

CJ's Story

I. Forebodings and Fiascos

My son was an enigma from the start. CJ was noticeably late for every possible developmental milestone: sitting up, walking, talking. He never crawled on all fours, preferring a sort of arms-only commando crawl instead. But he seemed to understand what was happening around him astoundingly early, displayed an impish sense of humor before he could speak, and often unnerved people by looking deeply and knowingly into their eyes.

"Whoa, is he an alien?" a friend asked once. "Your baby just probed my soul!"

Once he hit school age, a dozen red flags lit up for me, but I couldn't seem to get anyone else to take them seriously. It was like a nightmare where you're screaming at everyone about the meteor that's about to hit, but they can't hear you above the party music.

His behavior was inexplicable, never seeming to fit a pattern. He always appeared to understand the material, but couldn't finish an assignment to save his life. At recess, he either made up elaborate games that others could barely follow, or watched the other children, looking confused. In the classroom, he had trouble following the simplest instructions. Connection with others was wildly inconsistent: Teachers swooned over his killer smile and bubbly humor, but he seemed mystified by his peers (and vice versa). He was enthusiastic (if unproductive) all day in school, always bidding his teachers goodbye by saying, "I had a great, great, great day!" Then he came home and collapsed. Homework was torture for all of us.

Whenever I expressed concern, teachers always reassured me. "Oh, he's fine," they'd say. "We can tell he's smart. Boys develop at a different rate than girls, you know." (If I never hear that line again, it will be too soon.) One master teacher that we sought as a consultant patted my hand, gave me a knowing smile and said, "I think the problem is that his mother worries too much."

I tried to believe them, but my gut told me otherwise.

From kindergarten through third grade, we tried different school models, including a brief

stint homeschooling, but it never really changed anything. We both had high hopes for third grade, when he began at a school that used a lot of hands-on manipulatives and encouraged children to go at their own pace. Both he and I may still be recovering from that year.

The usual problems of unfinished work and never knowing the instructions plagued CJ, but he was now so constantly overwhelmed and spaced out that the bullying began. *Why don't you use your brain, CJ! You can't be in our group; you're too stupid. Yeah, you can play with us – it's all of us against you, OK?* It goes without saying that he wasn't invited to a single birthday party, and I went on every field trip I could so that he would have someone to hang out with.

It was the social struggles that finally got my husband on board. Doug had had a bit of a "life's rough sometimes, he'll be fine" attitude, but I convinced him to go observe CJ in the classroom. He returned looking devastated.

"He was being bullied by this kid who was almost a foot shorter than he was," Doug said in amazement. "He just couldn't track anything that was happening around him. This kid started teasing him and CJ knew it felt bad, but it looked like he didn't have a clue what was going on or how to respond. It was so painful to watch!" *Yep. Welcome to my nightmare.*

The constant academic and social stress wore CJ down to an alarming degree. My sweet, bubbly boy with the impish sense of humor became glassy-eyed and unresponsive, slumped in a defeated heap against the car door on the way home from school.

"He always understands the material," his teacher told me in one of our all-too-frequent meetings. "In fact, when I talk to him, he's obviously quite bright. There's no learning disorder that I can see. He just needs to learn to work faster and pay attention better. He'll get there. You know, boys develop at a slower rate..." *Oh, spare me.* Our meetings continued, but never seemed to lead to new insights or strategies. I had no idea what other questions to ask, but the "answers" I was getting seemed in no way adequate to explain the pain, struggle, and shutdown I was seeing in my son.

My heart contracted as I watched him withdraw a bit further into his own personal little fog zone every day. Sleep became a regular battle; we were up at night with him more than when he was an infant. He had exactly one friend, but was too tired to play with her outside of school. I made sure we did fun family activities whenever possible, but inside I was dying. My gut developed a permanent clench. My beautiful child seemed to be withering in front of my eyes and I felt helpless to stop it.

