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## Journey to LD Proud to Be

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**ABSTRACT** In this autoethnographic essay, the author explores a wide range of personal experiences as a neurodivergent student. The author challenges the reader (students, educators, parents, whoever they may be) to self-reflect on their own experiences with the neurodivergent community to broaden the understanding of each person's unique academic journey. The author's hope is that readers feel inspired to recognize their own personal capacity to create real change in expanding upon what it means to be part of the neurodivergent community and beyond. **KEYWORDS** neurodiversity, self-disclosure, learning disability, PTSD, academic support

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This essay tracks my personal journey toward neurodivergent empowerment in academia utilizing stories spanning from my ADHD diagnosis in the first grade to the present day where I work alongside the Department of Inclusive Education. Throughout my young adulthood in academia, a period loosely constituted as ranging from elementary and high school to freshman year of college, I struggled to accept neurodivergence as part of my identity. Allotted the opportunity through autoethnography to recount the many twists and turns of navigating academia as a neurodivergent student, I self-reflect on my own experiences, emotions, and dialogues impacting what it means to identify as neurodivergent.<sup>1</sup> Using the tool of autoethnographic writing, I also utilize reflexivity and storytelling to dive deeper into my experiences to illustrate the cultural inadequacies in academia as a neurodivergent student.<sup>2</sup> As a major part of my identity today and as part of my advocacy work, I proudly share my journey with students, teachers, school administrators, and parents as a motivational speaker and facilitator.

### FULL DISCLOSURE

We all have a personal story to share that has the power to inspire and bring positive energy to others. At the age of twenty-six, while completing my undergraduate studies, I reached a pivotal moment in sharing my experiences of navigating academia with an Executive Processing Disorder and ADHD to the public. Prior to this, I had been working closely with the State's Department of Inclusive Education Programs Professional to develop a larger community of different thinkers/learners on our university's campus, work I found to be not only important but timely and necessary. Throughout our time together and joint work of improving disability access in middle schools, I found the topic of my own neurodivergent academic journey came up from time to time.

Early that Fall semester, the State Programs Professional and I met up in the on-campus Starbucks to discuss a near-peer mentoring program, a program that pairs

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neurodivergent college students with middle school students with similar diagnoses to their own. With her uniquely perky and positive disposition and passion for working toward changing disability perceptions in state middle schools, I felt comfortable to disclose parts of my own neurodivergent journey. Some of the stories I shared included my “disruptive” behavior in the first grade and my high school Precalculus teacher who failed to recognize the importance of my accommodations. In response she exclaimed, “Wow, Dave! A lot of students, parents, and educators would benefit from hearing you share your stories. The state holds an annual transition conference here in town each Fall. Would you be willing to speak at this year’s conference?” I of course agreed, excited to take part in a conference focusing on helping young individuals with disabilities utilize various services. This conference in particular helped students as they progress from high school into post-secondary education. While transition services are generally provided to individuals with disabilities to facilitate movement through vocation preparation, independent living, or community participation, I wanted to ensure that my speech focus on the various transitions a neurodivergent student would face throughout their academic timeline. That is, from elementary school into high school, from high school into college, and from college and academia into the workforce.<sup>3</sup>

I prepared my speech weeks in advance of the conference, but I still felt my anxiety racing when the time came for the event to take place. Luckily, I had my family by my side who reminded me to take pride in my story and not to feel the same long-standing shame I had always felt when it came to my own journey in academia. They also reminded me to focus on my “why.” I knew that sharing my story might illuminate and bring out of the shadows experiences neurodivergent students face daily and my anxiety slowly transitioned into pride.

While setting up the slideshow and getting ready to share my speech titled, “Journey to Learning Disability Empowerment,” I watched as patrons consisting of high school students, parents, and educators from around the state entered. I stood at the front of the room facing each individual as they made their way into the room, now starting to feel the anxiety creep back into my mind as this was the very first time I had shared in such a public way my learning challenges and scattered academic journey. I felt fearful of the audiences’ perception of me since, like many other taboos, neurodivergence and learning disabilities are rarely discussed openly in public settings. The fear of being seen as abnormal<sup>4</sup> or as the Other created an incomprehensible pain blocking my paths for open communication.<sup>5</sup> Despite any qualms regarding disclosing my neurodivergence, this was my time to share my journey and “out” myself in a way, and it needed to come directly from me as the place of agency.<sup>6</sup> Standing with pride at the lectern overlooking the audience, I was now ready to allow others to enter my previously very private world.

Minutes prior to starting my presentation, the last available chairs filled up. “Do you mind scooching down?” I overheard some of the patrons say. A sea of engaged individuals now flooded the room—some sitting on the provided chairs, some sitting legs crisscrossed against the wall, and others standing in the back corner extending out into the hallway.

