



Raising a child with learning disabilities (LD) or special needs is challenging. Sending them off to college alone can seem harrowing for a parent. But with determination, persistence, support, and courage students with LD can be successful in college. My oldest son is one of those students. I interviewed him while he was home on spring break to ask him his perspective as a senior in college. (Proud Momma Michele Strasz, Executive Director, Capital Area College Access Network.)

Mom: *What recollections do you have about how things were for you as a kid especially as you were just being diagnosed at age 8?*

BJ: It was tough at first depending upon which teachers I was with. In some cases one teacher was a little bit more helpful even before I had been diagnosed. There was a lot of stress with the teachers in third grade before I switched schools. They were not willing to help me when I needed it. The teachers did not take into account what I needed as a student. When I went to my new school they were more helpful especially once I was diagnosed with ADHD when it was much clearer what they could do to help me.

Mom: *What does it feel like to have ADHD?*

BJ: It is hard to describe. You are either really hyper focused or really confused in certain scenarios. You can sometimes move very quickly between being hyper focused or distracted. Sometimes I have an instance in which I focus on the wall in front of me because it's there and then I realize "oh crap I'm in the middle of a test". My focus shifts constantly between different things on a somewhat random basis.

Mom: *What are you studying in college?*

BJ: Mechanical engineering with an emphasis on automotive structural design and mechanics. I would like to work in race car design and engineering. I like cars and things that go fast. As a kid I loved NASCAR. I like engineering in a competitive atmosphere because it gives me a more focused challenge. You cannot build a family car that just goes fast; whereas with a race car the task is designing to go fast. You do have to take into account driver safety. I work better when I hyper focus. I'm in the zone and less likely to make a mistake.

Mom: *In your engineering program you have to do a co-op. Tell me about work.*

One of the main things I work on is prototyping and quote support. When we get orders from our customers we try to optimize a blank for manufacturing in cars to make them as light weight and safe as we possibly can. We want to eliminate material waste cost. Our goal is to have the best possible part that will be cost effective. We mostly work in uni-body parts for cars, but occasionally we will work in framed parts for trucks.

Mom: *What do you know now you wish you had known when you started college?*

BJ: I wish I had known how much work load I was going to have. My second term I should have scheduled differently. I had a math heavy workload which was really stressful. I was always behind. I did not know what order to take my classes to create a balanced schedule. I wish I had asked for help sooner especially with calculus. I failed two calc classes the first time around. It was after I failed that I asked for help from one of my friends to tutor me. I went from a D level math student to a B or an A level math student.

Mom: *Tell me about the assessment or IEP process at the end of high school to college.*

BJ: In high school the school district did a revised assessment. I had already been diagnosed with ADHD. The school district gave me the documents to take to my college. During my second year in college, they required a more up to date diagnosis from my doctor. My college has been very accommodating. My IEP originally allowed me to have 1.5 times on tests, but due to my struggles in my freshman year, the counseling office let me have double time. For example, if the final is regularly a 2 hour test I get 4 hours to take it. I still have an occasional time when I don't complete a test.

The biggest thing I have learned to do is evaluate what questions I have to put the most priority on and then focus on those questions so I get the most points. I have had to adjust my technique. Originally I just went front to back. Now I know when to skip over problems and come back to them later. I mostly learned that on my own. I wish I could get more guidance on this.

Mom: *What other accommodations do you have at college?*

BJ: I believe I have the opportunity to take extensions on certain projects, but I have not had to use that yet. Sometimes I get notes from other people, but generally that's because I missed the class and not because I missed something during notetaking. Even then, most notes are posted on line so I don't miss too much. I still try to sit towards the front of the room to limit distractions.

Mom: *What lessons have you learned that might be useful for other people with learning disabilities?*

BJ: Don't try to overburden yourself with small things. Try to focus on the bigger picture. Take one or two courses that are less work so you can focus on your major classes. Don't procrastinate because that can burn you. Get help early and then you will have less of a chance of being overwhelmed. I want to get a good grade not just pass the class. Get your accommodations set up early.

Mom: *Where do you go to get your accommodations set up?*

BJ: My accommodations are set up by the student health center. I have to go to the counselor at the beginning of the term, either the first or second week before I take my first tests. I also work with the academic success center to set up my tests and tutors.

Mom: *How do you keep going when you feel like quitting or you struggle?*

BJ: I don't ever feel like quitting. Sometimes I over emphasize something when I should move on. I need to take a break: go exercise and do something with friends for a little while. Those little breaks will help me keep my mind fresh. I need to make sure I do things in short spurts. Keep it balanced.

Mom: *What things did Dad and I do that helped you?*

BJ: You fought for me to get these accommodations. You worked really hard to find out what my health problems were when I was younger and to make sure that I got the help that I needed to learn. Without your help I probably would not have gotten into the National Honor Society in high school. I probably would have gotten into college on time, but I'm not sure if I'd be on pace to graduate any time soon.

Mom: *Was there anything that didn't help?*

BJ: The occasional yelling and lecturing was frustrating. I cannot think of anything that didn't really help. I am very grateful for your help and support.

Mom: *To medicate or not to medicate?*

BJ: I was not medicated throughout K-12. I knew I needed more focus in college. There was so much that I needed to do. While the medication does make me more focused, it is not a substitute for accommodations and asking for help. You need to make sure you focus on what you need to be successful whether or not you are taking medication.

Mom: *What do you wish people understood about ADHD or learning disabilities?*

BJ: I wish people would understand that it is not a case of a person not putting enough effort into their work or being stupid. It does affect a person's ability to learn but they can overcome those odds. Some of the most intelligent people in history have had learning disabilities. We need to have the proper help and accommodations to help us with our disabilities. If we get the right help then we will be able to be successful. It just might take us a little bit longer than it does for other people.

Mom: *What advice do you have for college students out there with ADHD or other learning disabilities?*

BJ: Don't quit! Make sure you get the help you need. If not you will struggle and keep struggling. There is no magic pill. Even with your medication you still have to put in the work. Be open about your disability.

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