

An ADHD Story

© Mary Ann Davis 2014. All Rights Reserved.

So the t-shirt reads, "How many ADHD kids does it take to screw in a light bulb? Look! A chicken!!"

It's 1995 and I'm sitting in my Mainstreaming Class, a class necessary to clear my teaching credential and I seem to be the only one with tears rolling down my cheeks. We've just completed the section on working with and learning to recognize students with ADHD and I'm now thoroughly convinced that my 13 year old daughter, Liz, has ADHD. I'm also feeling a little negligent and inadequate as a parent for not recognizing this sooner. I was only just completing my credential program, so my classroom experience was very limited, but I was thoroughly familiar with the many parent conferences and very understanding teachers who said they would allow Liz to stand to do her work whenever she got too fidgety. I also harkened back to Liz's first pediatrician who recommended I stop breastfeeding her and put her on a high calorie formula, because she was in the 3 percentile and needed to gain weight. I wanted a second opinion. The new pediatrician asked her dad and me what Liz was like at home and combined with the genetics factor of both us being extremely underweight into early adulthood, we also recognized that Liz never stopped moving from the time she woke up until she went to bed. We changed pediatricians and I kept breast-feeding.

All the evidence ran like an old newsreel through my brain: I recognized that as a 5 year old, if I gave Liz a list of 3 things to do, by the time I got to the third one, the first two had been long forgotten. There was the impulsivity that often combined with her amazing creativity, like the birthday card she made for me from family photos found in a photo album that she took and decided to collage. There was the heart-breaking frustration I witnessed as she struggled to make friends in middle school and she was often the target of bullies. She started her 7th grade year with tears, claiming she had no friends. 7th grade. Liz was "different" in an awkward, self-conscious environment where conformity reigns. She did, however, have more pocket money than a lot of kids, because she became an expert at retrieving the dropped quarters that rolled under the vending machines that most kids were too cool or embarrassed to pick up because it required laying on your belly on the dirty concrete and poking at them with a stick. She felt different. She knew she was different. I loved her for her differences, yet I knew it was often a torture for her. I decided to talk to her about the possibility of her having ADHD, but I found it hard to figure out a way to approach her on the subject and I know I was still battling with admitting to it being the truth. I could argue that none of her teachers ever even mentioned the possibility---she was above average

academically and was identified as gifted and talented in art by the 3rd grade. I knew enough about the workings of the school system, though, that her brand of ADHD was of no real concern for teachers. She was getting good grades and wasn't causing problems in class. The social piece and my concern and frustration with her lack of attention (which, by the way would alternate with *extreme* focus and attentiveness) were another matter. It hurt me inside to see her struggling with friendships and I feared every time she rode her bicycle. I saw her often crossing the streets without looking because she already was looking far ahead at where she was going. I decided to talk to her about my suspicions. She absolutely *did not* want to be identified with those "hyper" kids who seemed to always be in trouble and denied that it was possible at all that she had ADHD. I dropped the subject.

In the meantime, high school gave her new opportunities to make friends. Her brother, Andy, had just graduated so as an incoming freshman, she already knew juniors and seniors, who quickly took her under their wings. Speaking of wings, she discovered some new ones she never knew she had in the drama department and suddenly "being different" became cool. The lessons of awkwardness and friendlessness never left her and because she'd now experienced both worlds-- she had many friends in the popular crowd and also often sought out those students who didn't make friends easily. It wasn't until the end of her junior year that the subject of ADHD came up again. Hanging out with her high-achieving friends had her seriously over-extending herself to try to keep up with AP classes and outside activities. Some teachers "unofficially" gave her extra time on assignments to help out. We started the process of getting a diagnosis so she could get accommodations when needed. When we brought up ADHD this time, a lot of the pieces of the puzzle suddenly made more sense to her. There were answers to the questions of why she struggled more than her friends, and why, even though she now seemed to have countless friends that she still felt isolated and "different" at times. She found comfort this time in knowing there was a reason why and found a new acceptance of herself. She jokes about it now and desperately wants one of those t-shirts, you know, the "chicken" one. Books like Lara Honos-Webb's, *The Gift of ADHD: How to Transform Your Child's Problems into Strengths*, helped us understand that you can develop control over the challenges of ADHD and enhance the five gifts ADHD offers: creativity, attunement to nature, interpersonal intuition, energetic enthusiasm, and emotional sensitivity. Liz graduated from high school and was given the honor of being the first to receive an award for Outstanding Musical Achievement and she was then off to Southern California to begin studies at the University of California at Irvine. In spite of it all, in her first quarter at UCI, Liz was put on academic probation. College and a life away from home was a whole new overwhelming world. She went to the Special Services Department and signed on. Now being allowed extra time on tests and a smaller testing environment, it made all the difference in the

world. In spite of her 1st quarter difficulties, Liz graduated with a 3.0 GPA, a bachelor's degree in theater, and is now off living her dream in New York City. That gift of "energetic enthusiasm" is a good match for the fast-paced life in the City.

Epilogue

It's 10am on a beautiful Sunday morning. What was supposed to be a quick step outside to get the Sunday paper has ended up being an hour of gardening in the front yard in my pajamas. I started by pulling a section of weeds that had grown through my cardboard sheet-mulching and then noticed the old, twiggy growth in the mint patch. I left the weeds and turned to the mint. When I deposited most of the twigs into the compost bin I noticed that the hydrangeas, after recovering from the winter frosts had a lot of new growth and definitely needed to be watered with the heat we were expecting that day. The yard was now 1/16th done, the mint patch 3/4, and the hydrangeas did get totally watered-- but I've suddenly noticed that the liquid gold tree really DOES need transplanting. I've gotten used to the fact that "flitting" has become an art form for me. It happens when I garden, when I clean my house, and when I organize and close up my classroom at the end of the year. I've done this all of my life. It still frustrates me, because I can diligently be hard at work all day and still have little to show for it. But I also understand and can work better with it better now and can even smile and shake my head thinking, "There she goes, again." It's just how I am. I also have ADHD.

As I struggled to figure out a way to talk to Liz, there wasn't an ounce of conscious awareness that I, too, have had similar struggles through my life. About two years ago, when I read an article about adult ADHD, I got half way through the checklist, and after having checked off every item, I already knew where this was heading...

The first step to working with most challenges in life is recognizing the challenge. As a teacher, when I get myself sidetracked in the middle of a lesson, with the equivalent of "*Look! A chicken!*" I can smile and reply with, "*Sorry, it's the ADHD in me*" and get back on track. Role models who model acceptance are valuable and help remove the stigma from a different way of functioning and a different way of looking at and being in our world, and we start to appreciate the contributions and gifts we all bring to this world.

And, I really do need to get one of those t-shirts...