Following my presentation, the audience erupted in applause. Tears began trickling down my cheeks due to the overwhelming amount of adulation I received for sharing my

personal story. “Breathe in, 1, 2, 3, Breathe out, 1, 2, 3,” I repeated in my mind for personal reprieve as multiple individuals made their way toward me. A young man approached me and extended his hand to shake mine and said, “Thank you Dave for sharing your journey with learning disabilities and ADHD in school! At my high school, I sometimes feel like I’m the only person who struggles to learn. Knowing that I’m not alone with a learning disability has changed my view on having learning disabilities.” In this moment, I felt immense self-pride in my decision to openly disclose my neurodivergent journey to empowerment, and knew it was a move in the right direction.

By using storytelling and self-disclosure in this moment, the audience was able to partake in an imagined exercise of sorts, the imagining of a new reality through the experience of the oppressed other.<sup>7</sup> In some respect, aspects of my journey resonated with the members of the audiences’ own. While the feelings of pride overwhelmed me that day, reaching that point of self-acceptance was a long and arduous one to say the least.

### **ADHD . . . SQUIRREL!**

During the first grade, the first letter of our last names determined our locational placement within the classroom. With a last name beginning with the letter W, I sat in the back, the furthest distance from the teacher. Just behind my desk, large panel windows exposed our school’s courtyard with various oak trees, benches outside each classroom door, and a concrete pathway cutting through the courtyard diagonally with individual paths leading from the main office to each classroom. Throughout the entirety of the school day, I would fall into a daydream fugue, staring out the windows mesmerized by all the action of our school. The students passing through the courtyard, parents picking up their children from the main office, or the squirrels scurrying up the oak trees all held my attention, not my teacher. This was most evident during Popcorn Reading.

The reading activity Popcorn Reading, also known as Round Robin Reading, allowed our teacher to monitor our comprehension and concentration skills in the classroom since it requires the instructor to call randomly on students to continue the reading from the point the previous reader had stopped. Always seeming to be distracted with the action outside the classroom window, my lack of participation when it came to my turn to read would be seen as disruptive and quickly followed with scorn. My teacher would call out, “David?” and then again when I didn’t register her call, “David?” and then once more, but now with a raised voice, “David White? Are you listening to me? Stop staring out the windows, it’s your turn to read.”

My inability to remain focused coupled with my perceived disruptive behavior led my teacher to speak with my parents regarding her concerns. My teacher noticed that my attention rate faltered compared to other students, my reading levels remained substantially lower than peers, and my behavior in class distracted myself and the other students. All of these are key signifiers of ADHD and point to various other learning disabilities.<sup>8</sup> Issues with learning can be detected as early as first grade, and thanks to my teacher’s recognition and action, it did not take even more years to address my situation.<sup>9</sup> This

early recognition in the classroom provided my mom a viable reason to make an appointment with a psychiatrist for a screening as the next best step.

ADHD is diagnosed by a psychiatrist based on the criteria within the DSM-V. Signs of ADHD specified by the DSM-V are based on inattention and hyperactivity. My inattention showed itself as a failure to give attention to my teacher and to follow through on instructions as seen during class activities. It was also seen in being distracted easily by the activity of (but not limited to) the squirrels outside the classroom and being forgetful while performing even the most mundane tasks. How hyperactivity presented itself in my own life included my fidgeting, constant motion, and disrupting of others.<sup>10</sup>

Upon walking into the psychiatrist's office, the toys in a brown wooden box caught my attention. "Whoa! GI Joe and the scorpion Hot Wheels car!" As I sat with a GI Joe in one hand and a few Hot Wheels cars in the other, the psychiatrist bent down beside me and began asking me questions.

With a comforting voice, the psychiatrist invited me to join her at her desk. "David, bring your friend and cars over to the table here and sit with me." I sat down with her, GI Joe still cruising with his Hot Wheels car. "I have a few fun games we are going to play." She began running various tests to assess whether I would classify under the diagnosis of ADHD. I felt excited to play and found the test "games" challenging since they consisted of matching, recreating images using blocks, and rapid memory tests. The psychiatrist used Rapid Letter Naming to help distinguish between the diagnoses of either ADHD or a Specific Learning Disability (SLD).<sup>11</sup> She performed this test by stating ten to twelve words with my goal being able to regurgitate as many of the words I could back to her afterward. "All right David, I am going to say a list of words, and I want you to repeat what I say, OK?"

Despite the fun nature of the test, I became overwhelmed and exhausted with the difficulties of remembering the order of the words and experienced lapses in my performance. Furthermore, my slowing ability and longer response times were signifiers of an inefficient top-down response on my part.<sup>12</sup> Kneeling beside me, the psychiatrist kindly praised my effort and diligence. "It's OK David, you did great! You can rest now!"

Based on the results of the assessment, I received a diagnosis of ADHD. With this diagnosis, I became eligible to receive educational accommodations through my Individualized Education Plan. I also now had access to specialized classes resulting from the Response to Intervention (RTI) in identifying my needs as a neurodivergent individual and assessing the types of services that may assist me with school.<sup>13</sup> I was fortunate that these services followed me all the way through junior high and as I entered high school, now with an additional diagnosis as having an Executive Processing Disorder.

