

A Disability Won't Define Me

By Lauren Beck

I wasn't a good student in the fifth grade. For half of the year in math class we had timed quizzes every week with mixed multiplication, division, addition, and subtraction. I performed well below the class average on these quizzes. It was frustrating and embarrassing. I didn't know why it took me longer to do simple arithmetic. I was placed in lower level math classes through eighth grade. I feel lucky to have parents that saw me try hard and struggle and tried to help me instead of believing that I wasn't smart enough to work through the issue. The school psychologist gave me an educational evaluation so that I could receive extra time on my quizzes and exams. With this extra time, a lot of practice, and development of time management skills I was able to overcome my learning disability.

By freshman year of high school, I put so much effort into the lower level algebra class that my final grade was over 100% (using extra credit). I was the only student in that class to qualify for honors geometry. I performed above average in the rest of my high school math courses while receiving extra time on exams. I never actually understood my learning disability until I had to retake this educational evaluation to update my disability records before college. I scored above average in a lot of the Woodcock Johnson assessment sections, including a 138 in the math calculation section (very superior range). However, I still scored significantly lower than average in math fluency (a section with only timed simple arithmetic). I still receive extra time on my exams, and I believe it makes a huge difference for me on exam day.

I just passed exam P/ Probability with a score of 10 in May. I really enjoyed preparing for this exam. Call me crazy, but after work I prefer grinding out some stimulating math questions over a Netflix binge watch any day. I started studying for FM, which I plan on taking this December. I couldn't be more ready for the challenge and excited to learn. I fell in love with math because I felt as though I had something to prove because of my lack of automaticity. I believe that I chose to pursue this career path because I'm not someone who shies away from a good challenge even if it appears that the odds are against me.

Paradoxically, I feel as though having this learning disability has helped me because I've become really good at understanding the "why" to get around it instead of memorizing answers. I don't think that I would have been as good of a student without my learning disability because I usually feel as though I have to work harder to achieve the same result as my peers. I still struggle sometimes to feel as though I am "good enough" or "doing enough" even when I'm performing well above my peers with just one accommodation. I still fear that I'm going to get caught or someone's going to tell me that I don't belong if they ask me a simple arithmetic problem and I can't produce an answer in ten seconds even though I perform really well when given complicated calculus. Imposter syndrome is widespread amongst those of us with learning disabilities, but I will never let my learning disability be something that defines me or stops me from pursuing my passions.