

TRUE STORIES

About Real People

SPECIAL
SECTION
Ten Years
Later

SUCCESSING*
With

ILD

* LEARNING DIFFERENCES

Jill Lauren, M.A.

With a Message to Parents and Teachers from

Dr. Harold S. Koplewicz



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A Message to Parents and Teachers

As parents are deluged with information about the problems of children with learning difficulties, they may get so involved in defining their child's "disability" that they lose sight of their child's positive attributes. We're all too familiar with stories about young persons who become discouraged and think they're stupid, lazy, or crazy. But let's not lose sight of those who are able to carve out productive and satisfying lives, despite their difficulties.

In the first edition of *Succeeding with LD*, an extraordinary book, Jill Lauren profiled individuals of all ages with learning problems whose belief in themselves gave them the courage to mobilize their strengths and to work hard to compensate for difficulties. Ten years later, Ms. Lauren revisited the individuals she originally interviewed to discuss their experiences in the intervening years. She chronicled the obstacles, frustrations and accomplishments of their individual journeys, thus helping us to appreciate their lives and accomplishments with a deeper, more nuanced understanding.

What do these stories tell us about the qualities and experiences that enable some people to overcome obstacles and to capitalize on strengths while others struggle? Each story is uniquely compelling, but the threads that run through them are striking. One thread is the unwavering support of parents, teachers, and other adults. With a secure, supportive base, students are empowered to meet life's challenges with an optimistic "I can do it" attitude. Another related thread is seen in each individual's capacity for resilience; they all exhibit the ability to bounce back after adversity. Each story also depicts people who were able to identify their problems, while they also recognized and utilized their strengths. When faced with obstacles, these qualities helped them sustain their motivation and their self-esteem.

Ms. Lauren's ten-year follow-up interviews help us understand human resilience and the diversity of human experience. The range of individual goals and definitions of success are made real in stories as varied as Anitra's success as a receptionist, Robert's completion of both college and law school, Jack's career as a paleontologist, and April's accomplishments in real estate. In addition to giving us insight into the minds and hearts of these unusual people, these narratives remind us that life in the classroom can be stressful and degrading for those who learn in nontraditional ways.

This new edition of *Succeeding with LD*, with its ten-year perspective, provides some unexpected benefits. By introducing us to people of all ages with learning problems, Ms.

Lauren has done the world of education a service. These stories of courage and determination serve as models to promote respect for diverse learning styles. Most importantly, the stories help us recognize that differences exist among people, differences that make each person's narrative special. The people profiled also refused to be defined by their learning problems, and their response to their challenges provides insight into helpful strategies.

Unfortunately, individual success stories are not as common as they should be. Current educational research has shown the shortcomings of the traditional 'one-size-fits-all' teaching approach. Learning differences are generally not appreciated, and for many students the classroom remains a humiliating environment. Current statistics call attention to the need for changes in our educational system. The number of children diagnosed as learning disabled has tripled in recent years. According to a study by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2005) by the U.S. Department of Education, thirty million people are unable to read basic text, such as directions or medical instructions, due to undiagnosed learning disabilities, inadequate schooling, and parents who were themselves poor readers.

