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“i lik pie”

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“i lik pie.” This phrase was one that all of my teachers were all too familiar with seeing. I literally wrote that single phrase hundreds of times on hundreds of assignments from first through fifth grade. I was always able to play it off by adding a comical stick figure of myself next to that phrase. Sadly, most of these teachers took that at face value and thought that I was a student who was capable of writing more and chose to write that one phrase over and over again as a joke, but it was not a joke. Not only am I dyslexic, I am dysgraphic and have dyscalculia as well.

Looking back, I would describe myself as being moderately to severely dyslexic. At the beginning of first grade, I was only able to read two words, “a” and “I”. Even with that fact weighing on my mind, I still considered myself to be smart. But as school was getting harder, I was beginning to struggle more and more to keep up that charade. Despite the fact that my parents were very involved in working with the school to figure out why a seemingly smart boy was struggling to read and write, no one seemed to understand or figure out a way to teach me so that I could learn. As a repercussion of my teachers’ inability to properly reach me as a student, I began to sharpen my creative problem solving skills.

By second and third grade I had taken on a new role in the classroom. I no longer considered myself to be a student who was there to learn, rather an outside efficiency consultant brought in to better organize the work flow and educate my own teacher on how to effectively run a classroom. During time that the students would use for independent reading, I, as the self-appointed expert, would frequently give what was mainly considered unsolicited advice to my teacher on topics such as how to better integrate new technology into the classroom. In third grade, I would give up my recess time to teach our new teacher how to operate her new Smartboard which I myself had learned to use while other students were reading silently.

Despite everyone’s best efforts, by the end of third grade, I was still reading significantly below grade level. Even with support from the special education team, my

family made the choice to leave our elementary school for homeschool. During that year, I underwent strenuous reading remediation with a tutor. After getting my reading and writing skills up to grade level, I enrolled in a small gifted private school with very supportive staff. There I spent my fifth and sixth grade year as a way of getting reacclimated to a more traditional classroom as well as develop the skills that I would need to self advocate for things like the use of assistive technology, that without, I would not be capable of functioning in my current high school classes.

In seventh grade, I made the jump back into public school. There I was surprised to learn how few students and teachers were familiar with dyslexia and what it encompassed. That was when I realized that I was on my own. I could not rely on teachers to know enough about what I struggled with to fully help me access the materials that they would give me. I began exploring assistive technology more seriously and using it to get through my assignments. I also took the opportunity to teach those around me more about the challenges that I and other dyslexics were facing. Many of my teachers began to take the methods that I had developed for myself, and employ them with other students. As I was assigned longer books to read outside of class, I began to listen to the audio versions. Many of my teachers had never thought of recommending that to students who were having problems keeping up with the assigned reading. I began bringing my own iPad to class in order to use the speech-to-text function to help get my thoughts and first draft “on paper”. At that time no other students were using any of the available computers in the classroom to write. In my IEP meetings, my family was pushing the envelope by requesting accommodations that the school had never thought to utilize for a student with my type of disability, but mostly things I had discovered on my own that worked for me.

As I began high school, my sixth grade sister, who my family had always assumed was just a struggling reader, was diagnosed with dyslexia as well. I realized that she did not have the same technical and self advocacy skills that I had been developing over several years. I realized that I had developed a knowledge base of how to accommodate for dyslexia. I realized that I needed to share some of it with broader audience than those who lived in my home or who I interacted with in my classes. I began to seek out opportunities to speak at events held by our school system. I was able to speak at our

County's Parent Resource Center event they held about dyslexia. After that event, the Parent Resource Center received such overwhelmingly positive feedback about my speech and demonstration that they invited me to come back when they held the same event the following year. Between those two years we had over two hundred parents attend. As my involvement in the school system grew, I realized that it would be helpful to have someone who had the right ideas about special education fighting from the inside.

In the fall of 2013, our County's former Special Education Advisory Committee Chair, Nancy Van Doren, approached my mom about her bid for a seat on our school board. Nancy had never done anything like this so she knew that she would need some help navigating the campaign. Nancy knew I had a strong technology background, and approached me for help creating a website and all the infrastructure to accept online donations as well as sending email blasts. Even though my role in her campaign started as simply running the backend of her technology, my role grew when she asked me to be the one to introduce her for her official campaign announcement. I used the introduction speech as a platform to publicly tell everyone that not only was I the campaign's I.T. manager, but I am also a dyslexic student. Many of the three hundred people in the room did not expect that a student with a disability was able to manage school as well as take on something like this.

After the successful campaigning, which took almost 1 year, I was continuing to think about ways to help my sister with her new dyslexia diagnosis. My mom had been helping a friend grow a parent support group in our county. The goal of the group was to create a network of parents with dyslexic children to discuss how to better advocate for their children as well as suggest methods of teaching their children that have worked for them. That gave my sister and I an idea. We realized that there were many of these types of groups in different areas all over the country, but one type of group was missing. In the summer of 2014, my sister and I attended one of my mom's parent support group meetings and pitched the idea for More Than Dyslexics.

More Than Dyslexics is a group of mostly secondary school students who all have reading or writing disabilities, but more importantly, we want others to realize that we want to be recognized for more than our weaknesses. We have been able to hold three

events so far where our members are able to get together and mostly meet other kids going through similar challenges. We have been able to create a mailing list of over one hundred email addresses from our website. It was great for my sister and I to see how quickly a group like this was able to catch on. We have also been introduced to a diverse group of kids from surrounding counties, some of which have driven upwards of one hour to get to our events. We look forward to holding out next event when school begins next year.

It's been a great journey so far, advocating for dyslexia and as a result, I've gotten to know a lot of the administration in our County's Special Education Department. In a few weeks, my sister and I have been invited to speak at Arlington Public Schools Special Education Summer Reading Camp. This camp consists of elementary school students who struggle with reading. Hopefully we will be able to serve as role models for them, and show them that just because they can't read, that doesn't mean that they won't be successful in the future.