II. Answers...But Few Solutions

Finally, in the spring of that endless, miserable third-grade year, someone told me about a special education expert who could reportedly decode any kid. She was reputed to excel in complicated kids like my son. Good enough for me! We made the appointment and CJ showed up gamely, ready for a new adventure, making his favorite stuffed dog answer the questions. She proceeded to put him through a few hours of testing that wiped him out for the rest of the day.

The results gave us an overwhelming amount of information. For what felt like hours, the tester explained the significance of all the test results. I had no idea brain function was so complicated or that there were so many potential glitches. By the end, I could practically hear my own neurons sizzling as I tried to cope with the ocean of new information.

But at least we finally had some clear data. First of all, she explained, CJ was twice exceptional (gifted but with learning disabilities – who knew?). In an IQ test, people's subtest results will usually fall within the same range, even if they are, say, good at math but bad at English. Having one subtest that is significantly out of range of the others may indicate a learning disorder. Serious discrepancy *throughout* the test indicates 1) a brain that is not working in harmony and 2) a very frustrated and confused child.

CJ's results were either all the way at the top (particularly abstract thinking and 3D spatial skills) or all the way at the bottom (such as coding, which relates to handwriting, and rote memory – both of which apparently live in parts of the brain that never got plugged in because he ranked at a dismal first percentile).

"He's one of the five most twice exceptional children I have ever seen," said the tester, an expert on twice exceptional children. "He's highly intelligent, possibly brilliant, and understands things completely and quickly. But his deficits make output very difficult and exhausting for him. He's demonstrating a tiny fraction of what he understands. It's like having both the accelerator and the brake on all the time."

"I won't lie," she continued. "It'll be a tough road. But with proper support, these kids really come into their own in college." *College?! My brain froze. As in, the thing that comes after high school? But I don't even know how to get him through fourth grade!*

Some of the most revealing specifics about him were the following:

- 🔍 Severe dysgraphia meant that trying to write by hand brought his whole brain to a screeching halt. This explained why he rarely finished a writing assignment (but his handwriting – before he hit the wall – was beautiful, if labored, so no one thought of

- a writing disorder).
- 🔍 His rote memory weakness ensured that he would struggle forever with basic math facts (among other things), which is what most of elementary math education is all about.
 - 🔍 Although he had quite a high verbal understanding, even testing at a college level for reading comprehension, he had tremendous trouble finding words himself. “He orients to the world visually and has a deep sense of things, but translating his understanding into words may always be difficult for him.” That, right there, explained a great deal, confirming my sense since early on, that words were somehow not his first language.
 - 🔍 He displayed slow, but steady, processing speed overall. “That’s not one that’s going to change, I’m afraid,” she informed me. “Processing speed tends to stay steady throughout life.” And with all the other problems slowing him down even more... well, it was a wonder he had ever gotten *anything* done in school. (By the way: that was, thankfully, one thing she turned out to be wrong about.)
 - 🔍 On the plus side, his 3D spatial skills – tested by having him solve three-dimensional puzzles – blew even the tester away. “He got them all,” she said, adding apologetically, “But I had to take off points because he did some of them upside down. I asked him about those, just to see if he knew they were upside down and he said he wanted the hard ones to be the right way up so I could see them.” *Whoa*.
 - 🔍 A separate test with another practitioner revealed Auditory Processing Disorder, which impaired his ability to register verbal input properly, and which had made most of the school day into a confusing, disjointed wall of sound. It also explained why he never knew what the instructions were, or sometimes, that they had even been delivered.
 - 🔍 Yet another evaluation revealed severe Sensory Processing Disorder, which explained a great deal about why he always seemed so exhausted and spaced out. The occupational therapist who tested him recommended some classroom supports, which made no noticeable difference besides increasing the teasing. Although she would have been happy to work with CJ, it was a very long drive and I hoped the classroom supports would be enough. They weren’t, but it wasn’t until years later that I understood why.

Both kinds of processing disorders (the last two in the previous list) explained his constant overwhelm, which would tip over into complete meltdown in the face of something as stimulating as a birthday party or even a particularly lively day in the classroom.

