



First Person

A Judge's Story

By: Jeffrey H. Gallet

Jeffrey H. Gallet, Judge in Family Court, State of New York, takes us his journey to success. Gallet, who barely graduated from high school, went on to Brooklyn Law School and graduated in the middle of his class. Now a successful judge, Gallet shares how supportive parents, a wonderful friend, a professor who believed in him, and a school willing to take a chance guided him to the success he experiences today.

My mother was a trained teacher but even she did not understand learning disabilities. The term was almost unknown when I was a child. She was convinced I was bright, and she knew I was working hard at learning, but she could not understand why my achievement was so low. She shared my frustrations.

Everyone at school said that I was lazy or stupid or both. After a while I began to believe them. Sometimes, I just gave up. I couldn't write, spell, or read, or answer questions quickly. I didn't even know which hand to put over my heart when we recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

Once my parents were called to school and told that I had scored first in my class on an I.Q. test. That score they were told was evidence that I had cheated on the test. My father, a lawyer, argued that I must have been bright, indeed, for I had copied only the correct answers. My parents never gave up on me although it must have been a great disappointment to those two scholarly people that their first born could barely graduate from high school.

They encouraged me to go to college and I did, graduating last in my class. I wanted to go to law school against the best advice of my school counselors. Again they encouraged and supported me, this time along with one of my professors, Dr. Hugo Mailey.

Law school - no longer last in class

Brooklyn Law School took a chance on me. I responded with the best academic performance of my career and I graduated in the middle of my class. By law school I had begun to learn how to compensate for my problems. I also had the good fortune of meeting Steve Lusthaus, another student, who was willing to spend many hours discussing legal concepts with me. Law school was easier than college because there was more emphasis on concepts and less on rote learning, my greatest weakness.

Steve, now a successful lawyer, and I still joke about the time he tutored me for a torts examination on which I scored an "A" and he only a "B". I also remember the night I decided to drop out of law school because of the seemingly endless pressure and Steve argued with me all night, refusing to let me go to sleep until I agreed to stay in school.

Life finally comes together

I was a lucky one. Loving parents, a college professor and a law school roommate supported me, encouraged me and refused to let me fall victim to my frustrations and give up. They knew that I was neither stupid nor lazy, even though there were times I was not so sure myself. By the time I was, by

chance, diagnosed as learning disabled at the age of thirty-five, I had already learned to deal with my learning disabilities. By the age of thirty-seven, I was a judge.

I take special pride in one accomplishment. Having failed English courses in both high school and college, I finally learned how to write. But, today, with five books and over thirty articles to my credit, I still suffer from terrible writer's block and an irrational fear that I am about to make a fool of myself every time I sit down to write. The fear and the frustration have left such a lasting mark on me that I can never forget how it was. I can never fully believe it will not be that way again.

Some thoughts about the juvenile justice system

I agreed to write this article, after first refusing, because I think my story may help parents deal with their LD children. Almost every week I see a learning disabled child who, undiagnosed or untreated, is venting his or her frustrations in anti-social ways. I could have stood in that same spot. If not for loving, caring, involved parents, my frustrations at not being able to keep up in class, and to some extent in the play yard, could have burst forth in the same self-destructive way.

The schools and the courts have not met their responsibilities to LD children. When I was young, they simply did not recognize the problem. Now, they can diagnose and deal with LD but have not allocated the resources to do what must be done.

I expect the FCLD benchbook to make a major impact on the juvenile courts. Juvenile court judges will for the first time have an authoritative work to help them deal with the LD youth-at-risk. Hopefully, it will lead to treatment programs to halt the escalating conflict between the frustrated, angry, impatient LD youngster and his or her overburdened, impotent-feeling parents who are unable to socialize their children and integrate them into their peer groups. Too often in the past, the solution has been to place the child in foster care, an unsatisfactory, non cost-effective solution which may very well do more damage than good.

It is the schools which hold the key to avoiding the type of conflict we see in the family courts. An early diagnosis of the problem and an integrated treatment plan, including not only help for the child, but, also, counseling for the parents, would save many children now going astray. Unfortunately, too many schools have not focused their attention and resources on the problem and research proposals to find methods for early diagnoses of LD are going unfunded.

There is improvement. As education programs such as the FCLD grants for handbooks for lawyers and judges make more and more people aware of the problem and the terrible waste it creates, more LD children are being identified and helped. Unfortunately, the process is painfully slow.

Their World, 1996

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