

# My Journey

by Cassandra Record

What does the word “disability” mean to you? For many people, disability is something really bad, something no one wants to have, something everyone frowns upon that makes people treat you differently. To me, however, disability means power, strength, and honor. I would like to share a few stories from my life with you to explain my perspective.

I remember a time when I was in third grade. It was during the part of the day when we were reading. The teacher told us that we were to go around the room and each student would read one paragraph out loud. I never wanted to read out loud. I sounded different from the rest of the kids because I had a stutter. Nervously, I looked around the room and counted the number of children in front of me to determine which paragraph I would have to read. Once I figured that out, I read my paragraph to myself several times. When I looked up to see how far around the room we had gotten, I had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was getting closer to my turn to read. Five kids before me, four kids, then three kids. When it was my turn to read, I felt I was going to throw up.

I said the first word: “The,” but nothing came out, just this obnoxious “th” sound over and over. I lost my breath. The class started laughing at me. I turned beet red, and I wanted to cry. The teacher calmed the class and asked me to start again. I tried. That stupid word “the.” I finally said it. Then, the second word: “cat.” Again, I tried to say the word and nothing came out, just a “ca” sound over and over. My breath disappeared, and the class began giggling again. I began to well up with tears. I felt so embarrassed. I couldn’t read out loud. I couldn’t even form the words to ask the teacher to go the bathroom, so I held it in until I could go home. Being so young and feeling helpless is an awful feeling. My parents tried everything, including speech therapy. Nothing helped. Then one day in fourth grade, I woke up and the stutter was gone.

Yet my difficulties with language did not vanish. For many years, I struggled to understand what people were saying. I managed. I asked people to repeat what they said or to say it a little differently so that I could understand. But in my senior year of high school, the impact of my difficulty with language became more apparent. Now that I was older and aware of the reactions I would get from classmates, I found a different way to handle it.

The bell rang and woke me from a deep sleep. My heart started pounding. I felt confused. Where was I? English class. It was nearing the end of the quarter, and I had given up. I had not the slightest idea of what was going on in class. I was not going to graduate anyway, so I figured *What’s the point of participating?* and I spent a lot of time sleeping in class. After struggling for the first half of the year, I had tried to get help from my English teacher. She offered to help me after school at a time that was impossible for me to attend. There was no flexibility. The result was that I wasn’t able to learn the material, and I failed English. Although I went to prom and got my cap and gown, I didn’t get to walk at the graduation ceremony with

my class. I was so heartbroken. I passed summer school and earned my diploma, but after that I didn't want to go to school ever again. I felt I had no one in my corner. I thought so many bad things about having a disability. I thought if I was "normal" I would have graduated on time. Every aspect of my life seemed impacted by my disability.

What happened to me in high school was that I felt I was being pushed along, pressured to find a way to graduate, even if I didn't understand the material. I learned that pretending not to try was safer than trying and not succeeding. I felt the disappointment of being in an educational system that was not equipped or willing to support me. It was not easy to find the motivation to go to college after this. Working a part time, dead end job helped me find my way to college, and experiencing a different educational system in college helped me get out of the dark place I was in.

Today, I am in my last year of college and I am President of an honor society. I have a 3.5 GPA, and I have grown so much as a person. How did this happen? I took the initiative to start working with Disability Services. Accommodations in college are meant to help you be on an equal level as everyone else in the class. There is a whole support system in college, a department full of people who can help if your accommodations aren't working for you. It's my choice if I want to pursue the advice that is given to me. I was approved to use accommodations like extended test time, preferential seating, and audio-recorded lectures. Those accommodations gave me the strength to show what I was learning. I started getting A's and B's. I started to feel great. There was a place where I belonged, a school that accepted me, people who understood me and wanted nothing but the best for me. Being a part of Delta Alpha Pi, I have never felt so much power, strength, and honor. I've watched not only myself but the other members grow as well. We come together to support and help each other out as whole. I have met so many strong and powerful members with disabilities. They inspire me to keep going, even when I feel like my disabilities have defeated me.

Having a disability isn't a curse. It's actually empowering. Even though I have had my share of difficult experiences, the struggle has brought something amazing to me; it has made me the person I am today. I'm leading an honor society and earning top grades at the same time. I am using my leadership skills to help other students like me feel strong and connected. As a group, we are changing the way people think about "disability" so that this word means something positive, an opportunity for success, as well as power, strength, and honor.