No wonder CJ was so wiped out! But even armed with so much new data, our meetings with the school were frustrating. Everyone was very sympathetic, but with his high scores canceling out his abysmally low ones, CJ had actually not tested badly enough to qualify for any services from the district.

He needed much more support than it looked like we could possibly get from the school (I found out, much later, that this was not entirely true), so we made the first of many decisions to abandon the usual route of schooling. At first I found myself panicking about “ditching normal,” but clarity finally dawned on me: *He’s not like everyone else. Stop trying to make this fish climb trees; he’s not designed for it.* Education isn’t supposed to wear your soul down. It’s supposed to teach you how to learn, how to think and that learning is exciting. So far, all it seemed to be teaching CJ was that he was stupid and weird.

Fortunately, fate had handed us the perfect place for our unique little fish. The woman who had done CJ’s evaluation had started a school specifically for twice exceptional (or 2e) children. The tuition was way out of our range, but we took a deep breath, went into debt and signed up anyway. We just couldn’t watch our son suffer any more. He was once known for his joy; more and more, he walked around in a spaced-out fog, slouching against walls and collapsing into chairs whenever he got the chance. So when the school opened in a lovely new space the following fall, CJ began his fourth-grade year there.

In so many ways, the new school was a welcome reprieve. Support started where a child was, not where he was *supposed* to be. CJ could read a book three grades above his age level and write a book report worthy of a second grader; that was normal for this demographic. Science class was all hands-on and college level; lab reports were both written (for the practice writing) and verbal (which was how they actually determined whether a student had understood). If CJ was too exhausted from the day to get through his homework, I wrote a note explaining this and we would catch up on the weekend.

Just as importantly, CJ no longer felt like the weirdest kid in the room all the time. Everyone had something they struggled with; issues showed up in different ways; when someone was having a tough time or even a meltdown, everyone understood. This alone helped shift a dangerous trend in his self-identity that had deeply concerned me. It also planted a seed of compassion in him that I still cherish. *Be nice. Everyone has his own hell.*

Overall, CJ seemed quite relieved not to be under such a constant crush of pressure. But during his fifth grade year – his second at that school – I slowly realized that he was not actually much happier or less wiped out, just less actively stressed. He was treading water instead of drowning, which was an improvement for sure – everything is relative – but he was still a long way from learning with enthusiasm or actually being, you know . . . *happy*.

I started seeing more signs that maybe it was time for Plan J, whatever that might turn

out to be.

One morning, after I had let him sleep late, he went bounding into the classroom with what I considered to be his usual joie de vivre and beaming smile. His homeroom teacher was shocked.

"Wow, what happened to him?" she asked, bemused. "I don't think I've ever seen him in such a good mood!" *Really?* I thought. *Because that's who he's been since he was born.* If he was never like that at school, that was worrisome to say the least.

Another day soon after, I found myself chatting with a new mother at the school. Her daughter Emily had autism, but was high-functioning.

"CJ's autistic too, right?" she asked knowingly. "He and Emily have that same look, like they're really on Pluto or something. I'm so glad she found someone else from the same planet!" she laughed.

"Uh, no," I stammered, shocked. "He's not on the autism spectrum."

The Importance of Community

That school, which sadly no longer exists, brought surprising bonuses for me as well as for CJ. Aside from not at all missing the weekly "what's wrong with my kid" meetings, I suddenly found myself in a community of parents that knew what it meant to wander through this strange, mapless territory. "So, what are *you* in for?" we'd ask each other, sounding like prison inmates. But there was sweetness in the shared dark humor, compassion as we listened to each other's universal tales of exhaustion and confusion and school disasters and uncomprehending family members and 'fun' excursions that had gone horribly wrong. We understood each other's worlds and daily battles, and the sheer relief of knowing we weren't alone lightened our hearts.