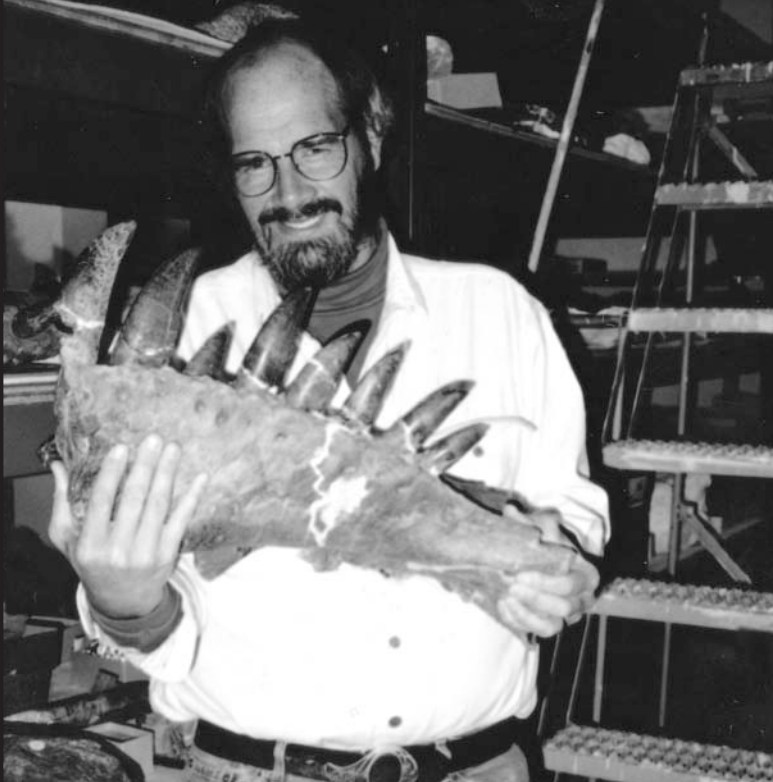
As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, I often see children and families who are dealing with the realization that their child may need help in mastering academic work. My priorities, in addition to making sure that the family works with the school to develop an appropriate educational plan, are to help the family create a climate that will build on the child's special strengths to enable him/her to develop a strong, flexible sense of self and an optimistic point of view. Another important aspect of my work with my colleagues at the New York University Child Study Center is to further research and to utilize recent advances in technology, such as brain scans and functional MRIs, that provide new scientific insights as to how learning occurs – how information enters the brain, is processed, stored, and then used. It is with this advanced scientific knowledge that new perceptions and educational procedures will be developed. The future definitely looks bright.

We are truly indebted to Ms. Lauren and the courageous people she profiles in *Succeeding with LD* who were willing to share their personal journeys in the hope that their experiences will light the path for others who are struggling.

Harold S. Koplewicz, M.D.
Founder and Director of the NYU Child Study Center;
Arnold and Debbie Simon Professor and Chair,
Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry;
NYU Langone Medical Center

Dr. John R. Horner

Age 49



Dr. John R. Horner holds the upper jaw of a Tyrannosaurus rex.



Dr. John (Jack) Horner had trouble with every subject in school and flunked out of college. Today, he is a brilliant paleontologist at the top of his field. He has received a MacArthur Foundation Award (some people call it the “Genius Award”) and was the real-life model for the paleontologist in the movie Jurassic Park. He lives and teaches in Montana but looks for dinosaur bones all over the world.



Jack at age 8, when he found his first dinosaur bone.



Do you have a special interest you think about all the time? What do you do to explore it? How can you get more information about this interest?

I remember as far back as second grade having difficulty in school. I was terrible at math, terrible at reading, and terrible with foreign languages—which I thought included English. I was terrible at everything. People didn't understand LD when I went to school. My teachers thought I was lazy. But I knew I wasn't. I thought they meant I just wasn't very smart.

I was very interested in science. When I was eight years old, my father took me to a place near my home in Montana where he remembered a bunch of bones sticking out of the ground. While I was there, I picked up a bone and gave it a number because I was already cataloguing fossils. I thought it was a dinosaur bone and found out later that it was. I was so interested in dinosaurs and science that I thought about that stuff all the time, even in school.

In seventh and eighth grade, I remember wanting school to be over so I could get to the library. I looked at every science book in the town I lived in. Not only the ones in the library but also in the school, and in the libraries of the teachers and doctors. Every book I could find, everywhere. I never read them, because I couldn't read. The pictures helped me learn a lot about science, though.

I also spent a lot of time wandering around the hills of Montana, looking for bones and fossils. If I could get some friends to go with me, that was good. But I didn't need to—I entertained myself pretty easily. I was still having a terrible time learning in school. But my mind was filled with questions about science, so I wasn't worrying about failing classes.

High school was the place where I could put my questions about science into action. Every year, we had science fairs. During my freshman year, I made a big rocket that went a long way. Everyone knew about my rocket, and I won the science fair. I didn't build it to impress anyone else, though. I built it because I thought it was pretty cool. I also won the science fair in my sophomore and junior years.

