

Eren's Self Advocacy Origins

When I was still a student at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, I was helping out on a weekend rummage sale at a nearby church, participating in the required "Day of service" at the university. My work ethic at the church impressed a woman there who, upon learning that I had autism, decided that I might be a good fit for her program at Marshall University's Multicultural Affairs department. The program was called...Multicultural Ambassadors. We were all from different backgrounds...sexuality, race, income, disability, etc....We would go to different places throughout Huntington, and speak for 1-2 minutes, on breaking down stereotypes....

So basically, I had practice talking about autism in 1-2 minutes...I ended up seeking help from the Marshall University Autism Center, my mother, and my best friend. As I kept presenting, and improving my speaking I learned something; I really ENJOYED it. People were listening to me trying to explain what I had gone through and then they came up to me afterwards and thanked me for educating them. Children at a school, little kids no less, asked me questions that I was happy to answer. I kept practicing my skills, and thus my language and speaking abilities improved greatly. My social skills still needed work for years to come, but I could communicate so much better.

This was during the 1st and 2nd semester of my 4th year of college. I graduated proud of myself. While I was trying to find myself and find purpose, friends, employment, etc. when moving back to Atlanta, the special needs employment agency Briggs and Associates gave me the chance to speak at the Atlanta Mercer University...about my life as an autistic.

I had someone film me while I spoke...it was supposed to be 15 minutes, it ended up being 27. I made some jokes in my speech, and I received my first standing ovation when I finished. I ran into a man at a grocery store who told me that he had listened to me speak, and found it inspirational.

I continued to make mistakes, and suffer hardships...but I wanted that future, that bright future, for myself and for others....and I am making that a reality.

I, who had sought inspiration to accomplish things in life, had given other people inspiration.

I remembered then, back when I was in high school, when my mother had my father take me to a speaking engagement given by an elderly couple on the spectrum. The couple emphasized friendship and trying new things in life, and while it took me so long to get to points of progress, it was the day immediately afterward that I began aggressively pursuing change.

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I started eating in the cafeteria rather than away from it, I tried interacting more with people and trying new things. My parents and teachers noted the change. I even started making some changes to my diet. That couple had made such a huge impact on me with their speech. Now, I would do the same for others...I wanted to inspire hope in people to have a future, and encourage them to be willing to make the change within themselves as soon as possible to change destiny. I realized that I would no longer be a boy who people thought was going to live his life in a community home with no friends, no real job, no life. I could be so much much more than that! I wanted to help others realize that was possible. The speech at Mercer took place on October 2013, 3 months after my service dog passed away. So many people had done so much for me.No w it was time for me to give back to the positive parts of society...

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August 2011 I became a self-advocate through the Marshall University Multicultural Affairs Program simply by this random act of helping out and getting involved in the community at a church....Realizing my impact on myself and others after October 2013 after I gave a speech prompted me to begin this whole new part of my life.

Eren Niederhoffer is a self advocate who offers information and support on the topic of self advocacy. He has contributed this advice in collaboration with the Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership. The information provided on the Georgia Parent Mentor website and on this document is intended as general information only and does not take into account your objectives, situation and needs. is General Information only, so does NOT take into account your objectives, financial situation and needs. Before acting on any information contained in this website you should consider the appropriateness of the advice having regard to your objectives, situation and needs.