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Just Getting By

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Just Getting By

High school is a place of fitting in. Wearing the same clothes as other people, having similar hair styles, taking all the same classes, and eating the same boring cafeteria food for lunch. However, I was never ordinary. I missed extended chunks of school throughout my life to compete in equestrian show jumping competitions. I had responsibilities greater than most sixteen year olds would understand and did the work load of a professional job. I was never able to procrastinate because setting things aside meant I did not have time to finish my work, and if my grades dropped, that meant no more horses. I did not have time to participate in the social life of high school since I always missed the weekend activities, but that did not bother me. While most of my other classmates were stressing over where they wanted to go to college or what they wanted to do with their lives, I had known what I wanted since I was four. After sixteen years and six months of being alive I was on a direct road to achieving all my equestrian goals while still getting an education until a detour crossed my path. There is a famous quote from Ben Carson that I live my life preaching; “Success is determined not by whether or not you face obstacles, but by your reaction to them. If you look at them as a hurdle, each one strengthens you for the next” (Carson). However, some challenges seem to be more of a mountain than a hurdle to tackle.

My freshman year of high school, I was chosen to represent the United States of America in Europe in show jumping competitions. As one of four under the age of twenty-one chosen for
this amazing opportunity it was an honor; the only down fall was that it required that I miss the last two weeks of my freshman year of high school. For the other three riders on my team this schedule was not a conflict since they were in college and already on summer break. I was the baby of the trip yet I needed to juggle the most responsibilities. Representing my country was an opportunity I could not pass up; it required me to work with the school administration to extend my school year and take my final exams when I finished competing.

While competing, I juggled finishing my Spanish, biology, and math courses while turning in faultless rounds in competitions. Having some teachers giving me a difficult time and not completely supporting me made me question if I was in over my head and if it was worth it. During the only five day break from the competition schedule I flew back to DC, met one-on-one with all of my teachers, and completed the mandatory biology final pig dissection. Ms. Cuello, my biology teacher, patiently taught me the entire anatomy and respiratory system of the pig, and helped me prepare for the test. After studying one-on-one with her, both my teacher and I knew that I had the information down pat. However, after grading the test, my score did not reflect what I learned from studying and that caught her attention. Immediately, Ms. Cuello went to the head of the Upper School and told him what happened. She explained how she watched me study, quizzed my knowledge, but a day later when told to recite the information again, I failed. While most teachers would have brushed this aside as a careless student mistake, my teacher could see that something was not right.

My freshman year grades did not reflect the amount of work that I dedicated to studying. For years, I spent hours completing all of my assignments to perfect standards. I never let on to the time, attention, and focus I needed to spend completing those tasks, but when it came time to remember the information for a test, something always fell short. Teachers blamed it on the
amount of class time I missed for riding and I started to accept that maybe I wasn't smart enough to get better grades. I often wondered if I went to class like other students or had more free time things might be different. While I hated to blame my equestrian passion for standing in the way of better grades, I got by academically and that was good enough. Now a teacher was seeing first hand that something was wrong.

While reading and school always seemed challenging, riding was almost second nature. Like riding a bike, every time I was placed on a horse I knew exactly where I was. I had a relationship with my horses where with the simplest squeezing of a leg or shift in my balance allowed us to communicate effortlessly so we could dominate complicated courses with great ease. Riding gave me confidence that I could excel at something. In the competition ring, it didn't matter how fast I read or how great my school grades were. My horses never judged me for mispronouncing a word or not being able to read one so the priority did not seem urgent. In the ring, I was the same as every other kid trying to jump the highest obstacles in the quickest time. One of the reasons I wanted to devote so much of my energy to riding was because it was rewarding, but no matter the amount of hours I dedicated to school, my effort did not match the outcome.

At the request of my teacher, for a week in the middle of the summer, I went to an elderly woman’s house to test my brain. While discovering a specific problem seemed like something to blame, I was secretly terrified of a diagnosis that I would not be able to do anything about. We worked in the basement of her suburban home three times a week for three hours. Each day, I was allowed one break for fifteen minutes that I would always spend with her black lab Zorro playing fetch outside. During the testing, a simple explanation didn't seem logical to me. The entire experience seemed like a waste of time and a bother since it was keeping me from riding. I
thought to myself *of course there was nothing wrong with me, I just had to “figure out” high school and overcome the new challenges that middle school did not have.* Similar to the thoughts of Laborit, “I thought I was limited to my present state. And above all, I thought I was unique” in my chosen lifestyle of being a full time student and talented equestrian (608). I hated to be there, but I hated the thought of continuing to not succeed at school even more.