My senior project was about dinosaurs. I had been working on it since the tenth grade. I was curious about why dinosaurs in Montana were so different from the dinosaurs found in the same type of land formation in Alberta, Canada. That year, I won first prize at the science fair again. Two years ago, I finally published the answer to the question I was curious about. It took me all that time to find the answer.

Even though I was winning the science fairs, I was still doing poorly in science classes. The teachers wanted us to memorize for tests. I can't even understand what *memorization* is. I don't think it's possible for me to learn; it's just something I can't do.

My grades proved that. I remember getting only one B in my life. The rest were a few C's, mostly D's, and lots and lots and lots of F's. But I always believed in myself. This came from knowing that there were other things that I could do better than anyone else. My science fair successes and most of my successes in my career have come from an "I'm doing it my way" attitude. Finally, I graduated from high school with a D minus in English. My teachers said they would have flunked me, but they didn't want me there again.

I wanted to go to college because there were more books and more stuff to learn about science. I had lots of questions that I wanted to answer. Back then, some colleges accepted you even if you had bad grades, otherwise I couldn't have gone. Throughout college, I learned a lot but I kept flunking out. I still couldn't memorize. It was also hard for me to keep up with lectures. In chemistry, I remember my teacher writing on the board and talking about something else at the same time. I couldn't follow either. And I could never keep up with all the reading.

The college kicked me out for failing, but I kept going back. Then some teachers came to my rescue and said, "We don't know what's wrong with him, but he obviously has the interest. We know he's bright, but he can't seem to get through these classes." I took every undergraduate and graduate course in science that I could find. It took me seven years to do this, but I never got a college degree because I had failed too many classes.

After I had taken every class I wanted to take, I wrote to English-speaking museums all over the world looking for any job related to paleontology. I was offered a job working in a museum in Princeton, New Jersey. At Princeton University, I became a paleontology preparator, which is the person responsible for cleaning and assembling dinosaur bones.

If I hadn't been offered this job, I still would have studied dinosaurs. I knew that I wanted to be someone who contributed something worthwhile to the study of paleontology. And I was hoping I could find something that would help unravel some of the mysteries of dinosaurs. Nothing would stop me from answering the questions I had.



*Is memorizing
information hard or
impossible for you?
How do you handle
this learning
difference? Do your
teachers understand?*

While I was at the museum in Princeton, I learned about dyslexia and better understood what LD was. I was sort of relieved to understand there was a reason why school was always hard for me, but I had never let my LD stop me from doing what I loved in science.

Whenever I had a vacation, I went right back to the fields in Montana to explore and look for dinosaur fossils. On one of my vacations, my friend and I found something very exciting—nests that contained baby dinosaur bones. This let me know that baby dinosaurs stayed in their nests when they were young. This kind of behavior was unheard of in dinosaurs. It was big news, and lots of people all over the world wanted to know more about it. It took many years to dig up these nests, and we're still digging.

Best School Memory

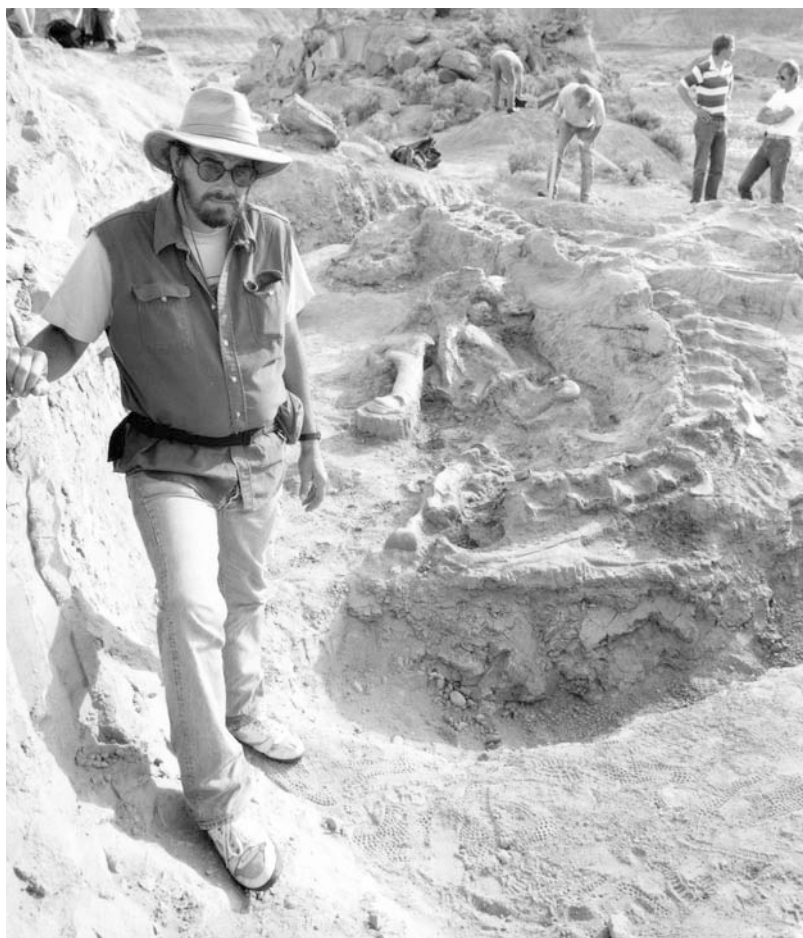
“Kissing my first girlfriend.”



