



THE LONG ROAD TO ADVOCACY

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AN INTRODUCTION TO AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The reason I wrote *The Long Road to Advocacy* is because it is not very often that a person with developmental disabilities writes an autobiography. For many years, people with developmental disabilities have been left out of the inner circle of education as we know it today. Because of this exclusion, it takes time for a person with developmental disabilities to learn all that I'm writing in this paragraph. In my own life, I was bullied and had to take myself out of junior high; I did not have the opportunity to learn about basic grammar until I took classes at a community college in my early thirties.

Not only is there lack of equitable education for people with developmental disabilities, there is also lack of encouragement. People with developmental disabilities have been segregated, bullied, and put aside because we are different than the average non-disabled person.

Fortunately, I had someone in my life who saw that I had the potential to learn more. Randi Moe, a mentor I worked with at a vocational skill-building center, went out of her way to encourage me to continue my education. Because of her encouragement, I was able to get my GED and attend community college later in my life. We need more encouraging and patient people like her. We must encourage people with developmental disabilities to study more about their interests. I would like people with developmental disabilities to be able to accomplish what they set out to do. I found this encouragement at South Puget Sound Community College.

Later in my life, I also found encouragement at The Evergreen State College Writing Center with the Kokua LEAD program. I started writing my autobiography by dictating my story to a job coach named Cori. As time went on, Randi Miller of Kokua got me connected with the LEAD program and set me up with Josie Jarvis, an intern from The Evergreen State College. As we were working on my book *The Long Road to Advocacy*, Josie helped me to develop different ideas on how my book could be written, organized, and revised. She also suggested that I go visit The Evergreen State College Writing Center. This is where Josie and I met and began working with writing tutor Haley Bea.

Working with the Writing Center has been a wonderful experience. Working with Josie and Haley has given me a different perspective on how to write my autobiography and make it clearer. It gave me an idea of what sentence structure should look like; it's also been a helpful and broadening experience in getting my ideas across. I thought that writing my autobiography was going to be simpler than it was.

I've learned that I have a long way to go and that there is more to writing than I thought. I would recommend collaborative writing, especially if you are a student at Evergreen or any other educational institution. It has given me new ideas and shown me that there is more I can do with my writing. I would encourage teachers of all walks of life to help students learn about writing what is on their mind, even if it's just a simple sentence. It is my hope that people learn how to work together on writing projects.

Community programs like the Kokua LEAD program are so important because people with developmental disabilities need a “hand up” to accomplish their education goals. They need inspiration so that they can believe in themselves and their potential and see the possibilities that are out there to read, write, and more. I think these programs are also important because they provide students, staff, and non-disabled people the opportunity to learn about and connect with people with developmental disabilities.

It is my hope that teachers and tutors make it a point to have their students with developmental disabilities learn about the writing process—perhaps this would encourage and empower people with developmental disabilities to write their own stories. I want to get people with developmental disabilities excited about writing their story and being heard. It is therapy for them to write their feelings down.

EXCERPT FROM *THE LONG ROAD TO ADVOCACY*
CHAPTER TWO: SCHOOLING CHALLENGES

In 1963, when I was twelve, we learned that a new special education wing was being built onto John Rodgers Elementary just around the corner from my family's house. With the new renovation in place, I was excited to attend a new school in my neighborhood. That summer, before school began, we received a phone call saying that my new teacher, Mr. Monahan, was going to come to each student's home to get acquainted with the incoming class. I showed him my sports trading card collection. He was impressed; apparently he had been a football coach at one of the other schools.

As the upcoming year approached, some of the PTA members made it known that they disliked the idea of children with disabilities attending the same school as those who were not disabled. Despite their objections, I entered into John Rodgers Elementary School. The transition into the John Rodgers special education program was difficult, and I frequently found myself caught in between the two worlds of “regular” and “special ed.” Although I was able to keep up with and understand the work in all other classes, the faculty and school frequently misunderstood my

capabilities and wrongly thought my cerebral palsy was a mental or behavioral disability. Cerebral palsy is a neurological condition that mainly affects muscle function and coordination; it does not diminish my intellectual capacity or my ability to learn.

During my time in the special education program, the other students and I took Mr. Monahan's class in the mornings. He was a good teacher, although I often felt bored and isolated because the program was unable to accommodate all of my learning needs. For example, my reading level often excelled beyond what my peers were learning in the classroom. In the special education program I was the only student with a physical disability; most of my classmates in the special education wing lived with mental and learning disabilities. Although I was able to participate in a traditional reading program, I was not given many other opportunities to challenge myself.

The special education students were frequently segregated from many of our peers. For a while the teachers and school staff brought lunches to our rooms in the special education wing on a cart. Apparently, they were not yet ready to "mainstream" us into the regular population. It wasn't until later that year that people with disabilities were able to eat in the cafeteria with the rest of the students. Looking back, I feel cheated that we didn't get to join our peers for lunch.

It's sad for me to think that the kids without disabilities weren't able to experience and grow up learning about the lives of those with developmental disabilities. I would have liked to have seen more integration between the programs. People come from different places, and it's important that in public communities, such as public schools, we see what we have in common and come together.

Growing up in the '50s and '60s and having lived through the many dramatic changes in ideas and events shaped my relationship to politics and advocacy in America. 1963 was an especially charged year both for me personally and for the nation. It was the afternoon of November 22 when our teacher came into the classroom to announce the bad news that President Kennedy had been shot. The whole school was in shock, wondering, "Who would want to shoot President Kennedy?" This event, along with witnessing the Civil Rights Movement at this time, planted seeds that helped me become more aware of the social and countercultural movements happening around me. During this particular time in my life, I felt deeply segregated within my school, and it was moving to watch how others around me were fighting the injustice they felt. I would realize later that these acts of individual and community activism helped me see the potential for creating positive social change through self-advocacy.