We were the parents who didn't even consider taking our kids to the Chuck E. Cheese birthday parties because we knew that in five minutes, our kids would be either catatonic or crazed. We were the ones who explained to camp counselors what little Sarah or Patrick might need, making the counselors roll their eyes and mutter about "helicopter parents" – only to find little Sarah or Patrick sobbing in a corner when we went to pick them up. Ours were the kids other parents would describe as *too sensitive*, as if there was a thing in the world we could do about it. You could spot our children on the soccer field in a second, watching caterpillars and looking up in great surprise when the ball came by. It had been cute in first grade, but that was long ago. The phone rang and our stomachs tightened, knowing that it might be the school saying we had to come pick up our child early.

We worked overtime to hang onto the one or two friendships our children still had, others having fallen away because our kids just didn't seem able to sync with others their age. All of us had 101 tales of gritting our teeth when well-meaning but ignorant teachers, coaches, friends, and family members hinted, with various degrees of kindness, that we just needed to discipline our children better. Or teach them to "man up." Or whatever utterly useless advice might occur to them. When I took an informal poll of the other parents, I found that the average number of schools these families had tried was about one new school every two years. Some families had moved across the country for this program.

I started to realize just how isolated I had become. My friends had been caring, but no one had fully appreciated the extent of what we were dealing with and I had had no energy to press the point. I got tired of trying to explain the depth of the crisis to blank, uncomprehending faces and averted eyes. Often, I avoided contact because I was such a wreck and didn't want people to start avoiding me and my constant drama. After we left that school, I maintained a few essential friendships with those in the same boat, and even sporadic contact proved crucial to my morale and spirit.

I hope that you do better than I did, especially now that social media makes online community so much easier. It makes an enormous difference, and you will be a happier, more relaxed person if you seek it out. For many of us, the first things we drop in a crisis are the things we need most: self care and reaching out to community. We just don't think we have the time or energy, and we're too caught up in getting through each day to consider our own needs. But that school showed me what a lifeline it is to be surrounded by people who have been down the same weird, hard-to-describe rabbit hole you have. I hope, both for your sake and your child's, that you will find a way to give yourself that.

"Oh, really?" chimed in another mom, who had known CJ since he started at the school. "Huh. I always assumed that too. He's always so in his own world."

This small exchange shook me. Had I gotten so used to CJ's shutdown that it had become the new normal? Or was part of me just so tired of fighting and researching and stressing, that I was hoping it would...what, just work itself out? Were we doing *anything* right?

One afternoon, CJ came home upset that he had bombed a math test.

"What happened?" I asked. He had known that unit cold.

"This stupid fly was buzzing around the room the whole time. I couldn't concentrate."

The situation just didn't seem sustainable. The sensory supports and specialized atmo-

sphere were great, but we couldn't keep CJ in a bubble for the rest of his life lest the presence of a mere fly disrupt his ability to think straight.

I felt overwhelmed and defeated. What was it going to take to get this child through? My file of evaluation results and notes was as thick as a New York City phone book, but somehow even that had not given us enough answers. I started having dreams that CJ was being sucked under giant waves, over and over, looking at me with anguished eyes that seemed to say, "Why aren't you helping me?" I stood by, stricken and helpless, holding the answer no parent wants to admit: *I don't know how.*

Numb from the constant desperation, we went into regroup mode once again. We let ourselves be guided by two questions: Was this the best we could do? And, was it working for CJ? The answer to the second question was definitely *no*. That had to mean that the answer to the first was no as well. But now what?

III. Trusting Myself, Trusting My Child

Making the decision to homeschool involved taking a lot of very deep breaths. If a specialized school with trained personnel had had limited success, who was I to think I could do better?

I'm his mother, dammit, I told myself. And at this point I have a freaking ton of information from experts. But more importantly, I know my son. I know who he is under all the issues. And what he needs right now – more than the right school or to be on track with math or to learn how to write a book report – is to become that kid again. I just didn't see how he was going to get anywhere at all without that.