Worst School Memory

“Being caught talking in fifth grade and having to stand in front of the class. I was really embarrassed.”

At this site, Jack and other scientists are digging up the bones of a Tyrannosaurus rex.



Eventually, I moved back to Montana so I could be near the fields. I became the curator at the Museum of the Rockies. I also teach at Montana State University in Bozeman. I never make my students memorize for tests. Instead, they have to explain what they know. Now I have an honorary doctorate from the University of Montana in Missoula, which was given to me by the same man who had kicked me out of college when I was younger.

Because I am dyslexic, I believe I offer a different approach to certain subjects. That comes with the way I think. I think differently, and that makes me ask questions differently. That's just the way some of us dyslexics are.

Information comes into my brain all jumbled up. I sort it out the best way I know how, and it may not always be sorted out right. I just line up the thoughts in the order in which I recognize them, until things make sense. When all the thoughts are lined up, I ask an original question. I don't sit around and think harder, I just ask questions differently. Because I'm not able to remember everything, I tend to remember what's most important. Then I can get to the root of a problem, without over complicating things. People tell me I have an interesting perspective.

If I went back to sixth grade, I would probably get the same grades I got then. There's no way I could get higher grades, especially if the teachers still taught me the same way. But even with all my difficulties in school, I always did what I wanted to do. I wanted to be able to do real science. I wanted to be sure that I was asking good scientific questions and that I had the knowledge to try to answer them. I didn't know I could be paid to be a paleontologist, but I worked very hard to be one no matter what.

If you're interested in something, spend time doing it. It doesn't matter what the subject is. Don't worry about what other people say. With science, sometimes there's the stigma of being a nerd. Just don't pay any attention to that. If you're interested in science, do it. I feel good about what I do because it's exciting and fun. If you like what you do, then life is just a wonderful thing.



Jack says that because he thinks differently, he asks questions differently, which has helped him with his career. In what ways has your learning difference helped you?

***“Just do it your way and to your satisfaction!
Never worry about the expectations of
others. Do it for yourself.”***

Jack

Jack (right) served as a consultant to Steven Spielberg (left) in the making of the movie Jurassic Park. Jack's knowledge of dinosaurs helped the movie-makers to create more realistic looking dinosaurs in the film.



If you are interested in learning more about Dr. John (Jack) R. Horner or his search for dinosaur eggs and nests, visit his website at http://web.mac.com/johnrhorner/Site/Jack_Horner.html, or check out some of his books:

Digging Dinosaurs by John R. Horner and James Gorman (NY: Perennial Library, 1990). Describes Jack's discovery of a new kind of dinosaur, the Maiasaur, which took care of her babies in nests. This was the first nest of baby dinosaurs ever found.

Maia: A Dinosaur Grows Up by John R. Horner and James Gorman, illustrated by Doug Henderson (Philadelphia: Courage Books, 1990). A realistic account of the life of a young dinosaur.