## TEACHERS JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND

By my high school junior year, using accommodations such as extended time on exams in a quiet room became the norm for me. I felt that I had a supportive enough team of teachers and counselors at the school who had a general understanding of my different

learning needs and techniques. All things changed, however, when I was placed into Mrs. X's pre-calculus course.

Learning math concepts of quadratic equations and logarithms with an Executive Processing Disorder is similar to learning a foreign language, but to no avail. When it came time for exam days, I needed a private room and extended time for thinking through the math concepts. In addition to my Executive Processing Disorder, my ADHD causes exam environments to be incredibly stressful due to the time restraints and distractions from other students. I would struggle to stay focused and ignore even the slightest noise such as the tap-tap of someone's pencil on their desk, the digital clock showing my remaining time decreasing down to the second, or the loud POP of the bubble gum bubbles from the guy sitting next to me. The importance of being allowed to complete exams in a separate room thus helped to mitigate many of these distractors. Not only that, but not having the fear of running out of time and being able to think aloud gave me a better chance at comprehending the materials.<sup>14</sup>

For those students requiring extra time on exams, the teachers were required to deliver the exams to the guidance counselor prior to the exam day. After only the first month of this practice, Mrs. X started to make this requirement on her part seem more of a "burden." She would often refer to my accommodation as my "special treatment" and clearly displayed her complete apathy toward my academic success by acting "too busy" or distracted when I approached her regarding my test-taking accommodations. I had already felt a huge sense of shame and uneasiness in having to utilize extra time, and her treatment just furthered these feelings to a point that made this class impossible for me to participate in.

By midterm exams, my teacher made it crystal clear to me she did not approve of my receiving accommodations for her class. After finding her failure to send the guidance counselor a copy of my exam, I made the walk across campus to her classroom where my fellow classmates were already waiting to take the same exam. Entering the classroom, I saw Mrs. X preparing the stack of exams to distribute to the students. "Mrs. X, I was just over at the guidance counselor's office, and you didn't send them a copy of the midterm exam." With an agitated glare, she sighed and responded, "Wait here a minute as I make you a separate copy."

Awaiting my teacher's return to the classroom with my copy of the exam, the students sitting around me engaged in banter amongst themselves. Not ten minutes later, the door of the classroom opened with my teacher returning and clenching in her hand my copy of the exam. Viewing myself with others conversing, my teacher automatically assumed the worst of her "special treatment student." Her voice rose above normal. "David White! How dare you cheat. It's bad enough I must give you extra time for the test!" With the students stunned in silence, the distinct sound of the whistling wind blowing through the trees outside the window filled the room, creating discontent within each student. My teacher beckoned me toward her as she stood at the door. "I'm taking you to the Dean's Office immediately."

After abruptly dropping me off at the Dean's Office, my teacher hastily skirted across campus back to her classroom. While I was waiting to speak with the Dean, the events

that occurred replayed in my mind. In disbelief, I felt completely alone and paralyzed with fear. The Dean of Students, standing behind a polished wooden counter in the front room of the office motioned with his hand for me to come speak with him, “All right Mr. White, explain to me what happened.” The Dean, a large man red in the face with a blazer, a red tie with the school’s logo displayed midway, and khaki slacks glared at me to answer. “Sir,” I calmly responded, “all I wanted was for Mrs. X to deliver my midterm exam to my guidance counselor so I may complete it with my extended time.” I thought to myself who I could count on in that moment for a defense of my good will. With my parents both working, I thought probably not one of them in this moment. Then it dawned on me who had my back in all academic settings and understood my neurodivergence. “Ask my guidance counselor, Mrs. A. She’ll clear this up.”

After speaking with Mrs. A on the phone, the Dean sent me to my guidance counselor’s office. Walking into her office, the scent of apple spice from a candle on her desk hit my smell receptors, easing my anxiety. “David I’m aware of what happened with Mrs. X and I’m so sorry this all occurred.” With tears in my eyes, I begged my guidance counselor not to send me back to that teacher. “I can’t go back. Isn’t there another class with another teacher?” Mrs. A swiveled in her chair to look at her computer for a minute. “How about starting tomorrow I move you to Mr. B’s pre-calculus (B) class? They move at a slower pace, which I think will benefit you as a student.”

I was incredibly grateful for this change, but now terrified to approach any of my teachers about my extended time. On the first day of his class, I timidly approached Mr. B and disclosed how I learn differently with my Executive Processing Disorder and ADHD. Smiling from ear to ear, Mr. B responded, “I have ADHD too . . . Squirrel! I’ve got your back, David.” Even in the wake of this positive shift in my academic journey, the effects of Mrs. X’s treatment had already seeped their way deep into my psyche following me to college and beyond. That is, my differences are something to be ashamed of and only serve as a burden to others. I must overcome all of them.

