

Something just didn't make sense.

From Where I Sit

By T.J. Sullivan

As my son entered fourth grade, something seemed “off.” He was reading at a high school level or greater. People constantly commented on how well spoken he was. He was mature beyond his years, and able to engage in intelligent, witty conversations with all ages. He had a great vocabulary. He was a generally happy kid with lots of friends. But when we looked at his handwriting, it was terrible. He could spell the same word wrong three times in one paragraph.

This was difficult ground for a new parent. We had just adopted my son a year earlier, and I couldn't put my finger on what could possibly be wrong. As fourth grade turned into fifth, and fifth turned into sixth, the frustration grew. I forced my son to sit at the dining room table doing handwriting exercises. I circled misspelled words in his assignments, requiring him to erase and correct each one. We had his vision checked. I told him to quit being lazy and put more effort into his homework assignments, often forcing him to sit with me at the dining room table slowly writing out every word. It was painful.

Nothing made sense. The kid was reading Stephen King novels, for heaven's sake. He was correcting his friends on the use of “me” and “I” when they spoke. Even so, his grades were slipping. His teachers were becoming frustrated, and parent-teacher conferences were depressing. His teachers loved him personally, but didn't understand why he wasn't putting forth better effort. “It's the middle school thing,” they'd say. “He will grow out of it once the hormones settle down.” I continued to hope, even as the stress level increased at home.

He started giving up: not doing homework, failing to turn in major assignments, lying, and acting out when teachers pushed him. His report cards were either A's or F's – nothing in between.

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Sometimes, life gives you a gift when you need it most, and mine came in the form of a relationship. My partner, Scott, is a Ph.D. psychologist who had some background in learning diagnostics. Dr. Scott casually brought home some old copies of testing materials from his personal files and ran my son through some exercises in the family room after dinner one night. He suggested some testing and helped me find a qualified psychologist in our area specializing in learning differences.

For his part, my son was excited about getting tested. He wanted answers too.

I had never heard of dysgraphia. No one I knew had ever heard of it. Pardon the coarse explanation, but in the way that the better-known “dyslexia” is characterized by words having a hard time getting from the page to the mind, “dysgraphia” is characterized by words having a difficult time getting from the mind to the page. When it comes time to write or type, my son’s processing speed is in the third percentile – the lowest three percent of all humans. In terms of reading skills, he was in the 97th percentile for his age group.

I am not ashamed to admit I got choked up when I heard the diagnosis. Suddenly, it made sense that he could read a Dean Koontz novel but couldn’t remember how to spell Sullivan, his new middle name. Best of all, my son and I hugged, and I apologized for questioning his effort. I apologized for all the times I told him to quit being lazy and put in some effort. I apologized for all the tense nights spent at the dining room table with a look of disappointment on my face.

For a guy who had graduated fourth in his high school class and who had graduated

from college at age 19, I suddenly felt very stupid. Learning had always come naturally to me, and I knew nothing about the learning disabilities that millions cope with every day. Even as I type this piece, my spell check program recognizes the word “dyslexia” but asks me to correct “dysgraphia.”

My son and I were lucky. I married a brilliant man who recognized a problem. I had the funds to pay for \$5,000 in diagnostic testing. Recently, I was able to put him in a private school with a cutting-edge approach to learning challenges and teachers who know how to teach kids like mine. He uses a program called “Dragon Speak,” speaking answers to tests into a headset while a computer writes out his answers.

Last week, he came home after the first quarter with six A’s and a B, and he’s annoyed by the B in Geometry. A few years ago, he was disengaged from school and his teachers. Today, he loves his teachers and is playing on his basketball team. A fair amount of my speaking money now goes to his annual tuition, but it’s totally worth it.

He’s looking at colleges, and when he goes, he will need to choose a school where the learning services center is top notch. It will be one of the leading questions we ask when visiting schools. How do faculty members work with students with special needs? Do the learning services staff members do a good job advocating for students who often don’t advocate for themselves?

Clearly, not all students and parents are as lucky as we. School systems do a spotty job of diagnosing learning disabilities – it’s expensive, after all. Kids without resources disconnect from their schools or fake their

way through with miserable grades, and many maintain a belief that they are failures. Many kids think they are stupid, and they start limiting their own potential or acting in self-destructive ways. Many of their parents beat their heads against walls wondering why life with their child can’t be easier.

My journey with my son led me to suggest this focus on disabilities to the editorial board of this publication. The stigma and lack of understanding is formidable. Surely, there are hundreds of students with undiagnosed learning challenges in our fraternity/sorority communities. I often wonder how many of our students turn to unhealthy choices as a coping mechanism.

I recently heard a fraternity/sorority advisor expressing frustration that one of her student leaders couldn’t, or wouldn’t, fill out a simple form to register an event. “Seriously, how hard could this be?” she asked. Years ago, I would have agreed with her. At that moment, my thoughts went to my son. He’s starting to look for a job, and simple job applications are a nightmare for him.

Perhaps this issue of *Perspectives* will encourage you to learn more about the wide array of disabilities challenging your students. It’s worth studying. Maybe you’ll encourage your staff to learn more. Perhaps you’ll be able to give hope to a family you know is struggling with some of the same challenges my family faced.

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From Where I Sit is a section in *Perspectives* featuring a personal perspective on the interfraternal community. Do you have an opinion to share on fraternity/sorority life? Tell us how things look from where you sit by emailing your thoughts to the editor at asg@dzshq.com, and you could see your ideas in a future issue of *Perspectives*.