CJ was 11 years old and had yet to experience school in a positive way. We were all in desperate need of a little recovery time. In order to help myself through the occasional anxiety attacks about abandoning any kind of normal path, I kept a card at my desk that read, "What is the priority *right now?*"

We threw away all the thoughts of where he "should" be and focused on two things: getting the intensive therapeutic support he apparently needed, and helping him find the joy in life again. It seemed strange to use joy as a barometer for progress, but I felt I had to trust in CJ's innate desire to participate in life. By *joy*, I do not mean "having fun." It was more about letting his natural curiosity emerge, trusting that his inherent human desire for expression, exploration, and success would guide us both to the paths *he* needed.

Slowly, a plan took shape; an unorthodox one, to be sure, but one that seemed to fit CJ.

First, since CJ's sensory processing issues seemed so severe, we found a clinic that did extensive sensory integration therapy and discovered several things we hadn't known. While the specialized school had always acknowledged CJ's SPD (Sensory Processing Disorder) and

provided wonderful allowances and supports for it, no one had ever spelled out three very important points.

1. SPD is very treatable. Some kids seem destined never to be completely free of it, but with appropriate treatment you should see significant improvement at least.
2. *However*, if you don't aggressively treat it, it doesn't ever resolve on its own. Kids don't grow out of it and in-class supports are not, by themselves, enough to make actual progress.
3. If you don't address SPD, higher learning functions are not likely to improve much either.

"SPD happens on the foundational level of the nervous system," explained the occupational therapist who ran the clinic. "You can't build a house, let alone make renovations, until you have a strong foundation." After an in-depth crash course in "SPD and Our Son," Doug and I left the assessment meeting with dazed looks and pages of therapy protocols that needed to be done every day. Several times a day. This was a whole lifestyle change!

We sat in stunned silence on the long drive home. "You'd think someone could have mentioned that before," Doug finally said.

We discovered other significant things, too. The main one was food allergies. On a hunch, our doctor had run a panel on CJ that revealed egg and dairy allergies. He had never shown digestive symptoms, but those foods had apparently been derailing his brain chemistry for years. After a few egg- and dairy-free weeks, a portion of the fog CJ had been perpetually living in cleared dramatically and his energy improved. (He calls it "brain snot" – "It's thicker than fog, Mom" – and, after proving to himself several times that it actually does make a major difference, he stopped trying to cheat on his new diet.)

So began our new life. For the SPD, we brushed CJ's skin and did heavy physical activity five times a day. CJ used a home listening program daily to address the auditory processing issues. I carted him around to a lot of appointments, including vision therapy and speech therapy and craniosacral therapy to support his nervous system through all the changes. (Not all of that should have been done at the same time, however; when you read this book, you'll see why). We found CJ a mentor, an amazing guy who taught martial arts and ancient wisdom and was a wizard at helping kids celebrate their uniqueness.

We spent a lot of time outdoors and found wonderful homeschool groups that did projects together. We also watched and discussed educational videos that CJ chose. I think he can still quote the one on quantum physics. Gradually, after several months, we incorporated more *school* into the homeschool scenario. His portfolio was unusual, but thorough – he and

I took turns choosing topics, so mythical beasts and weird deep-sea creatures sat alongside the Revolutionary War and human physiology on the list. CJ also learned to type on a keyboard, and the world of writing and independent work began to open up to him.

And slowly, the boy I knew came back to life. He laughed more, revealed the full extent of his imagination and goofy sense of humor, showed more initiative and interest in the world. He learned magic tricks and performed them to anyone he could corner. During the many transit hours we logged, he made menageries of brightly colored creatures out of pipe cleaners and constructed elaborate worlds for them. We had never been able to play board games because he would fall apart when he lost, but he learned to deal with his emotions and discovered that he enjoyed them after all. He even started beating me regularly at spelling-related games, which was shocking because he had always had so much trouble with spelling. But because of the way he could turn things inside out mentally, he could see possibilities for rearranging the letters that I could not. I began to breathe deeply for what felt like the first time in years. My gut, where I hold most of my stress, began to think about relaxing.

