



LANDMARK DAY — Rob Herman, left, Kevin Gott and Paul Hudson try on their mortarboards Wednesday in advance of becoming the first graduates of Landmark College in Putney, the nation's only college for people with dyslexia. The three have studied for two years at the school en route to associates degrees in general studies.

It was a Landmark occasion for three graduates in Putney

By JILL ARABAS
PUTNEY (AP) — All his life, Rob Herman grew up thinking he was lazy. His IQ was 156 but he couldn't read, he had trouble writing and his teachers always made fun of him. He became the class clown.

He obtained his high school diploma at a private school, even though he did no work. He forged his transcript to get into the University of Montana, but he flunked out after four semesters.

Herman still calls himself a clown, but he's not in class anymore. On Thursday, he and two other students became the first to graduate from Landmark College, the nation's only college for dyslexics.

The three students received their degrees before a packed River Valley Playhouse, which is on the campus.

"This place changed my life," said Herman, a 26-year-old from Great Neck, N.Y., with a beard, a quick smile and black curly hair that falls to his shoulders. "It gave me an opportunity to get an education, to understand myself, to accomplish goals for myself.

"If I didn't come here, I don't know where I'd be — probably working a manual labor job somewhere," he said. "I'd be alone, as I was before."

Dyslexia is a learning disability commonly known for the reversal of letters. Dyslexics also have trouble organizing their thoughts, writing them down, remembering names, taking notes and learning foreign languages.

The handicap affects 10 percent of the population. There is no known cure for the disability that has afflicted Nelson Rockefeller, Thomas Edison and Hans Christian Anderson.

Since 1971, more than 2,000 younger dyslexics have attended the Landmark School in Prides Crossing, Mass. The affiliated college opened in September 1985, in a spray of red and white brick buildings that once housed the bankrupt Windham College and at one time was considered as a site for a federal prison.

The first year, 77 students enrolled in the pre-college and college programs, the latter leading to an associate's degree in general studies.

The student population has doubled. Landmark's budget is strong, it's a candidate for accreditation, and its five-year plan includes more dormitory space, a better library and a scholarship fund.

"I think things are going very well," President Jim Olivier said in his corner office Wednesday. "We've been successful in doing what we set out to do, which is prepare students for success in non-specialized colleges."

Landmark students have been accepted at more than 100 colleges and universities.

"I think I've seen us evolve in a very positive direction," said Greg Brown, a humanities and political science professor. "We're beginning to understand much more clearly than when we started what works, what doesn't."

Courses at Landmark are very similar to those at

other institutions, but the teaching is tailored to individual needs. There is one teacher for every three students, evidence of the special attention teachers can give students.

Teaching at Landmark emphasizes reasoning skills, what Oliver calls "critical thinking. It's taught with a very explicit eye to having students take it in, in a very organized way, write it down in a very organized way, make the logical connections between points made, and see the structure of it all," he said.

Herman found out about Landmark through an education consultant. The other graduates, Kevin Gott and Paul Hudson, read magazine articles about the school.

Gott, a lanky, athletic man from Baltimore, found out about his problem in high school. He thought he could cut it at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., but he quit at the end of the year. "They had the facilities for me to get help," but he didn't approach them.

Why?
 "I guess embarrassment," he said.

He also felt bad because of his grades. "I came from a very strong academic family. My dad's a heart surgeon at (Johns) Hopkins (Hospital). Everybody's always asked me if I'm going to be a doctor," he said. "I always felt I had to achieve in the classroom, and I didn't."

Landmark helped him stick it out in school. "I guess the biggest thing for me is increasing my self confidence," said Gott, 26, who was honored this year with two achievement awards.

Hudson, a Canadian citizen, also praised the school for raising his self-esteem. A former computer programmer, he plans to become an astronomer, a goal he said he never could achieve without Landmark.

"I probably would have gone to some community college, some low-level school, got a bachelor's degree and taken a job with computers. And that would be it," said Hudson, 22, who as a child often dreamed of the stars while visiting a Montreal planetarium. "Instead of setting myself up for failure, now I know what I can do."

The cost at Landmark College is a prohibitive \$20,500 a year for tuition, room and board. The only form of aid is several thousand dollars given out by the institution, a fact that upsets the graduates.

"I hate seeing this school just be here for people whose parents can afford it," said Herman, the son of a Pennsylvania businessman, who said he'd like to start a scholarship fund.

"I learned how to read here," he said as he and his classmates sat below a campus colonnade. "I never read before. I developed language skills. I really learned about myself here through developing language skills. And I developed social skills equally.

"I learned mathematics here. I learned to add and subtract and divide with confidence. I've developed more than adequate junior college-level skills. They've run out of courses for us. Darn!" he said with a smile.

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