

Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

EPISODE 38

In this Episode, Laurie and Abbey interview DJ Tharrington, a previous client, who shares his journey of growing up with dyslexia, working around it, and pushing through college curriculum with and without accommodations. DJ also shares his experience in battling his own ADA discrimination case and how that pushed him to attend law school.

Getting Diagnosed with Dyslexia (1 min)

DJ was living in Germany as a seven-year-old, and vaguely remembers being diagnosed with dyslexia after taking a special test with a teacher at the school, and the next day, he immediately started in special education classes. At the time he didn't really know what was going on, but looking back, he realizes that those special education classes were because of dyslexia. He also recalls having been in special ed type of classes as early as kindergarten.

Special vs General Education (4 min)

DJ recalls being in special ed classes up until the seventh grade, when his family moved back to the United States. His mom was concerned about him getting bullied, and removed him from special education courses. Because he was ahead of the curriculum currently being taught in Oklahoma, his grades were fine for a bit, but then they dropped as soon as the curriculum became new to him again. At one point, DJ says he even began to question his literacy because of how lost he was, and how low his reading level was in comparison to others.

College Hopping (9 min)

As a senior, DJ finished high school with a low GPA, and was not accepted from his first choice college, Oral Roberts University. His SAT and ACT scores were not great, and so he searched for other options, knowing school was the next step for him. Finally, they find Midwestern State University, who has a program where they offer remedial classes as needed, for no college credit. DJ stayed there for 2 years and struggled, before ultimately joining the Navy. He then spent some time in the Navy, training as a dental tech and struggled with the test taking portion of the class. After going through the University of Louisiana, he left school for a little bit for corporate America. At one point throughout the college transitions, he starts to seek out help. He knew he needed help, yet didn't completely know what to ask for, or where to go for help. Through his research online, he finds Laurie & Abbey, and gets a confirmation of the dyslexia diagnosis, and applies for accommodations in school.

Tools & Accommodations (14 min)

After getting awarded some accommodations at school like extra time on assignments and tasks, he also discovered a couple of tools that helped make his life easier, like the dragon dictation system. The dictation system listens to what is being said, and transcribes the audio, making essay writing and things of that sort, much easier to go through. Also, after finally getting accommodations awarded at school, DJ's test scores went up 17 points.

Dyslexia Shame (15 min)

Struggling with a learning disability can take a toll on your self-talk, your perspective, and your self-esteem. DJ talks about being the typical comic relief, and having to go out of his way to not be called on to read something in front of large groups at conferences and meetings. He took it as far as buying an eye patch one day at a national convention so that his co-workers would think something was wrong with his eye, and not call on him to read aloud.

Corporate ADA Discrimination (18 min)

After COVID hit the world, DJ had just taken his L-SATs again and was being promoted at work. He had won several awards in his sales position, and had performed so well that he was promoted to a managing position in compliance and auditing. This position was a struggle from the get go, consistently being told his spelling and grammar needed to be fixed. Knowing accommodations worked really well for him in school, and attributed to great success in that way, DJ applied for work accommodations. His work used a third-party company who managed requests and benefits like this, so he submitted the request, and didn't receive a response. After months passing, and not getting answers with multiple attempts to reach out, the company finally communicates and lets DJ know that his employer had been sitting on the request, and has not moved on it at all. After really pushing for an answer, the next business day, DJ was terminated. The employer said that his position had been eliminated, and he was no longer needed. A week or so after being terminated, he received an email from the third-party provider, letting DJ know that his accommodations were finally approved. This was obviously only showing up to cover for any accusations of discrimination. After seeking out legal counsel, DJ's previous employer agreed to settle outside of court. Finding a lawyer who truly knew what was going on in this case and knew how to fight for ADA accommodations was difficult. DJ said he met with several lawyers before knowing he was in good hands with a professional.

Giving Back (25 min)

What does the future hold for DJ? After settling with his previous employer, DJ realized that one way he could give back to others in the future who are in similar situations as him, is to help provide free legal counsel and direction. He realizes how many kids and young adults end up in the criminal justice system, because of choices they make in line with their situation. He is enrolled now in law school and is on his way to become a nonprofit ADA lawyer.

Resources:

Contact info for the podcast: letstalklearningdisabilities@gmail.com

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