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Changing Minds

Kimberly Kassner uses empowerment to help kids learn.

By Liz Harris

Say someone gives you a list of 20 unrelated objects to memorize. Do you think you could learn them—in order—in a matter of minutes? Or perhaps you're introduced to a classroom full of students. Could you remember all of their names? Would you feel good if you could?

Kimberly Kassner of San Rafael likes to use little tests like these in her EmpowerMind® workshops. Her students usually pass these warm-up exercises with flying colors, demonstrating that we all have the ability to learn if we're given the right tools or taught in the right way. "Everybody nowadays goes, 'You've got Attention Deficit Disorder' or 'You've got Dyslexia,' 'This is what's wrong with you,'" Kassner says in her typically animated speaking style. "We stay completely away from (our students') areas of weakness. We focus on their areas of strength and have them discover what works best for them."

"We" includes her husband Peter Earley, who will be teaching this year at North Bay Marin School and currently co-teaches workshops with Kassner, the energetic mother of an infant son. Kassner also does one-on-one tutoring and produces tapes and books, like her 1995 publication, *You're a Genius and I Can Prove It!—Unlock Your Natural Ability to Achieve Excellence*. As a featured guest on Bay Area television and radio shows, she puts her teaching skills to the test by using them on volunteer subjects while the TV camera are rolling. The results look pretty convincing.

One of Kassner's success stories has been with a group of at-risk kids in a nine-year-old pilot program at San Rafael High School. The principal, Nando Llacuna, was "skeptical" at first, Kassner admits. "He said, 'I really want you to prove it to me'" and assigned her some of the most disruptive kids in the school. As she worked with them, however, not only did the mavericks show that they could master academic tasks, most gained a healthy dose of self-esteem as well. That's another tenet of her workshop: building self-confidence as one success leads to another.

That's been the story with Kassner. Since she started out professionally almost a decade ago, she's conducted programs at public schools in Southern Marin as well as a six-week session at the county-run school for teenagers in Marin's juvenile justice system, which in 1997 earned her a spot on television with KGO reporter Cheryl Jennings. Recently, Kassner broadened her program beyond the at-risk students and now offers it nationwide to adults and young people alike. Two-day EmpowerMind® workshops are held in Marin on a regular basis, and in addition Kassner conducts teacher in-service training and continues her private tutoring.

So what makes EmpowerMind® different? It's highly inventive, using strategies like word and image associations, timing and pace, attitude and self-awareness. Kassner developed many of the techniques as a reaction to her childhood experiences in Michigan, where she was a scholastic underachiever. It wasn't until she got to Central Michigan University that she figured out how she learned best, even when she learned best. Kassner went on to graduate with honors, majoring in communications and psychology.

Her strategy for teaching combines a number of factors. One information-retaining technique involves "creating an association—that's the basis of the memory—an association with something that you know already," Kassner explains. So she might have people look at a word and find something that they can get a visual image of, and it sticks. On the simplest level think of the "o" in "capitol" as the dome of a building, and you won't mistake "capitol" for "capital."

More complex—although it worked for at least one of Kassner's students, a 10-year-old named Samantha—is the process of drawing numbers and making picture associations with them. Samantha also learned multiplication by touching the numbers on a telephone. "I showed her how to add, subtract, multiply and divide in nine sessions," says Kassner. Samantha had come to Kassner at a point when she was nearly four grade-levels behind her classmates in math and was doing poorly in other subjects as well. Samantha's father, Robert Somers of Mill Valley said he'd turned to Kassner after numerous special programs had failed to help his daughter, who was born with a hearing loss and was stumbling her way through school. He had no high hopes. "Going in, I was more desperate than anything else," he says.

He took a workshop with Samantha "by far the youngest" in the room, recalls Somers. Early on they did an exercise "where you introduce yourself to others and at the end you had to repeat everyone's names. My daughter did it and she got everybody's names. It was like the happiest day of her life. It did so much for her feeling of self worth. She literally skipped away from the session." Somers says, "It was

amazing for me to watch that transformation." From there, Samantha worked privately with Kassner. "They did different learning techniques and Samantha really got it," he says.

Brenda Bercun had a similarly positive experience last year with her son Ross. He was in the sixth grade, his first year in middle school, and was having a tough time of it. Though bright, Ross is "an auditory learner," says Bercun. "He needs to fidget, he needs to get up and walk around, he needs breaks . . . which made it really challenging for him" at his Larkspur school. Bercun had heard Kassner on the radio, was intrigued, and gave her a call. "I was impressed by what she said, that kids have different learning styles." Bercun and her son took a workshop. Again, it was the memorization—this time through story association—that seemed to work wonders from the start. Ross discovered techniques "that fit his learning style," says Bercun. Equally important, Kassner helped Ross discover what techniques didn't work for him, like doodling while listening to the story. "They also discussed attitude and how important having a good attitude is, and how to make tests for your friends."

Kassner's methods for making textbooks "less boring" also went over well, according to Bercun, who reinforced at home what she and her son had learned in the workshop. Ross continued the program with three months of private tutoring under Kassner, with whom he "had a great rapport" notes Bercun. Gradually, "his attitude really changed, and Kimberly was a big part of it." Kassner is a good fit for "kids who don't fit the mold in public school," Bercun believes. "I wish she were a teacher. I wish she had a school!"

Lisa Hawley of Tiburon, a kindergarten teacher at Brandeis-Hillel School in San Francisco, was so impressed with Kassner during teacher in-service training last year that she signed up her two teenagers for a workshop. "I think first of all it's fun to watch Kimberly," says Hawley. "It's exciting and interesting. I think what she tries to do is empower people and take away the fear factor . . . She says to you, 'If you don't learn, it's my fault.'"

Kassner also stresses the importance of relaxing, especially before and during a test. Hawley agrees. "The fear factor, especially when you are taking a test, can be enormous." She likes Kassner's step-by-step approach, "which I think is helpful when you're nervous and trying to take a test."

"As a parent, I think children are under a lot of pressure these days to perform in school," says Hawley. And Kassner's techniques "can be helpful."