The evaluator quizzed me on everything from how to sound out words, to brain puzzles, and reciting grocery lists backwards. At the end of the three hours my brain would feel as if it had been picked apart and dissected for every inch of its existence similar to how I had picked apart the pig's organs in Biology. The same woman who served me lemonade and graham crackers when I arrived was secretly opening up my skull, making observations about every word I said, and closing me up to send me back into reality. I sympathized with the pig, as someone was trying to dissect my insides and analyzing how my brain worked. At the end of it all, the work we were doing felt pointless to me. None of the activities made sense. How was reciting the alphabet backwards going to explain why I worked so hard and how my grades did not show it?

Weeks later when the results came back I was sure they would say that I needed to learn new study habits and to everyone's belief, I was just not trying hard enough. The results were not only shocking, but confusing and took me awhile to understand. It was revealed that there was truly something wrong. I had morphological dyslexia. I had a reading disability? I knew how to read all the words presented to me or at least I thought I did. How was it possible that I had created my own method of reading and no one had ever noticed?

A common misconception about dyslexia is that it is the mixing up of letters or reading words backwards; however, the correct definition is more complicated. Dyslexia is finding
unexpected difficulty in reading and that your ability does not equal your intellect. In first and second grade when everyone was taught how to read, I missed learning the basic building blocks and created my own system of spelling out the words. My system was quick; however, the information was not sticking and I wasn't actually learning. All my life, I had compensated by working hard and staying on top of my work to get by. Suddenly, when high school hit, my coping strategies were no longer sufficient for more demanding reading tasks. To most it appeared that I could read, but upon careful examination it was discovered that many words I mistakenly decoded not only affecting my pronunciation, but also the meaning. Finally, it all made sense. I had experienced that “When disabled people are able to pass for nondisabled, and do, the emotional toll it takes is enormous” (Linton, 229). I never knew the difference between my system of reading and how everyone else read. I knew that I wasn't very good at reading since I was always placed in separate, slower reading groups but that was only inconvenient since it meant less recess. I never knew that what I was doing was ten times harder and was taking me ten times longer to process the same information as everyone else. Always turning in A+ homework made me feel that school was under control. I never gave teachers the opportunity to think that I was any different. From the testing, I now had a reason and something to blame, but I now had to figure out how to overcome it.

If I hadn't been so desperate for answers, maybe I would have let the discovery of the disability upset me more, but I didn't have time to be upset. My heart told me that I had to adapt so I could catch up to all my peers. Looking back, I remember the feeling of physical exhaustion from working so hard to get the work done and the emotional exhaustion from pretending to be like everyone else when I really was not. I could tell I was not at the same level as my peers by comparing grades or sharing the amount of hours devoted to studying, but I figured it had
something to do with the amount of class I missed. I never openly shared my struggles with friends, and honestly, I think an outsiders would have guessed I was an A student from how hard I visibly worked. After hearing the testing results, I knew change was necessary, but I was left reflecting on the why and how this could have happened. The blame was not on my brain, but on the school system and how I had been taught the information. My school taught reading in one generic way and expected that teaching style to apply to all students. The author Steve Kuusisto once stated in reflecting on his school experience that “All these are things left to my dissemblings” when he was left to navigate campus with impaired vision and complete all the same readings assignments as his classmates (530). All the same resources are given to every child, yet it is up to the student to be able to utilize the resources and defend themselves if they are somehow unequipped. I have always been a very determined person and while the daunting task of having to learn how to read in a new way seemed exhausting, I was up for the challenge. I wasn't broken. I didn't need to be changed or different, I just needed to be taught in a way so I too could excel academically.

In order to catch up with my peers and break my bad habit of glossing over words, I had to focus my attention hard and fast. I needed to learn to pay attention to the order of the letters and how words were broken into syllables to know what parts to emphasize and what sounds to make. Instead of continuing Spanish my sophomore year of high school, I used the time to meet with a tutor twice a week for an hour, to re-teach me how to read. Elizabeth and I would sit in the drafty, little corner room underneath the main stairway of school. I referred to the room as Harry’s bedroom since it had a remarkable resemblance to the bedroom that Harry Potter was cramped to live in. It had a window that overlooked the main lawn and a small table with two chairs. When the winter months arrived, the cool air would grasp onto our spines. A radiator was
kindly placed in the corner, however it always took too long to warm up and would just be getting nice when it was time to leave. For forty-eight sessions, Elizabeth and I sat in that little closet and did tedious reading exercises. She would have me sound out preschool words like “Cat,” “Mat,” and “Bat.” In addition we learned new words from an interactive dictionary and we practiced breaking apart different words and creating new words from those syllables. Sitting in the room felt like I was in timeout, but I still didn't fully understand what I had done wrong to receive this punishment.