## FEELING THE STIGMA

When I began my first year of college, I wanted the classic experience of participating in athletics, various clubs, and meeting new people with interests mirroring my own. I put my energies into lacrosse and outdoor clubs to distance myself from my academic struggles. I didn’t want to be “different” during these “best years of my life,” and I was determined to be “normal.” I feared that with disclosing my ADHD and Executive Processing Disorder, my ethos would be permanently discredited and my neurodivergent learning style would be stigmatized with such labels as “lazy,” “stupid,” or “retarded.”<sup>15</sup> I feared these outdated labels for Intellectual Disabilities or learning disabilities may diminish the number of positive perceptions of myself and decrease my viability.<sup>16</sup> When I took my exams in the Disability Resource Center (DRC) and returned to class the following period, my classmates would interrogate me, questioning my absence during the exams. Sitting down at the desk in the back corner, my class acquaintances seemed to always ask variations of the same question: “Hey, Dave! We missed you during the exam

the other day. Are you feeling all right?” Fearful of disclosing my disabilities, I did not want to respond, “I take my exams in the DRC because I have multiple learning disabilities.” With stigma comes what scholars refer to as “kakoethos” or “bad character,” and by concealing my learning disabilities from my peers and teachers out of fear of being seen as less-than or a “bad student,” I continued the charade of passing as neurotypical, enjoying the benefits of the average college student while maintaining my credibility.<sup>17</sup> For me, the social benefits of avoiding stigmatization greatly outweighed the costs of access to accommodations or any systems of support for my learning disabilities.

I couldn’t handle the social pressures any longer, and shortly thereafter I stopped using my academic accommodations all together. Of course, my grades swiftly dropped below passing. I became further isolated as I tried to convince myself and others that I didn’t have any sort of learning disability. This push for normalcy did not make me feel the greater sense of connectivity to my peers that I thought it would—it did the exact opposite. Unfortunately for me, the cognitive stress coupled with the now physical distress and anxiety started to take its grave toll. I stopped going to lacrosse practice, stopped socializing with my friends, and last but not least, stopped attending classes. As a neurodivergent student with cognitive impairments such as ADHD, I experienced even further emotional difficulties, which led to impulsivity, decreased self-esteem, and even impaired interpersonal skills.<sup>18</sup> It was all becoming so cumulative, and I now felt I could no longer partake in any aspect of campus life.

After two weeks of self-isolation, I found an envelope slipped under my dorm door. When I read “Office of the Dean of Students” printed as the sender, my heart dropped. I could feel my anxiety increase. As I walked into the Dean’s office, her office layout reinforced my fears of academia through multiple visuals, including her unnecessarily large desk and multiple diplomas with awards hanging on the walls. Less than twenty minutes into my meeting with the Dean of Students, she informed me I would need to withdraw from the university due to my low academic scores. I, like many other students with learning disabilities, sometimes require strict personal attention in receiving academic accommodations. While universities must assess whether the personnel are providing the proper assistance to the student, universities may fail in providing the necessary specialized attention the student needs to access the proper accommodations.<sup>19</sup> A few months passed following my “voluntary” exit from the university before I ever recognized the multiple failures on the University’s part to provide the assistance I needed as a neurodivergent student to succeed in the first place. Although this moment of devastation knocked me down—and knocked me down greatly—I would later realize that this was the start of my journey to neurodivergent empowerment. While not the “best years of my life” start I had imagined for my college self, it was a necessary chapter in my life, setting the now unshakable foundation for my advocacy work and beyond.

## FINDING ALLIES

Two years following that devastating academic experience, I decided to return to a university closer to home to be in contact with family support systems and utilize the

university resources. Prior to the beginning of classes, I scheduled an appointment to meet with an advisor at the University's Disability Resource Center. The disability advisor I met with also held the position of Director of the Center. An aura of pure kindness and warmth filled the center and her office. I immediately felt comfortable in her presence as I explained to her my struggles from the previous institution and my hesitation about returning to school. "I am worried of falling through the cracks again and not receiving the support I personally need to succeed with school. I can't. I just can't go through another round of college without feeling supported." With a warming smile, my disability advisor squashed all my fears. "As your personal disability advisor, I assure you that I will help you find the accommodations and teachers fitting your learning style increasing your ability to thrive here." The great strength of this advisor was in referencing my pre-existing learning competencies. She took into consideration my knowledge, skills, and abilities and from there developed a competency-based approach to providing the accommodations specific to my needs as a student and supporting my academic goals.<sup>20</sup> She ensured I would receive access to various accommodations, including a TextAloud computer program, extended time on exams, a note taker for my classes, and even a smart pen to audio-record lectures. I appreciated her attention to detail, as I had no prior knowledge that this degree of support existed on college campuses. I felt so relieved. After filing the forms for my accommodations, my disability advisor reiterated to me the importance of teachers as allies. "Now that we have figured out the best accommodations for you, I think introducing yourself to your teachers will also benefit your learning and academic success."

Despite being equipped with these supportive services now, I remained fearful that I would become just another face in the crowd, as this University housed upward of 20,000 students. One of my first courses, a World Religions course, took place in a large auditorium. It was the largest class I had ever attended. I timidly entered and slowly walked down the aisles of seats, each one occupying a student. Beginning his lecture, the professor's active engagement with students and the material alleviated my anxiety. Rather than standing at a podium for the entirety of the lecture, the professor walked around, asked questions, and engaged us all in the material. Closing the lecture, the professor emphasized his office hours and location in our on-campus Starbucks. With this new journey of academia at a new university, my mindset became self-advocacy, including building a communicative rapport with my professors. I knew the immediacy of meeting with them early in the semester would allow my teachers and me to create a communication of both party's willingness to succeed.<sup>21</sup> I decided to visit this professor at Starbucks the second week of the semester to create a foundational rapport for the duration of the course.

