

#ThinkABILITY

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August 21, 1972, was a very fearful day for my family. When I was born, there was very little oxygen circulating to my brain. By age two my family was well aware that I had developmental delays and by age 2-1/2, I was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. My family struggled with the questions “how” and “why” did this happen? Those questions were never answered and are no longer relevant.

When I started school, I had a hard time. I was smart enough to learn, but the peer pressure haunted me. I felt different. I had limitations that others didn't have. Others also put limitations on me that were fear based and not legitimate. I give much credit to Taylor Smith, my best friend when I was growing up. He was instrumental in my “getting through” my early years. He protected me at times and also treated me as an equal, not as a “handicapped” boy. Taylor would not let me “off the hook” just because I had a disability. I will always be grateful to Taylor for his friendship.

From an early age, I remember hearing questions about my future. Would I be able



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to finish high school? Be able to go to college? Be able to work and live independently? There were no answers, and I sensed my family's anxieties over my future. When I started high school, I developed an attitude. "No matter what it takes, I will succeed." I felt driven. I still struggle at times with what being successful means to me.

I was in a vocational program when I was 16 and felt more comfortable with my working buddies than I did with my peers. The guys I worked with accepted me just as I was. I never mixed well with the "cool" kids in school because I didn't fit in. I was always trying to prove that I was good enough. When I graduated from high school, I wasn't sure what to do next. I decided to give college a try. I still felt like I had to prove something. It took me 5 years to achieve an associate's degree in business administration. Getting this high school diploma and Associate's degree were a couple of the proudest moments of my life.

I relocated to Greenville, South Carolina, and worked in a grocery store bagging groceries. I worked very hard to prove myself and became an assistant manager within 3 years. I continued to work longer & longer hours pushing myself relentlessly. However, every hurdle that I jumped, there was a bigger one waiting for me. I was proud of my success, but I was also exhausted. I changed companies thinking this would help, but the work was not a good fit for my skills.

As I look back on the last 20+ years, I certainly achieved a lot, but I wasn't happy. Sure I proved I could succeed, but I was mentally and physically exhausted. As I compare the resources that were available when I was growing up to what is available now, it's like night and day. The education process is better today than it was in 1980 and I'm happy about that. This is going to educate more kids with disabilities, but when are we going to start talking about acceptance? The things that can't be taught by the education process. As I look around the world, there is a great deal of judgment of people who aren't perfect and of people who need help doing the basic things. These judgments are not going to change unless we put the effort to teach. For a long time, I felt that part of having a disability was being treated differently.

Today, I realize that if I don't help people get to know me, they might not ever. I don't limit my support system to people who understand disabilities. I understand that I can be a bridge that brings people together, by being on the front lines and discussing issues that are hard to discuss with each other. Recently, I met with the Mayor of Abita Springs, LA and the Mayor of Madisonville, LA; to provide input and discuss possible ways to make a difference in the lives of all its residents. I am in the process of building a public speaking career in hopes of reaching out to people that do not know what it's like to have a disability and want to learn.



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#Think**ABILITY** is a month long social media campaign to celebrate the accomplishments of individuals with disabilities. The campaign is coordinated by Families Helping Families of Jefferson and held annually during the month of **March**. Learn more about it at <http://fhfjefferson.org/whats-going-on/special-events/thinkability>

Changing Lives. Every Day.