Digging Up Tyrannosaurus Rex by John R. Horner and Don Lessem (NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1995). The remarkable story of the discovery of the first complete Tyrannosaurus rex skeleton ever found.

Dinosaurs: Under the Big Sky by Jack Horner (Missoula: Mountain Press, 2001). Describes species of dinosaurs known to have lived in Montana and explains the scientific importance of their bones and skeletons.

Digging Up Dinosaurs with Jack Horner by Jack Horner, illustrated by Robert Rath and Phil Wilson (Helena: Farcountry Press, 2007). Takes kids along on a dig and profiles dinosaurs that once roamed Montana, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

WHERE'S JACK NOW?

One of the most important things to me has been teaching and guiding really good graduate students who go on to publish cool stuff, like Mary Schweitzer's work about soft tissue found inside the bone of a T-rex. First, I try to get my students to think out of the box, to think differently. Those of us with dyslexia really understand the idea of thinking differently, because that's what we do. I tell my students not to worry about preconceived ideas, but rather to try to come up with their own ideas. Mary did just that when she found that soft tissue still exists after millions of years. Before Mary, nobody had really looked to see if soft tissue existed because they thought it would be petrified. People couldn't find it because they thought it couldn't be found. This is a good lesson—it shows you have to test things on your own sometimes, instead of accepting what other people say. If I only listened to others when I was a child, I would have ended up thinking that I was lazy or stupid. You have to go out and test the waters yourself.

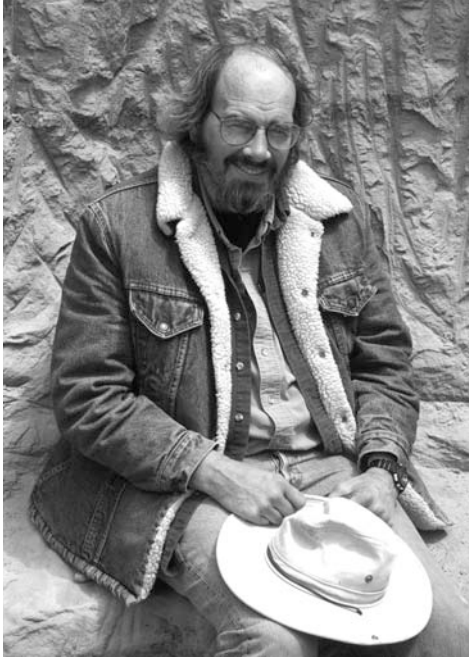
I've written even more books about dinosaurs. I try to make the computer do my editing, but usually my spelling is so far off that I ask someone else to edit my work. When I write an article



Jack on the set of the movie Jurassic Park.

about my research for a scientific journal, someone will help me get through all the background reading that's required. Reading is the hardest thing I've ever had to do. When I read, it's word by word. If I look at the words too fast, then I really get very confused. I don't use the computer to read to me because there are so many scientific words it can't say correctly. There's so much I'd like to know, I really wish I could read better. I'd be reading all the time.

I recently spoke at a conference about dyslexia. While I was there, I learned more about what dyslexia really is. Since then, I've been analyzing my dyslexia. It's actually very interesting to me to finally figure out which parts of my learning style are really the dyslexic stuff.