Commotion filled the Starbucks with a line stretching into the halls of the student union, a horde of individuals clumped together awaiting their orders, and students and patrons at each table engaging in dialogue, staring at laptop screens, or highlighting their week's required readings. In the corner of the chaos sat my professor with an open chair at his table. I slowly approached, still timid and fearful of allowing myself to disclose to yet another person my learning disabilities. Given that I was still at the beginning of my



college career, one that had gotten off to quite the rocky start, I could still feel the trauma, stress, and frustration of the past experiences affecting my ability to self-advocate in this moment. In addition, I still felt my self-esteem in this arena to be quite low.<sup>22</sup>

That being said, this first meeting with my professor at a Starbucks, away from all the academia triggers (large desks, diplomas on walls, academic books lining shelves), made the anxiety surrounding the disclosure of my learning disabilities much easier to handle.<sup>23</sup>

As I approached, he looked up from his stationery and bellowed, “Welcome, welcome! You’re from my World Religions course, correct? Take a seat—do you want a coffee or anything?” Rather than immediately discussing the class and coursework, the professor shared with me stories of his past work as a monk and professor. This was foreign to me, a professor participating in meaningful banter with a student, and I totally appreciated it. He shared his teaching background and his methods of inclusive education. Feeling comfortable with the professor, I took a personal leap to disclose my learning disabilities. I started my well-rehearsed speech. “I’m a new transfer student. I struggled to accept my learning disability and felt I had no support at my previous university. After speaking with my disability advisor, I decided to come visit you today because I want to improve my academic strategies for success, starting with utilizing my professors as allies.” My professor nodded his head in understanding, taking a sip from his coffee mug clearly brought from home, as I continued. “I’m also sharing this with you since after reviewing your syllabus, it states each exam is short-essay question. With my Executive Processing Disorder, short-essay style exams are a bit challenging.” My professor continued understandingly nodding his head, and his taking another sip from his coffee mug reassured me. It was now his turn to speak. “I totally understand, Dave. I’ll tell you what—if you are willing to meet with me here in Starbucks for office hours, I will assist you in preparation for each upcoming exam. Sound good?”

I agreed to his offer, finding that interactions with faculty outside of the classroom such as engaging in discussion or seeking academic advice beneficial to my development of academic practices and strategies for success.<sup>24</sup> This was one of the first of many professors whom I consider an ally in my academic journey. Although it took a bit of courage, this step in making the connection with my instructor gave me the motivation to continue seeking even more supportive mentors and allies in this sphere, where I was now attempting to do all things different than I had before. I was also beginning to recognize the need for a larger network of allies for my continued success not only in the classroom, but beyond. Again, a difficult but necessary experience that set yet another foundational trait necessary for my current and future endeavors.<sup>25</sup> That being said, while most professors were willing to engage and support my needs as a neurodivergent student, I did of course come across those instructors who held their own stigmas, making me more adept to identify the need for understanding not only on the individual level but on the more structural and macro ones as well.

## ARTFUL ADVOCACY

As an alternative form of accommodations, I enrolled in three courses constituting half the standard number of courses (through the Disability Resource Center) with two classes

focusing on my area of study Early Childhood Education and one art class of my choosing. Art allowed me to express myself through my imagination and creativity beyond the parameters of a textbook. The university offered an array of various types of art classes: drawing, painting, sculpture, and many more. When choosing an art class to enroll in, a class titled Book Making caught my eye. According to the course description, the student objectives included learning how to physically create a book and how to use printing machines with binding tools. Finding the sound of it more appealing than the drawing class, I opted to enroll in Book Making.

Learning how to put together a book as a piece of art allowed my creativity to flow. Our first project consisted of finding random materials to use for the front and back covers of a book. I pasted my found materials of a paper grocery bag and that Sunday's funny pages onto the cardboard for the two covers. We then learned to stitch the loose pages into a binding and connect the binding to the two pieces of cardboard covers. For the text, we used tiny stamps containing a single letter on each, referred to as "type," and to form a word, we placed the type perfectly into a pressing machine. I quickly realized I needed extra time to put the type in place to stamp onto the pages of my book. After sending my professor an email asking for assistance, she replied, "Dear Dave, I am happy to help. Please feel free to join me during office hours and we will work on your book together." During my professor's office hours, as she assisted me with my book, I felt the same mentor-mentee connection I had felt with my World Religions course professor. As I worked side by side with her, this professor began to feel like an ally, an academic resource I could rely upon. I was wrong.