When he was 12, CJ discovered the sport of fencing at a summer camp. I can barely describe how huge this was. Fencing was his very own activity, something he did for no other reasons than he was startlingly good at it and loved it. It wasn't therapy or an activity designed to "fix" him. The fencing community admired his skill and potential, but knew nothing of his struggles. He was just CJ there. It was an unexpected miracle, something I hadn't known to look for and am grateful for still.

National fencing competitions have continued to be a major part of his life to this day, and I think they have played a central role in building his confidence and independence (not to mention his ability to concentrate in a crowded, noisy room – something that would have been unthinkable a few short years earlier). I have come to believe that finding something like this –something a child really loves, no matter what oddball, un-academic thing it may be – is every bit as important as all the academic supports in the world. Passion for something can be the most therapeutic, motivating, healing thing you can find. It's a way to reach out to life. Ultimately, isn't that what we really want our children to do?

After two years, CJ wanted to return to school. He was 13. Time to see if the transformation would hold.

IV. The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Occupational therapists have a concept they call the *just-right challenge*. When a person is trying to rehabilitate, too little challenge will not do anything and too much will only cause overwhelm and collapse. You want to find that *just right* quality, where the task feels just a

teeny bit past what you can do, but then you find you can do it. So you keep pushing, and you keep getting a little bit better, and one day you realize you've gotten pretty darn strong.

CJ had too often experienced collapsing under too much challenge. Finding a place that would represent his just-right challenge felt crucial. As Doug put it, "I don't think he has another school disaster in him." This made the stakes a little higher.

Unexpectedly, we found a relatively new middle/high school in the area that had a very high teacher-to-student ratio, that focused on building community and learning in an engaged way in the real world, and that emphasized quality, meaningful work over quantity. Moreover, this would be the first year they had a middle school, so all the eighth graders would be new, not just CJ.

Overall, it seemed just right. Finally.

Not that it was always pretty. For much of the first year, CJ got in the car at the end of the day looking hammered, but he was always able to rally. He took six months off from his beloved fencing while he tried to decide if he wanted it badly enough to make it work with the new demands on his time and energy. Dealing with social conflicts or misunderstandings was sometimes rough.

But my biggest concern was the trips. The school went on a lot of trips, including a 10-day backpacking expedition for the whole school in the beginning of every year. I was already concerned about CJ having the stamina to get through an entire school day without all of his usual breaks. How would he survive TEN days without a break? Would he be sentenced to being The Weird Kid forever if he had a huge meltdown, or just shut down? Would he lose every single thing he brought? We had fought long and hard to get to this precarious place. Would he come back defeated by an experience that other kids his age could handle? Would this be the final school disaster that he just couldn't get back up from?

You know that crouch you develop when a child is in that wobbly, almost-walking phase, where they constantly look like they're about to topple over, and you're always ready to catch them? I spent most of CJ's eighth grade year in the emotional equivalent of that crouch, always ready to advocate on his behalf, to give him a pep talk, or to give him a mental health day if he felt he needed it. (He never took me up on that offer.) I felt tentatively relieved whenever he cleared some hurdle or other, but flared into full "dread mode" when things weren't going well. *Please don't let him withdraw, don't let him shut down, help him hang in there*, I prayed to whomever might be the patron saint of overwhelmed children. It took a while for me to trust that we were really out on the other side. Frankly, it took a while before we were.

But I had briefed the teachers on his issues and, although I'm sure they saw me as hugely overprotective, they listened patiently and did a wonderful job of supporting him. One, in particular, noticed something about CJ's circular, sometimes random-seeming way of talking

about things: If you gave him enough time and persistent gentle questioning, you would start to see where he was really going and how it related to the subject. His insights, once you figured out what they were, often brought the discussion to a whole new level. Once that teacher understood more about how CJ's mind worked, the rest of the class started to see it too. They began to show a level of patience and respect that he had never experienced, which boosted his confidence and allowed him to speak up more, which in turn gave him more practice, so that his thoughts came out in increasingly coherent ways. It was the first truly positive cycle I had ever seen in his school career.

