

Essay – The Blackest Blackbird

The Blackest Blackbird by *Linda Hyatt*

The playground can be a very lonely place for a special population of children. This population includes normal children, except for one flaw — they are learning disabled. The learning disability can be in one or more areas of processing information. Sometimes the learning disability is paired with another disability, such as hearing. Those with a hearing disability are perhaps the loneliest children on the playground. They have a hard time hearing what is going on, and find it difficult to appropriately interact in a group. Unfortunately, children can be cruel when another child has a problem. The problem happens later on in life after children learn to mimic the attitude of parents and other adults toward the less fortunate. The cruelty of children toward those who are considered different is one of the worst cruelties in life.

Imagine what it is like to go to school excited to learn and feeling as important as everyone else. After the initial shock of grouping children into red birds and blue birds (yes, it is still done, but with other names) to find you are really a blackbird. The other children know that you are different, that you are assigned to a special room during reading time, and that you cannot answer questions asked by the teacher. Teachers can also be cruel. They may want a perfect classroom, may not understand students with special needs or may not want to put forth the effort required to successfully teach them. They may have the attitude that these students are lazy and just need to focus and try harder.

Most teachers are very tuned into what teaching is really about... which is that each child is a unique individual and has the right to an appropriate education academically, socially and emotionally. They realize that it is up to them, as teachers, to change lives through love and concern for all students, and not just the blue birds of the world.

John was a very normal boy and loved to play with other children. When he entered kindergarten, he had excellent self-esteem. He really felt good about himself and the world. He had a little backpack with crayons, paper and pencils and was ready for kindergarten, just as the other children. He was very excited about learning and playing with the other kids. However, he had a couple of problems. He was learning disabled and he had a hearing impairment. When he looked at letters and words, they appeared backwards and wavy. He could not hear the soft sounds of the letters. In a noisy situation, he could not hear the teacher's instructions and could not do the work, because he did not know what to do. John was definitely the blackest of the blackbirds in the class.

John's parents went to the principal of the school to request special education help, only to be told by the principal that the school did not give special education help to kindergarten students. It is hard to believe in this day and age of enlightenment concerning those having special needs that there is actually a principal who would make this statement. The incident occurred in 1986 which was eleven years after PL94-142 came into effect. This is an example of what could be termed child abuse by an administrator. The principal did not physically beat the child, but emotionally and psychologically, the child was beaten.

The story continues. The parents received information about their rights as parents of a special needs student and insisted on an Individual Education Program (IEP) for their son. At this point, the parents were not aware of the services which were available. The result of the IEP was that John would receive special

education services for one-half an hour a day during his first grade year. The parents were not aware that the one-half an hour was with the special education teacher at the high school and that their six-year-old son would have to walk to the high school and be in the same room as eighth graders for his special education time. John remembers that he was "teased a lot" and was scared of the "big" kids. Consequently, John learned very, very little during first grade. John's parents moved him to another school in the second grade where there was an excellent special education teacher and a second grade teacher who understood disabilities. This was the first year of learning for John.

The parents moved to another state when John was in third grade. The third grade teacher was one of those who only liked the blue birds. John was different and went to special education and could not always hear and understand what was going on in the regular classroom. Most of the parties and movies were planned for the times John was out of the classroom. The parents were heart broken. The child was crushed. He had no friends because he was different. When he was in a group, he could not differentiate what was being said. He was the last to be chosen or not chosen at all. Over the years, he learned to walk on the playground by himself, as it was easier and less painful that way.

The rest of John's elementary school years were a blur of special education classes, rejection and teachers who just left him alone, except for his fifth grade teacher. She would make sure that he understood his assignments and that he succeeded. She understood that he could learn and only needed to be taught in a different way. During his seventh and eighth grade years, he was given a tape recorder to record class for his review. However, the classes were so noisy, the only thing that could be heard was the noise of the classroom.

John had one good special education teacher in high school for a year. She was truly concerned with how John learned and taught in the way he learned best. Another teacher that John had that turned his life around was his science teacher. This remarkable teacher taught to all students. John took the EMT class from him, became certified as an EMT and went on the volunteer ambulance service until he went to college.

John's parents never gave up on their goal to help him succeed. John was an Eagle Scout and spent two years in the Chicago area as a missionary for his church. John attended college and found he could be very successful taking two or three classes a semester with accommodations of more time for tests and books on tape. He will complete his Associate of Science degree in the summer of 2007 and will begin nursing school fall semester. His aspirations do not stop with being a Registered Nurse. John plans to be a Physician's Assistant or Nurse Practitioner. Even the blackest of blackbirds can succeed!

(This is a short synopsis of John's life. It does not deal with the headaches and heartaches John and his family have endured through the years. It does show success gained through determination and family involvement. The person submitting this article is the mother of John.)

Adapted from: LD Online - www.ldonline.org/first person

About LD Online:

An additional 25 stories are available on the First Person link. By going to the Kids link on the left of the screen, you will find additional "bubbles". Click on the "stories" bubble and choose from the many student-written essays/reflections on their experiences with their learning disability. Also, you will find GREAT resources for teachers and parents, and Spanish links as well.

For discussion and/or writing:

1. Is there anything in this story that sounds familiar to you, like, either you have experienced the same treatment, or you know someone who has?
2. Describe some of the ways that the parents of John were supportive.
3. What do you think is meant by the mother (storyteller) referring to John as the “blackest of blackbirds.”? How are they different from the “bluebirds”?
4. John has succeeded, with his parent’s support. Give some examples of his success.
5. Why is it that teachers were not able to meet his needs? What is your opinion on what was missing for the teachers?
6. John has 2 disabilities. Describe what his disabilities are, and the accommodations which were recommended for John. Which accommodations worked, and which did not? Why?