Our final project of the semester was a freedom-to-choose project allowing us to decide on the material used, the style of book, and choice of content. I felt this would be a good project for promoting neurodivergence advocacy. My book contained sixteen pages; the first half of the book contained a different stigma of neurodiversity on each page, and the second half contained a different positive attribute of neurodiversity. I felt this project aligned with both my creativity through art and my personal advocacy efforts for improving neurodiversity awareness.

After completing my book, the time to present arrived. Assigned as the final presenter, I sat through each of my classmate's presentations with anxious excitement to share my thoughts on neurodiversity, using something I created.

Following my presentation, pride swelled inside myself for sharing my unique style of disability advocacy using my art project to teach the class about neurodiversity. As I stood at the front of the class, the pride I felt in myself quickly turned to shame when the teacher I thought was an advocate of mine surprised me with a litany of insensitive comments. Sitting at one of the tables amongst various students, my teacher expressed how little she understood about neurodivergence and my project, using derogatory language I had just seconds before described as examples of stigmas, asking me, "So, you are retarded? Because that book looks like it was made by a retard." Frozen in shock, my anxiety increased. I could feel my heart race out of my chest. It took a great deal of strength to fight back the tears I felt coming on as I stood there at the front of the classroom facing down all the students and the professor. I returned to my seat and while

sitting in silence for the remainder of class, I kept replaying the event over and over in my mind. Triggering my academic PTSD of my high school pre-calculus class, my art teacher's response to my presentation caused flashbacks of the agitated Mrs. X wrongfully reprimanding me from high school. Even while standing perplexed but fully aware of the events transpiring in front of my university art teacher and peers, mentally I returned to the pre-calculus class with Mrs. X in a flashback, fusing the two events together in a single moment of time.<sup>26</sup> Upon returning home, I thought about who helped me with Mrs. X and who could help me at that moment.

There was one person I felt I could reach out to for help with this situation. After reflecting on the event from art class, I sent an email to my Book Making professor, but I took what felt like a leap and cc'd my disability advisor to express my thoughts and feelings of what had transpired. "Dear Professor," beginning with a formal address, "First, I'd like to thank you for your patience with me today in class as it takes me a long time to understand certain concepts in all my classes, not just yours. On the other hand, I do not appreciate being called RETARDED in front of the class for struggling with the project. I've faced stigmas such as that all my life, but NEVER in a university setting by an instructor. I felt singled out in front of the class and bullied, once again unacceptable for a university setting. As you should have learned from my book project, one in five people (20% of the population) have a learning disability. Yes, my disability is invisible, but that does not make it OK to be ostracized. Sincerely, Dave White Jr."

I received an immediate response from my disability advisor, who invited me to meet with her in person the very next day. Upon walking into the warming aura of her office, the tears I had fought back the previous day now flowed freely down my cheeks as I detailed what happened in the class. I told her how the teacher openly mocked my project and my learning disabilities in front of my classmates. "I'm sorry this has happened, and it's a learning moment for them," my disability advisor calmly tried to comfort me. "But some teachers unfortunately fail to understand neurodiversity and are stuck with narrow-minded views consisting of many of the stigmas you had presented to the class." We both paused for a minute in reflection. "Dave, I'm going to contact the professor and explain to her the impact her comments had on you. Don't let this instance define your identity with your learning disabilities. You have made huge strides in finding your voice and inner strength with your learning disabilities, for which you should take great pride." I felt immense gratitude for her words, as well as her actions in this moment. I knew what she was saying was true and that I could not let this event put me back, but rather have it serve as a catalyst and a reminder of the advocacy still necessary and pressing for neurodivergent individuals.

The following week brought the semester's final class session of Book Art before the sweet release of Winter break. Despite my apprehension of attending, I made the effort to sit amongst my peers. With the support of my disability advisor in the back of my mind, I continued to reiterate her words: "You have made huge strides in finding your voice and inner strength with your learning disabilities." Even so, my anxiety steadily increased as the teacher recapped the final presentations, in addition to alerting us to when final grades would be submitted. My heart continuously raced as I averted my gaze from the teacher,

as I tend to struggle with interpersonal conflict and dread any hint of animosity. Unable to decipher my teacher's thoughts regarding her remarks from the presentations, I continued to avert my gaze from her as she stood at the end of the table where I sat. I kept wondering whether she would approach me, causing this entire class to become a blur as I sat there in silence. About five minutes prior to the class ending, the sound of my name being called abruptly yanked my mind back into the physical space of the classroom. "Dave? Could you hang back for a bit after class?" Remaining seated, I felt my heart beating quicker while watching my classmates leave for Winter break, joyfully conversing with one another as they rounded the corner of the room, exiting through the double doors.

Following the faint passing of the exiting students' joyful banter, my teacher and I sat in silence for the longest thirty seconds. "Dave, your disability advisor reached out to me during the weekend, and let me begin by sincerely apologizing for my remarks during your final presentation last week. They were insensitive, and I was out of line for even suggesting such things."