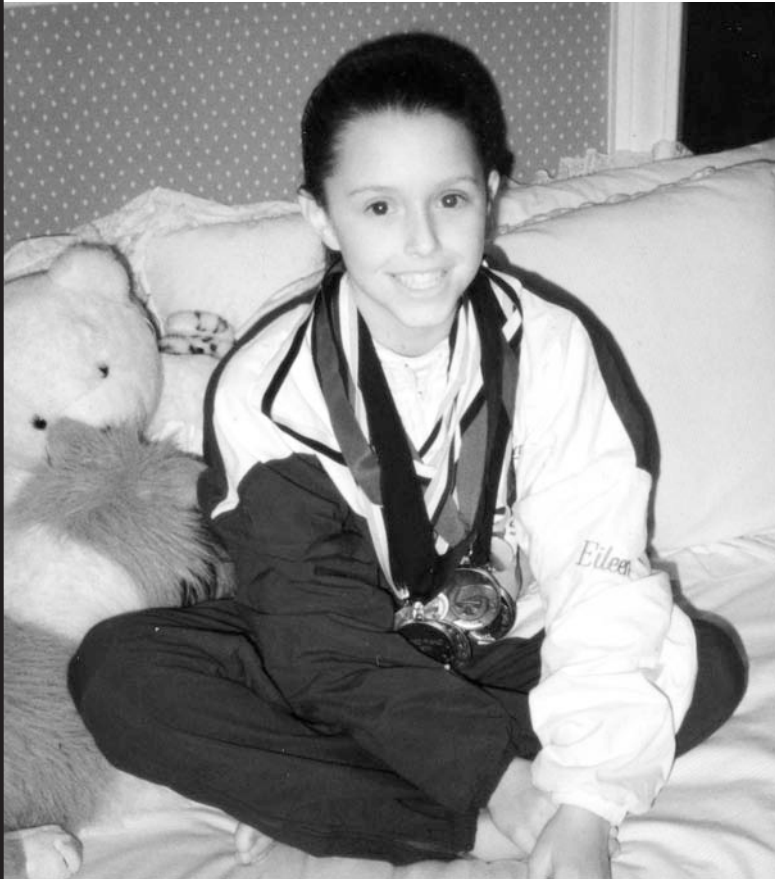


One of the problems I've had since I was a kid was in the auditory area. Whenever people said something to me, I always asked them to repeat it, so everyone thought I was partially deaf. My parents kept taking me to get my ears checked, and had the teachers sit me up in front of the class, but it never helped. The real problem was that I just couldn't put all the words together quickly enough. Now I explain to people that I must ask them to repeat stuff once or twice because of the way my brain works. Some people understand and are patient, but others are just as impatient as before I asked them. I find that kind of interesting in itself.

I've been working with people in Dubai to create a dinosaur theme park and museum. That sure has been fun. I'm also working on another dinosaur movie based on a script that I wrote. The best part of my work is helping graduate students and other paleontologists. When you do what you like, it's really cool.

Eileen Davidson

Age 10



Eileen Davidson at home in her bedroom, wearing her skating medals.



Eileen has trouble with math and language arts but loves social studies and science. She lives in Massachusetts, where she is a figure skater. Eileen skates solo and is also a member of a synchronized skating team.



Do you feel embarrassed to tell your teacher when you don't understand something? Why or why not?

Best School Memory

“Writing my first book at my new school.”



Worst School Memory

“When I was embarrassed because I didn't know my three times table in math.”

At the skating rink, Eileen shows off her moves.



In first and second grade, I remember that learning how to read was hard. Other kids were reading different books, and I had an easier book than everybody else. I thought I was kind of stupid and that I couldn't learn anything. I didn't tell anybody because I was afraid they would laugh. Back then, my favorite school day was Thursday, because it was a half day.

I would ask my mom, “Why is everybody else on a different book than me? Why am I on a lower book?” She would say, “Oh, it's just because you learn differently.” That made me feel a little better.

I started skating when I was four or five. Skating helped me feel better about school. If we had a test and I got an F, I'd go skating and it would make me cheerful. On the ice, it feels like you can do anything. Even if you can't do a jump, it feels like you can. In competitions, it's fun to have everybody's eyes on you. You get all the attention.

School got really hard in third grade. It seemed that lots of kids were actually smarter than me, and the school didn't teach me as much. A woman would come to our class and call my name, and I would go with her. She helped me with reading, math, everything.

In math, I sometimes felt embarrassed and didn't want to go in front of the class and say I didn't understand something. Once, when I did that, some kids laughed but I just ignored them. It didn't feel good, but you should have the courage to go up and tell your teacher you're having trouble. If we had a test and I was scared, I'd think about what my skating coach says: “Try your hardest.” And I would.



At the end of third grade, I had barely even gotten up to the three times table. Right after the day we learned it, my mom said, “Honey, you haven't been learning as much, maybe you should go to a new school.” And I said “sure.” I remember telling my friends, “I'm going to a new school, and I'm going

to miss you!” Back then, I wouldn’t have told them I have LD because I didn’t understand what it was. Now my friends know. They squeezed me until all the information came out. They don’t care, and we’re all still friends.