Besides my closest friends, I did not tell anyone what I was doing. If people asked, I said I was working with a tutor on my school work to get ahead for riding. I did not want to acknowledge that I had a problem and I especially did not want other people to know. I was afraid of being stigmatized and having that reputation stick with me beyond my time working with Elizabeth. Similarly to Laborit, “I had a secret. A world all to myself” that I was not sure I wanted to be exposed (599). I worried people would think differently of me or see me only for the disability. Having riding and school was always like living two separate lives, but keeping my disability a secret was like living on a completely separate universe. I needed to protect myself from the judgmental view that society has on people who are slightly different than the norm.

Midway through the year, Elizabeth and I started to read a book together. We started the first of the Hunger Games Series. Every time I got to a word that I didn't know how to pronounce, we would stop, and pick it apart like we were dissecting a bug. Limb for limb until I knew every syllable, pause, and accent of the word. My relationship with Elizabeth was similar to Laborit’s relationship with her mother. “She was the only one who truly understood me because of the language we had invented together…” and she helped me fill in the blanks that I
was missing from my knowledge (604). Elizabeth did not judge me for what we were doing or for how untraditional it was that she was teaching a sixteen year old how to read.

In our time together, Elizabeth and I read all four Hunger Games books. While the first one took us forever, by the end I was flying. Not only could I read chapter books at new remarkable speeds, but my grades started to improve, and I didn't have to work nearly as hard. I felt as though a rock was lifted off my shoulders. As Linton once quoted, “Someone with a disability overcame many obstacles.” and this proved to be true for me (Linton, 228). All of my work with Elizabeth focused on building the literacy blocks that had escaped me when I was younger. Learning to read again was just one obstacle placed in my path that I was determined to overcome.

Today, over holiday breaks, if I do not read as much, starting up again at school is always a little rusty. It takes me a bit to warm up to reading and reminding my brain how to sound out the proper words. There will always be certain words that are more challenging for me. While I know this disability will always be with me and while it was difficult at the time to learn the skills to read, the hardest part was describing the experience to others or being able to overcome “the social stigma of having a disability” (Linton, 228). It is from sharing my experience that I began to understand how a disability can be perceived in different ways.

On one college visit, I met with a faculty member of a university for my official interview. We introduced ourselves, talked about my interests, but before we got to what I aspired to be when I grew up or other basic interview topics, he asked why my grades were so low my freshman year of high school. To a complete stranger that I had only known for a maximum of ten minutes and who was influential in deciding my admittance to the university, I decided the truth was my best option. I told him how I struggled freshman year, how my teacher
had urged me to find out what was wrong, how I had gone through hours of testing, found out the reasoning, and worked my butt off to improve. The atmosphere in the room switched when he gave his response. The gentleman told me my experience was not a reasonable excuse for low grades and that the university would not even consider my application.

At the time, I had not told many people about this experience. For the few people I did tell, they were all very supportive and encouraged me to continue. Up to this point, they made me feel that my story was unique and nothing to be ashamed of. These supportive people made the hard work seem worth the struggle and that it would be only a phase in my life. What many people don't realize is that people who live with a disability are responsible for two things, “First, they are required to account for them, often to complete strangers; second, the expectation is that their accounts will serve to relieve their auditor’s discomfort” (Couser, 458). People living with disabilities are required to live in a world where disabilities are not accepted and to defend themselves to help make other people feel less discomfort. The admissions man not only called me out on and acknowledged my differences, but he was forcing me to apologize for being more unique than everyone else so that he could feel more comfortable himself. The unexpected and unfamiliar reaction from this man was heart wrenching. He made a disability that I was slowly becoming comfortable talking about and sharing suddenly something to be embarrassed by and extremely self-conscious of. He made me believe that the disability was going to affect me my entire life and hold me back from succeeding.

Unfortunately today there are still some people who are not supportive of individuals with disabilities: however, there are some that are understanding of what it means to live with one. While Couser once stated, “to have certain conditions is to have one’s life written for one.” I never want this to be said of me (458). I never want one attribute to hold me back, but instead be
my greatest dissimilarity. The pile of acceptance letters from universities across the United States showed that people are able to see the positive qualities and move past the one trait that makes me different. Choosing Miami, allowed me to build off of my strengths while continuing to strengthen my weaknesses. The experience of discovering my disability and learning to combat it made me a more determined person. The willpower it took to conquer this challenge thrown in my path strengthened me to be an even better student and more determined rider. While many would see a disability as holding them back, mine has made me stronger.