Sitting across from my teacher and listening to her apology, I felt the foggy tunnel in my mind reappear. At a loss for words, I mustered only a simple polite response. "Um, thank you for apologizing. Being a neurodivergent student, disclosing my learning disabilities is tough and I felt art could be a way to openly discuss and disclose my different ways of thinking." Nodding her head in a courteous and receptive manner, my teacher continued, "I want to ensure you feel comfortable in my class and although we are at the end of the semester, I hope there are no hard feelings. Are we good?" I nodded in agreement.

Determining the sincerity of an apology and true recognition of harmful rhetoric regarding disability is difficult in any setting. After completing Book Art, I left the semester, class, and teacher, hoping she used this occurrence as a learning experience for her future encounters with students, or any individuals, who think differently from herself. Despite this unfortunate experience, I continued communicating my neurodivergence with teachers and continued using my disability advisor as one of my greatest academic allies.

## CREATING A DISABILITY COMMUNITY

I not only utilized my disability advisor for receiving access to the various academic accommodations and assistance with teachers, but also sought occupation guidance. Once again sitting in the warmth of my disability advisor's office, I inquired about potential part-time jobs. "Now that I have worked to use my teachers as allies and my classes are going well, I'd like help finding a part-time job to add to my agenda. You know my learning style and skills better than most, so I was hoping you could help me with this new journey." After she asked me the type of job I was thinking about, I reflected on what kind of people I wanted to work with and for. "Do you know of any jobs in the area where I could be helping kids with disabilities?" At this question, she spun around in her chair to face her computer, grabbing a stack of papers from the bookshelf behind her.

“Dave, Dave, I have the perfect job for you,” she said excitedly, as she singled out a brochure pamphlet with the headline, “Do you have a learning disability and want to make a difference mentoring?” She continued to explain the program. “Dave, I think this is perfect for you! Eye to Eye Mentoring, a mentoring program for middle school students with learning disabilities is looking to kickstart a chapter at our university with a possible student coordinator. Pairing neurodivergent college / high school students with neurodivergent middle school students, mentors help their mentees develop self-advocacy, self-esteem, and self-efficacy skills using an art-based curriculum.” Sold on the position and organization, I immediately contacted the program coordinator.

After speaking with the program coordinator, I became the University’s chapter president. That summer, Eye to Eye invited me to Brown University for their Organizing Institute, a weeklong conference consisting of activities, guest lectures, and workshops aimed at preparing chapter leaders from colleges spanning the United States to become agents of learning disability change on their campuses. On the first day of the conference, I began realizing that having a learning disability comes with many positive attributes. Surrounded by fellow collegiate students who all had learning disabilities, a life-shattering epiphany hit me: I am not alone with challenges in learning. I am not the only neurodivergent person with a learning disability and ADHD.

Throughout the week, I engaged with students from all corners of the country who also learn differently. Through shared experiences, our bonds grew stronger, and I finally felt part of a community of different thinkers. By the end of the week, my personal views of learning disabilities drastically shifted from holding qualms of disclosure to finding pride and empowerment. Closing the conference, I joined my fellow chapter leaders and different thinkers for a group photo on Brown’s quad. Upon learning that the group photo as well as individual photos would be used for various billboards in Times Square in New York, we began chanting “LD Proud to Be.” In that moment, I realized I had found my community and my home, becoming empowered by my neurodivergence of a learning disability and ADHD.

Brimming with pride for my neurodivergence, I returned to my college campus the following fall, ready to build a community of different thinkers through Eye to Eye. Teaming with the Disability Resource Center, my mentor recruitment efforts included tabling, participating in collaborative events with the Disability Resource Center, and the use of guest speakers, as well as the use of the PBS (2016) documentary *Roadtrip Nation: Being You*,<sup>27</sup> featuring Eye to Eye. I was now equipped with not only the tools but also the confidence to begin building a community of different thinkers on campus.

As mentors, we strove to bring neurodivergent empowerment for learning disabilities to our mentees. Since both mentors and mentees shared the experiences of navigating education with various learning disabilities, our relationships grew stronger as the year progressed. One of the art projects we worked on with the kids focused on inventing accommodations they envision themselves using for school. Using multicolored pipe cleaners, the Math Spectacular Spectacles, glasses for visualizing the steps in a math equation came to life. Using colored paper and felt, the newest mobile device app for reading comprehension hit the markets. Leaving the art room that day, the mentors

agreed that while we were helping the students become empowered with their different styles of learning, the students were in turn helping us better understand our own neurodivergence.

### **FINDING ONE'S VOICE**

Following the debut of sharing my neurodivergent empowerment journey at the Transition Conference, the State's Department of Inclusive Education hired me as a Young Adult Facilitator. In this new role, the same Programs Professional who helped me share my story allotted me one-on-one access to various high schools in the state in facilitating their courses and goals while helping students understand and self-advocate during Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. With various teachers, administrative officials, and parents involved with the student's IEP development and implementation, the meeting historically places immense stress on the student, hindering their ability to speak for themselves and self-advocate.<sup>28</sup> As part of my position, I worked to help students receiving services in the Inclusive Education Department develop strong self-advocacy skills and create opportunities for them to actively participate in their own IEP meetings. Creating space for students to participate thus allows for their disclosures of personal goals for the year, allowing them to be agents in their own academic journeys.<sup>29</sup> To help students better understand their IEPs and become self-advocates, I set forth in assisting each student develop a dream board.