For the first couple of months at my new school, I felt kind of shy but I wanted to learn. Soon I felt like I knew everybody and that I could do stuff. I was excited because the classes were so much smaller, and I thought I would learn a lot more.

At the Carroll school, we don’t just spend one day on something. For example, we worked on the nine times table for a whole week, and I learned it. Also, the teachers talk in a different way to teach you. They explain things more, and I learn best that way. My reading is better, but it’s still hard for me to read words that are really long—you know, the ones that seem about 500 letters long. Math and language are the hardest for me; social studies and science are my favorites.

In class, I don’t really think as much about skating anymore because I know I’m getting better at school. After school, I skate solo and I’m also on a team called the Ice Cubes. I like being on the team. If I fall, people help me get up. Our team has traveled all over the country.

I’m trying to get better in solo skating. I’ve been working on my axel jump. I practice and practice, but I still haven’t landed it. I get frustrated because I have to do it over and over, but I keep trying. I’ll keep going until I get it.

One day, I might want to try another school so I can see if I’ve learned as much as I’m supposed to. If my next school is hard, I hope I can get a tutor. In high school, I want to be able to do the work on my own.

I’m also going to keep skating. I’ll practice as much as I can, so I can become a professional figure skater. That would mean being in a lot of competitions and maybe even the Olympics. Before my jumps, I’ll be telling myself, “Try your hardest.” When I land them, I’ll think, “I did it!”



Eileen and her brother, Jim, when they were younger.



Whenever Eileen is in a tough situation, she remembers her coach’s words: “Try your hardest.” What do you tell yourself when facing a challenge?

“It’s OK to have a tutor because they are fun, and you’ll learn a lot more. And it’s OK to have LD.”

Eileen

WHERE'S EILEEN NOW?



After skating and competing for ten years, I left the sport at age fourteen. With skating, I had no social life, really. I was always at the rink on weekends. I wanted to have that feeling of being a kid, going to school dances and trying new things. Though I miss skating, I was able to try new activities and hang out with my friends.

In college, I socialized a lot during my freshman year. I was afraid that if I didn't go out, I'd miss something fun. All that socializing hurt my grades. Now in my sophomore year, I want to get better grades, so I'm not partying as much. I spend most of my time in the library. During exam week, the library was open 24 hours a day. I was in my little nook studying, and it was wonderful. The only time I returned to my dorm room was for an occasional shower. I got my best grades, too, and broke a 3.0 GPA. I don't think a lot of kids realize that you can still be social and do your work. But you will feel so much better if you get really good grades than you would if you don't do any work and you're just a party animal.

My best grade was in English class. I've gotten A's for my journal entries, and I love my writing. I can read very well, sometimes it just takes longer. If I come to a word I've never seen I have to slow down, break it up, and pronounce it slowly. If I read too quickly I mess up, so I don't like reading in front of people. I'm still not good with numbers, and I don't think I ever will be. I try my hardest to avoid science classes where I have to use formulas. I'm not good at spelling, either.

I've come to terms with my LD. It doesn't bother me anymore. When I was younger, I was always afraid that people wouldn't understand my LD, and they really didn't. Now I tell my friends that I went to a school for dyslexic kids and that I have learning disabilities. One of my really good friends also went to a school for dyslexic kids. We joke about it all the time. We play cards, and when we total our scores we both have to count on our fingers.

I stopped seeing a tutor when I got into high school. I wanted to see if I could do the work on my own. And I could! In college, if I need help, I ask my teachers to meet with me. When it comes to papers, I have my friends proofread my work. I like the feeling of being independent and not needing the help of a tutor. I guess I want to prove to my parents, and mostly to myself, that I can do difficult work all on my own.

When I was still in high school, I got into painting, and I still paint. Now, in college, I'm pretty sure I'm going to major in art history. I would love to be an art or kindergarten teacher. I love little kids. I love the feeling of having kids look up to me.

At the beginning of my education, I wish I had somebody who I could have gone to, to express more about the feeling of "why can't I read, what's wrong with me." My parents told me that some people learn differently, but your parents are supposed to give you that kind of advice. It would have been nice to have had a teacher who was kind of understanding.