



IT TAKES

by JD Hardin

What do you see?

What if I told you that the line above was what some students with a learning disability read, but when a person without a learning disability reads the line, it says "What do you see?" This is just one example of a learning disability some people face daily. There are many other learning disabilities that come in a variety of shapes and forms.

Is overcoming a learning disability possible? Without a doubt it is. But how long do students endure frustration, not knowing what's wrong, before help is realized and the hindrance corrected or adjusted? Better yet, how can students overcome such obstacles to grow just like individuals void of such barriers? One simple answer is an extraordinary teacher.

Teachers are highly-skilled professionals trained in the methods and practices that help students learn, grow, and reach their full potential. However, as most parents and students will tell you, it is the caring aspect in teachers that matters so much when working with all students, especially those needing extra support.

For McDonough Elementary Special Education Pre-Kindergarten Teacher Casey Whitley, she knows the struggles students in her class face each day. She is trained with the educational knowledge to work with students who have many different disabilities, but she also has the personal knowledge of growing up with a mild learning disability herself. And as she puts it, the struggle was not easy to recognize for several years.



Whitley headed to college with the desire to prepare to be a teacher and make a difference in young people's lives. While pursuing this goal, a change of course occurred in her focus on just whose lives she wanted to impact. "Knowing some of my own struggles in school, growing up with an undiagnosed reading disability, and my passion for students with special needs, I decided to switch my major in college," said Whitley. She wanted to help students with different needs by utilizing tools and resources available to overcome their obstacles and be what everyone wants to be known as - normal. More importantly, she wanted them to know that she was one person who cares deeply for them.

It is this care and champion spirit that has parents with students in Whitley's class in awe of the transformations their children are making. Students in the class may walk through the door with their own unique disability, but those labels are quickly removed and everyone works in perfect harmony with each other to achieve student growth by tackling disabilities with abilities. While there are many transformational

success stories Whitley can humbly recall, she likes to remind parents that her students need to be viewed as much as possible as the three-, four-, and five-year-olds they are. This attitude will go a long way in helping them succeed.

When parents are struggling with their children's development and growth, it is comforting to know that one person who can help has actually been down similar paths growing up and didn't let those obstacles cause them to stumble, even when no one knew it was taking place. In fact, overcoming the obstacles provided the inspiration for this nine year teaching veteran to give back and ensure each student gets every opportunity at the best education and a successful future.

"The biggest thing, and I always try to remember this and remind my students' parents, is that although these students have special needs and different disabilities, we don't always need to treat them so different," shared Whitley. That is one key lesson we can all learn from one extraordinary teacher.

ONE

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