Dream boards are excellent tools for individuals to lay out personal goals using visually and personally creative methods. The process of writing personal goals or creating models representing aspirations allows the individual to conceptualize both what their goals entail and how to implement the steps toward achieving said goals. I, with the help of the Department of Inclusive Education, introduced the students to the dream board method to help develop their self-advocacy skills during their IEP meetings. Moving beyond the simple task of writing their personal goals and dreams, the dream board splits into multiple categories, mirroring an Individualized Education Plan. Broken down into categories including the student's strengths, their interests, their future goals, and their postsecondary goals, IEPs may be seen as roadmaps for student success. With each section on the dream board corresponding to a section within the IEP, the students use the board to increase their ability to self-advocate, improve self-esteem, and develop self-efficacy skills. Seeing the students thrive in finding their LD empowerment, I am again reminded of the stepping-stones toward finding pride in learning disabilities and the importance of self-disclosure, utilizing resources such as accommodations, developing allies, and building a community of different thinkers.

### **CLOSING REMARKS: THE IMPORTANCE OF ALLIES/ADVOCATES AND FINDING ONE'S VOICE**

My journey to neurodivergent pride and empowerment consisted of multiple twists and turns. To arrive at the point of finding empowerment with my own neurodivergence in

tandem with helping the next generation of different thinkers become empowered did not occur immediately. A lifetime of educational hardships combined with trial and error helped me find my pride in my Executive Processing Disorder and ADHD. It also set the stage and foundation for my current and future advocacy efforts, which would not have been possible without these firsthand experiences.

Navigating through academia as a neurodivergent student, I countless times felt isolated, struggling to understand math concepts, comprehend assigned reading assignments, or simply just focusing on the teacher. For most of my time spent in academia, I related to the proverbial iceberg. My friends, teachers, and education support staff never saw the foundation of who I was as a student: attending daily tutoring for math, science, reading, and writing. They only saw the exposed part, the tip of the iceberg: my inattention, “special treatment,” and stereotypes rooted in archaic stigmas.

Just as any student who is learning through a neurodiverse lens, I needed my teachers to be advocates and allies. I needed my first-grade teacher not to scorn my inattention staring out the windows into the courtyard but rather to recognize my keen observation abilities. I needed my high school pre-calculus teacher not to see my need for extended time on exams in a quiet location as special treatment but rather as a tool to allow me the time to think critically. Lastly, I needed my Book Art teacher to simply recognize the impact that stigmas of learning disabilities have on students rather than publicly espousing cruel remarks. With each instance, these educators missed prime opportunities to step in and become an ally with their student.

Despite those who failed to understand and assist in my learning journey, many individuals did take the time and the opportunity to better understand my unique learning style and needs. These individuals seized the opportunity to make their educational spaces accessible and applicable to all learners. Helping me navigate high school, my guidance counselor provided me the emotional support of understanding how I learn, as well as the concrete support of helping me find the best classes and teachers for my learning style. Inviting me to prepare for exams and research papers in our on-campus Starbucks, my World Religions teacher helped me feel the comfortability within my neurodivergent identity to approach other teachers, creating more mentors and allies. Lastly, helping me find my neurodivergent voice, the Department of Inclusive Education Programs Professional provided me the platform to share my stories of navigating academia as a neurodivergent student in order to help others do the same.

My neurodivergent allies and advocates assisted me in my journey to find my voice within the larger neurodivergent community. With the development and maintenance of open communication between myself and academic supporters, in addition to their willingness to advocate on my behalf, I began feeling empowered instead of ashamed by my divergent way of learning. This sense of empowerment was the necessary step for me to move forward in my own work to bring this same sense to others. By becoming aware of what I as a student needed to succeed, and by taking charge of my needs, I broke free of the ableist stigmatizations of neurodiversity and the need to “pass” as a “normal” student.

During that second attempt at college, I no longer felt isolated with my ADHD and Executive Processing Disorder. Quite the contrary, actually. I sought out other different thinkers/learners and used my voice to help others find their own. I recognized how each person has their own unique story and that the first step toward developing disability pride is through the finding of one's voice while sharing experiences with others. With one in eight individuals identified as neurodivergent and one in five individuals identified as having a learning disability, we must work to ensure that these different learners/thinkers never feel isolated, alone, or unsupported in their academic journey.

Academia is seeing an improvement in the representation and equity for different thinkers, but the movement toward neurodivergent pride is still progressing. In his book *Thinking Differently: An Inspiring Guide for Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities*, Eye to Eye Founder and CEO David Flink states, "If we don't speak up now, a population of different thinkers a generation in front of us will be at risk. And if we do, we can reshape the world for the better."<sup>30</sup> Understanding that each of us has our own story and journey toward empowerment, we have the power to create real change and expand the neurodivergent community. By sharing our stories of neurodivergent empowerment, we create opportunities for growth into something beyond ourselves. ■

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