic fibrosis and obesity.

At home, there was usually a microscope on the dinner table. Instead of "cow" or "horse," he taught his kids, Karl and Karen, to say "bovine" or "equine."

Like his dad, Karl had trouble reading. In first grade, an expert diagnosed Karl as dyslexic.

"You may be explaining my son," Dr. Thompson said, "but you just explained me."

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He was the professor who cared less about grades, more about learning.

The Thompsons moved to Port Richey in 1986, and Dr. Thompson started teaching at Pasco-Hernando Community College.

He enjoyed helping dyslexic students and had a laid-back lecture style, sprinkled with jokes. He tried to keep students engaged. He wanted them to want to learn.

The whole family passionately supported stem cell research. On Wednesday, they were elated to read that scientists have made a breakthrough in the Parkinson's field.

On Thursday, Mr. Thompson died. He was 81.

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FAST FACTS

Ronald Thompson

Born: April 29, 1926.

Died: Nov. 1, 2007.

Survivors: wife, Lillian Thompson; son, Karl Thompson; daughter, Karen Gillum; grandchildren Brian Thompson, Russell Thompson, Kathleen Harris and Johanna Gillum; great-grandson, Bennett Harris.

Services: Visitation 3-5 p.m. Sunday North Meadowlawn Funeral Home, 4244 Madison St., New Port Richey. Service at 11 a.m. Monday at funeral home.

Donations: Center for Aging and Brain Repair, USF College of Medicine.

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