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June 8, 2012

The boy pointed at people and said, “dumb”, “dumber” and “dumbest”. When he said “dumbest”, he pointed at me. I was 7 years old the first time I was bullied. I was so shocked and stunned that I didn’t know how to react or what to do. All I really knew was that what he had said was wrong and that his words stung like vinegar on a cut. It was in second grade that I first realized that I was different. I felt like I was in and from a different world from my classmates. Sometimes they would talk about me as if I wasn’t there, condescendingly explaining my behavior to each other, saying, “She always does that.”

It was the kids who were in the “popular” crowd who picked on me the most. They were a small group of boys and girls, kids who seemed to be well liked by the teachers. Later, I looked back at these early experiences and knew that I was so confused about everything—who I was, why I behaved the way I did, why I didn’t understand how to make friends. I was perceived by others to be the “shy kid”. I was not diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder, until I was 12, which is a very late diagnosis. I wanted to tell my parents that I was getting bullied, but I did not know how to explain what was happening.

Thankfully, when I was in third grade, the bullies were in the other class. We had two classrooms for each grade.

Unfortunately, the bullying got worse in fourth grade. A new girl moved into my neighborhood, (I’ll call her “Girl A”) and she behaved well in front of my parents and other adults. But when their backs were turned, she had the personality of a vicious junk-yard dog. It took me many years to realize that she chose me because I was vulnerable; I didn’t have many friends, and it was difficult for me to make friends. The rules of friendships were completely foreign to me.

One time, she and another student picked on me when the teacher was out of the room. They called me “queen of the dorks” and put an imaginary crown on my head. I was very hurt by their actions. Our teacher once said, after discovering that some of the students were arguing, that we “should all get along because we are all friends”. I knew even then that was not going to fix anything.

In second, fourth and fifth grade, my peers verbally abused me almost every day about the clothes I wore. I didn’t dress like they did; I didn’t wear the latest, “cool” clothes. I was not a “cool” kid. I didn’t pay attention to celebrities in the news or watch the same TV shows the other kids watched.

In my childhood, I just wanted to be a happy kid who felt free to be myself. I wanted to be a kid. But my classmates were not okay with that. They knew I wasn’t cool, and they used every opportunity they could find to make me feel like would never be good enough to be their friends. They were relentless. They made fun of the speech I wrote at the end of the school year for the anti-drug program DARE. My Halloween costume wasn’t cool. When I gave a presentation in Social Studies, they laughed at

me and asked me questions in a mocking tone of voice. I hated P.E. because I wasn't very coordinated and my peers were impatient and unkind toward me. I always felt like I was never enough.

The only reason I ever felt comfortable going to school when I was being bullied was that I got along very well with my teachers. In fifth grade, my teacher gave me a hug every day after school was over. I needed it.

Fifth grade was the worst of all. There was another girl, (Girl B) who chose me as her target. The whole school year, she seemed to enjoy treating me like garbage. She pulled my hair, kicked me in line, and made fun of my clothes whenever she could. One time, my mom came to school, and after she left, Girl B made fun of my mom wearing a scarf on her head. (It was winter) I was furious, but because I didn't know how to handle the situation, I kept my rage inside.

Recess is hell for most students on the autism spectrum because it is about socialization-an area people on the spectrum struggle with most often. I usually spent most of my time during recess talking with either the recess monitor, who was also one of the lunch ladies, or one of my few friends. I felt comfortable talking with the monitor, because she was nice to me, unlike my peers. One day on the playground, I was standing around, just talking with someone, when Girl B suddenly came up to me and told me to come with her. I told her I didn't want to. She started to ask me why, and she wouldn't stop it. After not being satisfied with my answers, she grabbed me by the arm and gave it a "snakebite," twisting my arm very hard with both her hands and causing severe pain. I found a teacher and she sent Girl B to the principal's office. After my mom learned about the incident, she came to school to speak to the principal, who said that Girl B was having issues at home. Not much else was done.

I am particularly concerned about students who are unable to communicate that they are being bullied. Before I was able to advocate for my disability, I had no idea how to let the adults around me know that I was being bullied. How can students with autism who have little or no verbal abilities inform responsible adults if they are being bullied?

I wish that my elementary school teachers and administrators had done more to address bullying. I felt so alone.

It doesn't matter who you are, what you look like, how you dress, what faith you believe, how you learn, whatever-nobody should have to feel afraid to go to school. BULLYING IS NOT A RITE OF PASSAGE! It is so heartbreaking to me to think of young children and teens who have committed suicide because they were bullied so much, they felt the only solution was to end their lives. Every student has the right to have a safe learning environment. School should be a place where students feel comfortable to be themselves. A school's number 1 priority, above all else, should be safety. When students don't feel safe, how can they learn? Bullying will become less prevalent when teachers, school administrators, and parents are honest and open about what behavior is tolerated and what is not. Bullying will go away when schools, parents and students work together so that kids understand that bullying will not be tolerated.

About me: I was born in Des Moines, in 1987. I grew up in Sioux City, Iowa, and graduated from Sioux City North High School in 2006. When I was 12, I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism. In 2005, I got a great opportunity to attend the Iowa's Youth Leadership Forum (YLF), a state-wide gathering of high school students with disabilities who have leadership potential. I have come back every year as a counselor, because I continue to see the tremendous, life-changing effect YLF has on the students as well as the staff. I consider myself to be an advocate for people with disabilities, particularly those on the autism spectrum. I have been playing violin since I was nine years old. I love cats and I love to read.