

My Journey Copy

Prologue

According to the National Center for learning Disabilities at least 1 in 5 American children has one or more learning disabilities. According to the Undersood.org 20% of adopted children have learning disabilities. This 10% more than non-adopted children. 60% adults with literacy problems have undetected or undiagnosed learning disabilities according to the Learning Disabilities Association of America. I am someone who struggled with undiagnosed learning disabilities. As an adult I was diagnosed with ADHD, dysgraphia and slow processing disorder. Here is my story.

My Journey

When I think about my family, the first feeling that comes to mind is love. I was three months old when I went to live with my foster family. By the time I was five years old I was legally adopted by that family. My mother was Mexican, my father was Swedish. They had five biological daughters, the youngest is 20 years older than me. Having such an age difference, meant that my sisters are like extra parents to me. My father passed away when I was seven years old. My mother worked as a traveling nurse, my sisters were my main caregivers. When I think back to my childhood I mostly remember being with my sisters. I'm sure it was a difficult responsibility for them to have, taking care of me. I was the only African-American in my family. The only African-American in the town we lived in, LaPine Oregon. My sisters never made me feel different. We were just a family and they loved me.

When I think back on my early education, from 1st grade to 12th, the first feeling that comes to mind is anxiety. I would look around at my friends and classmates and I knew that they

understood things that I didn't. I knew that everybody else was smarter than me and I didn't know why. My first big struggle began in the first grade when we were learning to read. I remember the teacher pointing out the letters of the alphabet, I remember her telling us what each letter sounded like. Memorizing the letters was easy, understanding words and what they meant was more difficult. I couldn't put the letters together and have them make sense in my mind. The teacher would write words on the board and ask us to read them. I was terrified the teacher would call on me. I would be quiet as I could, I would slouch down in my seat to make myself smaller. I did everything I could to not be noticed. For the most part it worked. My grades were bad but I was very well behaved. I went through second and third grade still not being able to read.

After third grade my family moved to Glendale, CA. Being quiet and well behaved in my new school didn't work anymore. I remember my mother being called in for a parent conference. My teacher said I was lazy and didn't apply myself. I felt embarrassed and stupid. My oldest sister, Myla, was focused on helping me. She started reading to me every day. She would read harlequin romance novels. On the cover there is usually a beautiful woman and a handsome man. The stories were always similar, they started out with a minor conflict, often a misunderstanding. One story that I remember is *High Country Governess*. It was about a sheep farmer who needed a governess for his children. His father found a woman to work for him. Initially the sheep farmer thought she was completely inappropriate for the job. Over time, they got to know each other better, they fell in love and lived happily ever after. The stories always have a happy ending. To me they were like fairytales but better because I could imagine myself as the heroine. My sister would buy two copies of each book. We would read them together. I loved these moments with my sister. We would sit in the living room on our old leather sofa. The TV would be on in the

background usually playing a soap opera, All My Children or General Hospital. She would read the words very slowly and have me look at them in my copy. She always encouraged me, she never made me feel bad for mispronouncing a word. Because I was so invested in the characters, I tried to learn. Because I felt safe with her, I learned to read. When I finished reading my first book, it was the first time I felt a sense of accomplishment. My sister gave me a new confidence in myself. The books gave me a new world. I learned that in books anything is possible. Those moments with my sister made me fall in love with reading and literature. I struggled with other subjects in school, but I never struggled with reading again. Over time I read more and more. By the time I was in fifth grade I was reading a different book every day. The only time I felt confident was when I was reading.

One of my favorite movies was *Gone with the Wind*. As an adult I understand it has a lot of racist stereotypes, but I didn't understand that part as a child. It's the story of Scarlett O'Hara a southern belle during the civil war. Her character was the first time I saw strong female character that didn't need a man. She was a role model for me. When I was 12 years old my mother gave me the book for Christmas. It was the biggest book I had ever seen, over 1000 pages. I remember thinking I could only read it at home because it would be too heavy to carry around. I was determined to read it. It took me a month to finish. I loved the way the author, Margaret Mitchell, put words together. It made me really connect to the characters on an emotional level. My favorite line from the book is Scarlett O'Hara saying "I can't think about that right now. If I do I'll go crazy. I'll think about that tomorrow." This reminds me to take time when I feel overwhelmed. The next day I can face obstacles with a new perspective and different opportunities. Being able to finish and enjoy that book inspired me to read different types of

novels as well as more complicated books. It also inspired me to want to become a writer. I wanted to be able to inspire other people the way Scarlett O'Hara inspired me.

When I got to 11th grade I had an incredible English teacher. She loved Shakespeare. The entire year we studied Shakespeares works, his plays and his sonnets. He wrote in a style called modern English. It's similar to what we speak now but also very different. The style of English was very complex and it was new to everyone in my class. For the first time ever I felt all of my classmates and I were on the same page, learning something new and different. I fell in love with the works of Shakespeare. The artistry of how he put words together really touched me. Before this class I didn't know that language could be so powerful. The romance and the beauty as Iambic pentameter, a rhythmic structure used mostly in poetry at the time. It was like music to me. Instead of doing my other class work I would go to the library and read his sonnets. My favorite sonnet is 141. "In faith, I do not love me with mine eyes, For they in thee a thousand errors note; But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise, Who, in despite of view, is pleased to dote;" This was the most romantic thing I've ever read. His love isn't idolized, they are human with flaws, he loves them anyway. It was another step in my journey. It was another part of the way I fell in love with language and the power of words to express emotions.

I knew I wanted to be a writer however, I did have undiagnosed learning disabilities. These disabilities made me feel like I wasn't smart enough or capable enough to follow my dreams. I was able to understand what I read in books, but struggled with understanding what I heard in lectures. I didn't know how to express what I didn't understand. I gave up on my dreams. I dropped out of high school. I became a nanny. Being a nanny is an important job, a good job. I was good at it. I didn't love it. When I was 39 years old I finally admitted to my doctor the struggles I had with education. I was terrified to say the words out loud, but I knew I

needed to if I wanted to continue to grow and change. He told me that I probably had a learning disability. Knowing that there was an actual reason to my educational struggles changed my life. I wasn't stupid, I wasn't lazy. I just learned differently. Knowing that there is a reason made it possible for me to get the help I needed. Getting help made it possible for me to return to school and follow my dreams. I know it will still be difficult, but I believe in myself now. I wonder how many other people had similar struggles to me. I'm sure there are many smart people that didn't have the support system that they needed. I'm really grateful that I had my sister to teach me to read. I'm really grateful I had my mom to give me great books. I'm so thankful I had a great teacher to teach me about Shakespeare. Mostly I'm encouraged that I'm able to return to school and follow my dreams with the support I need to succeed.

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