More importantly, no matter how difficult an experience was, he always came out of it with enough victories to make him want to try again. He liked the other students, the teachers, the philosophy of the school. He had an understanding of his issues and had learned tools to take care of himself. He *wanted* to make it work. So – clumsily, doggedly, gradually – he did.

There were many welcome surprises.

First of all, those trips I had worried about so much changed his life. The backpacking trips were a just-right challenge that required lots of heavy physical work, perfect for his sensory needs. They also taught him a resilience and responsibility for self (both his stuff and his internal state) that all the OT in the world couldn't have created. By senior year, he had gotten a scholarship for a month-long NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School) expedition in the Yukon. He still backpacks with friends for fun.

Other journeys opened the world for him. The school studied urban planning in the city and marine biology in California. CJ spent time with the Navajo in Wyoming and the Tarahumara Indians in Mexico, experiencing a kinship with both that he often didn't feel with his own peers. Service projects introduced them to communities all over the area. CJ learned that there are millions of communities that make up this world, millions of ways to express and experience and connect. To a child whose main experience in life had been of feeling like he was on the wrong planet, this came as eye-opening, heart-lifting news.

Second, he showed a remarkable gift for complex synthesis and public speaking. We were fortunate that his school made an extra effort to build on a student's strengths, whatever they may be; but one part of the curriculum, in particular, turned out to be perfect for bringing out CJ's talents. Final term projects involved both written work and a lengthy presentation, where students were expected to synthesize information from the semester under the umbrella of their own perspective. The presentation rubric was a mile long and required visual components as well as verbal. It was a big deal. Students spent weeks preparing. An adult would have found it challenging.

To everybody's astonishment, CJ produced compelling, sophisticated talks with a rapid-fire collage of digital visuals accompanying him. He was riveting and never once looked at

his notes. By his senior year, he had developed a distinctive style that people compared to TEDtalks. Doug and I sat in the audience, clutched each other's hands thought, *Where did that come from?*

But the thing that touched my heart most was his profound sense of compassion. CJ had been through a lot and knew what it felt like to be mocked, misunderstood, ostracized. Somewhere along the way, he made some internal commitment to make the world a kinder place than the one he had experienced. Teachers often commented on his kindness and inclusiveness. Struggling kids knew they had a friend in him.

At graduation, the head of school gave CJ a special prize for outstanding academic work and for being such a leader in the community. Doug squeezed my hand, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing: *My God, that was a long road. And every step was worth it.*

V. Epilogue, or How This Story Illustrates Why This Book Exists

So I have this son that I love to pieces, of whom I am inordinately proud, and who took more sweat equity and emotional investment than anything I have ever taken on in my life. And it worked. He made it. He's even in college across the country, where he manages classes, fencing, social life, and domestic skills all by himself (OK, I'm not actually sure how often he does his laundry, and I'm pretty sure he uses the floor as his closet, but he's hardly alone in that). And, although there will always be challenging aspects to his life, I do believe he's going to be OK. There were many times when I honestly did not believe I would ever speak or write that sentence.

But here's the thing. The number of brick walls and "if only I had known's" in this story is heartbreaking. We wrote this book hoping to cut down on yours.

This is the book I wish I'd had and Robin and Kim are the guides I wish I'd found.

There are numerous resources out there for every need. Too many. Parents are busy being parents, trying to juggle other children and our own lives. We trust teachers, doctors, administrators, and therapists to give us the information we need, or at least to tell us what we need to research further.

As you can see, that doesn't always work out.

- 🔍 Why did all of CJ's early teachers dismiss the warning signs? Why is it so hard to find other resources when you hit a dead end like that?
- 🔍 Why didn't the school tell us we had other options for how to work within the system? (As you will see in the Advocacy Chapter, we did, although ultimately I think