

Insecurity versus Determination

At this current point in time, the vast majority of my fellow students, teachers, coworkers, and family members would most likely not choose the word ‘quiet’ when describing me. A few accurate descriptive words that sum me up would be ‘bold,’ ‘chatterbox,’ or even ‘cheeky.’ However, for a great portion of my early life, I was the very opposite of these words.

My mother and I took turns reading to each other most nights before bed when I was quite young. She would always encourage me to push myself beyond my comfortable reading boundaries, by sounding out long words with many syllables, and to speak loudly and enunciate. I distinctly remember asking for her help quite often when reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* by J.K. Rowling, as much of the book was not in my current vocabulary. Unfortunately, all of my reading aloud and to myself did not prevent the speech sound disorder that would present itself to me in kindergarten. Simple, short words that would roll fluidly off of the tongues of my classmates would remain stuck like glue to mine, with me desperately trying to force the sound out of my mouth. Words that began with a hard C or K, or an L, M, or W were my worst enemy, as they were the ones that most frequently refused to leave my mouth. I would begin to say the word, but

it would be a few seconds before I could make it past the first phonetic sound to the second. In addition to this, whenever I would get particularly excited or emotional, I would stumble and trip over my words in my hurry to express myself, or even occasionally stutter. This left me shying away from public speaking opportunities, such as presenting in front of the class, and led to me staying away from people I did already not know. The very idea of getting stuck on a word or sound, or stuttering in front of a stranger or a group of strangers, petrified me. Each time my impediment surfaced I was always left feeling humiliated, despite the fact that it was usually courteously ignored by whomever I was speaking to.

Fortunately, in elementary and middle school, I was surrounded by a kind group of friends that did not make any sort of nasty comment about my speech impediment or worse, mimic it when it would happen. Had I experienced a form of bullying due to it, I am sure I would have retreated into my shell even further, and had my self-esteem brought down to a new low.

With time and practice reading aloud, my impediment began to rear its ugly head less and less. By the time I was in the 6th grade, it was growing uncommon for it to flare up. If I spoke too fast, I would still mix up my words, but it was increasingly rare that I would still get stuck on them in the way that I had for the majority of my life. However, my impediment had a long lasting, negative effect on me. Although my confidence had grown by a tenfold, I still had a fear of public

speaking, and spoke very softly. I still speak in a quiet voice, unless the conditions of the situation do not permit it, even today. I was beginning to branch out, introduce myself to strangers instead of shrinking away as I had done in the past, and volunteer ideas in class. But I was still doing these two things far less than the rest of my classmates, and still struggled with pushing myself to put myself and my thoughts out there. There was a constant war inside of me, and it was insecurity versus determination.

We also moved around plenty while I was growing up, which, at first, did not positively contribute to my shyness and lack of confidence. For the first 13 years of my life we bounced around various parts of Canada due to my parents work, moving 5 times. The first few times we moved I perfectly played the part of the stereotypical new kid; shy, insecure, lost in their new surroundings. However, after moving had become a part of our routine every few years, somewhere in my brain something clicked and told me “You are really never going to make any long lasting friends or develop relationships if you don’t open your mouth and take that chance.” And so, with great struggle and determination, I forced myself to risk exposing my speech impediment and to fight back against it by doing the very things that it had made me so afraid of to do. I fought back slowly, but I accomplished making many more friends, and practiced public speaking nonetheless.

This brings us up to January 2016, midway through the 10th grade. As we do each year at about this time, we were selecting our preferred courses for the following academic year. Quite a few of my good friends were choosing to take volunteering electives that were chockfull of community service, such as Link Crew and Leadership. However, I was torn. I had a strong desire to help others, and to dedicate my time to contributing to doing a task that would benefit those in need, but at what cost?

I was certain that committing to either of these programs would double the amount of public speaking that I was already quite nervous about, and that it would require interactions that I still wasn't quite comfortable with yet. I was terrified of having to make a phone call, to the Food Bank, for example, to inquire about a volunteering opportunity for my Leadership class. I was petrified at the thought of having to have a face-to-face conversation with my principal or vice-principal to ask for their support in organising an event. Finally, I was afraid of the new fellow students and teachers that this class would expose me to, forcing me to jump out of my comfort zone and interact with those I never had before. What if I stuttered and humiliated myself? What if my impediment worsened, back to what it was in elementary school, and I got a word stuck in my mouth in an important conversation? The new people I would meet wouldn't know how much I hated my impediment; what if I slipped up speaking to them – would they make fun of me?

Would it be to my face, or worse, behind my back? I didn't want sympathy, then or now. I just wanted to help those in my community without fear of being ridiculed if my impediment popped up.

Compassion and empathy are values that were deeply instilled in me by my Girl Guides troop. I was a Girl Guide everywhere I lived from ages 5 to 13, participating in community events, and learning new skills. Those 8 years had already shown me big and small ways I could make a difference locally, but it had been in a safe environment, with girls who were understanding of my impediment and did not point it out. Although it had been many years since my disorder had peaked and been at its worst, the fear of it still plagued me many years later.

Biting the bullet, I chose to do what I had always done when my impediment put me in a corner – do exactly what I was so afraid of doing. Without a second thought, I selected the class and never looked back.

I am extremely grateful for how I made this decision, as through my class I have had been fortunate enough to have had some amazing opportunities to benefit my community, and those less fortunate. My eyes have been opened to the struggles of others whose problems are much larger and real-world than mine, which has completely flipped around my perspective of how I view others, and how I form a first impression. Together, my Leadership class and I have spent time

creating food hampers at our local food bank, served food to recovering addicts and the homeless at a rehabilitation shelter, and made our school a warmer, more welcoming place by planning events that engage all grades and amass a variety of interests. We contributed, and continue to contribute, to our community in a similar way to the ways I did in my Girl Guides troop, but this class allowed for it to be on a much deeper, more impacting level. I was able to form new friendships and learn more about myself, which was a pleasant surprise; while doing something to create and inspire change. Everything that I feared that would happen to me in this class did; stuttering and tripping over words when suggesting ideas, interacting with those unbeknownst to me, and speaking to persons of authority. However, all of these instances and encounters only thickened my skin, and built up a strong foundation that will better equip me for similar circumstances in the near and distant future. I learned that the fearful scenarios I create in my mind are not always how events will play out in real life, as not once was I ridiculed or embarrassed for having a slight stutter or for mixing up my words. I was fortunate to experience the kindness of strangers, which only makes me want to spread such kindness to those around me even more deeply.

Leadership has been one of, if not the most meaningful experiences of my time in high school. I was able to make a genuine difference in my classmate's lives and the wellbeing's of those in my local community, all the while reshaping

myself into a more confident version of my former shadow. I successfully stood up to my impediment and refused to let it hold me back from something that means a tremendous amount to me; contributing. Contributing in the classroom by voicing my ideas, contributing to my community through fundraisers and volunteering, and contributing to my classmates and peers by organizing events to bring my school together. I do not regret taking Leadership in grades 11 and 12, and I most definitely do not regret taking the risk of signing up for this class, this opportunity, as it forced me out of my shell in the most beneficial way, both for myself, and for those around me.