



The Gift of Learning Differently

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2010 Anne Ford Scholar Mackenzie Meyer was identified with dyslexia and as a result told she would not be able to reach her goal of becoming a veterinarian. As a result, she has pursued her dream in full force and is a shining example for any LD student who has been told to lower his or her expectations.

President Obama has a nation of educators looking for “it.” Steven Jobs of Apple computers wants to unleash “it.” Superpower countries like US, China and India are in the race of their lives for “it.”

As for me...well, I already have “it.” Actually, I was born with “it.” I was born with the gift to create, to invent new ways of doing and being. I am a person who learns differently and therefore, by default, sees differently and will help this planet in ways it has yet to see.

Oh, yeah, I know it sounds like I have it totally together and have long since figured out that having a learning disability is a gift. But in truth, it has been a long journey. Just as it is with anybody with a disability, you have two choices: you can take the easy way out and accept that you will have a life with limits or decide that you are going to fight for the life you want to have and are meant to have. I chose to fight. I chose to tell the world “to help or get out of the way.” It hasn’t always been easy, and it hasn’t always been pretty. But I have made it halfway around the game board, and I don’t intend to stop until I achieve my first major goal of becoming a veterinarian.

My journey is about how a kid who can’t read grade-level textbooks, has difficulty writing sentences understood by others, has poor ability to judge the passage of time or distances traveled, confuses left and right, mixes up numbers, and has short-term memory issues, can achieve a “straight A” report card, get accepted into a pre-veterinarian program at several top-rated colleges, and contribute to her community.

There are six main things I have done in life to help me manage my disability so that I can be free to go about my life and achieve what I want with as much independence as possible.

I started with the end in mind.

Since I attended my first open house at Cornell Veterinary School at the age of 8, I knew I wanted to be a veterinarian. I was fascinated with the surgery center where veterinarian students pulled out various body parts from formaldehyde-scented jars and showed “up close and personal views” of such things like the inside of a disease-ridden cat brain.



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I signed up for the Cornell vet school newsletter in sixth grade and have attended seven more open houses since. I knew, from the first information session I went to, what is expected of me from high school and college to get into vet school. I knew the grades I needed, the courses I needed, and the amount of animal experience required. Last summer, I even set up an information session with the head of Cornell vet school to review my undergrad college choices and to share with her how I was tracking on my hours of animal experience and coursework.

So you see, when I am going out of my mind trying to read a textbook or study for a test, I know the “why” behind what I am doing. I know that in just a few years, I will be applying for med school and that every test I take, every book I read, every animal I heal, will be taking me toward my goal.

I set up my life to play to my strengths.

Reading and writing will never be my friends. That's just a fact. Science and math are my close buddies. They are “black and white” with rules that don't seem to have a million exceptions. So I have chosen a career path that will play to my natural strengths.

I have learned, and continue to learn, how to shore up my weaknesses.

I use traditional methods. To improve my reading and writing, I signed on in fifth grade to be the first to learn the Wilson Reading program and have been on the Wilson program the longest in the entire school district. I am still not at grade level but have closed the gap tremendously.

I also rely on books on tape, as well as peer readers.

To help me with my organization, I have made my own agenda that includes personal as well as professional appointments. I use both paper and my phone to ensure if one system fails, the other will kick in.

For driving, I knew confusing left and right would be a problem, so I make sure people point in the direction they want me to turn, so that I have a visual as well as oral clue. I also put red arrows on the instrument panel that clearly indicate left and right turn signals. And GPS has been a gift from above.

I am always investigating new technologies to help me adapt.

Every time I go on college interviews, I start with the disability office. I ask them what technology students are using. This has led me to “Reading” pens that record lectures at the same time you are writing. It has led me to software that scans your books and translates them to audio (so no more waiting for the librarian to do it on the school-owned machine). I have found software that helps me write and store flashcards, and of course, the ever-essential speech-to-text computer applications. Writing this essay has been possible through the use of technology (as well as several dozen rewrites).

I don't let anyone take my dream from me.

On June 15, 2003, I sat in front of the chair of the special education committee at our school. I remember him telling me that I had to be more realistic about my goal of becoming a veterinarian. He said, “The coursework is very challenging” and that a dyslexic could not “practically hope to get into and through med school.” I will never forget it. I can still see his face, and my mother's reaction. He did me a favor because I swore that I would never let anybody take my dream and hold it over my head. It is my dream. I guard it, protect it, nourish it, and will never let it down. When I graduate from med school, I will invite that man to my “white coat” ceremony.

I pay it forward.

Anyone with a disability can become self-absorbed. **Your whole life is about figuring out what learning style works for** nclcd.org/.../the-gift-of-learning-differe...

you. What communication works for you. We even have our own Individual education plan at school. But, we share the world with others, and need to remember that by becoming part of it, and giving back. So, I teach kids how to swim, help teachers learn how to better reach other LD students, volunteer at camp for disabled kids, help distressed animals in the wild, and just try to be a role model of what is possible in a life without limits. I am currently working on a guide to help LD students go through the college search process, including a questionnaire for the disability office interview.

So, if President Obama wants to shore up this nation's pool of scientists and inventors, if Steve Jobs wants ideas of how to unleash creativity, and super power countries what to move toward that next "Big Idea," there is an army of tens of thousands of LD students like myself ready and willing to show how it is done.

Visit LD.org for more information on this topic.

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"The power to hope, to succeed, and to learn."