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## **Best approaches to teach students with learning disabilities at the college level**

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# Best Approaches to Teach students with Learning Disabilities at The College level

## Introduction

In conducting research for this paper I found that there has been much literature written about how to teach students with learning disabilities at the college level and how these students can be successful. Despite this, there is still a lack of appropriate skills taught or suitable “academic strategies,” for this population. Often in general learning-disabled students don’t know their rights and responsibilities. Through interviews and personal experience, as a student with learning disabilities, I have an intimate view on the subject. In this research paper I will be sharing the methods used by my instructors through my experience as a student with learning disabilities and from my personal interviews conducted and scholarly research. I will provide resources for future students.

My goal is to make learning-disabled students more aware of the different strategies and services available to them. According to scholars who research learning disabilities, the term “learning disability” was first defined in 1963. However, actually defining the term was quite a daunting task. There are two parts to the term *learning disability*: Public and federal law. Public law states:

Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more basic Psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language spoken or written, which manifests itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write spell or do mathematical

**calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia (Lerner 6).**

**While public law is very broad federal law is hard for many students to qualify for based on their requirements.**

**Federally a learning disability is defined differently and comes with its own Set of regulations. This difference in definitions contributes to the challenge of students getting services. Federal Law States:**

**The person's disability must not come from visual or hearing Impairments, motor handicaps, mental retardation, emotional Disturbance or economic environmental or cultural disadvantage. A severe discrepancy exists between the students apparent Potential for the learning and low level of achievement (Lerner 7).**

**Qualifying for public or federal law allows a person to have resources open To them based on their disability.**

**Students with learning disabilities have trouble at every level of education but there is a significant amount help offered to those who aren't in college compared to those who are. There aren't many recorded strategies on how to accommodate students in these institutions of higher education. Through my interviews of college professors I discovered some methods to accommodate these students. These methods include: having students attend office hours, altering an assignment, treating the students with respect and as an individual, helping them develop self esteem, encouraging self advocacy and communication between student**

**and /instructor. Teachers also need not to consider the student in a victim role.**

**Along with these methods I have covered the current state of serving students with learning disabilities at the level of higher education.**

## **Literature Review**

**From the sources I selected on the topic of accommodating students with learning disabilities in higher education, many questions arose. The meat of my information on the topic comes from professionals teaching at the college level. There is a great deal of information out there but I am choosing to focus on information from the university level. Although professors work with students who have disabilities in a learning environment on a daily basis; figuring out the best ways to accommodate them. It's more the responsibility of the student to explain what accommodations would suit them best.**

**Unfortunately once a student with learning disabilities enters college, they are unsure where to go to get the help they need because all throughout school all their accommodations are taken care of by their case managers. Since many students are catered to it doesn't ever occur to them to speak up for their rights and responsibilities when they get to college. What is really needed is the voice of students of what they need at the college level. Professors at junior and four year colleges agree that because there so many services offered it's crucial to recognize what services will specifically help that individual student succeed.**

**Due to confidentiality laws I was unable to interview actual students who have learning disabilities and had to research my project by interviewing**

**instructors as well collecting different articles and books on my topic. Confidentially laws play into my topic because different types of learning disabilities a student may have aren't a matter of public record. It's difficult to get a student to even admit they have a disability and then seek help regarding their disability. So I was forced to rely on instructors who specifically worked with students with disabilities and what made those students successful in their class. Two people I interviewed are both instructors at CSU Monterey Bay in Seaside, California. Adrian Andrade works for the Technology Department and Human Communication department. He helps students become familiar with computers as well as helps them with their writing. Sharlene Gregg works for the Human Communication department, helping students strengthen their communication skills. Both instructors agreed on the importance of students with learning disabilities utilizing office hours. It's a great way for students with learning disabilities to talk to instructors individually without feeling embarrassed. This a great way to have questions answered or information clarified then going straight to the professor. "My approach is to work one-on-one with students who require the extra help" (Andrade). Office hours aren't the only way to serve a student with learning disabilities needs. While Andrade and Gregg feel office hours are important, other college level professors like Dr. Diane Bridgman, offer other options for students with learning disabilities.**

**Bridgman takes a different approach when working with students who have learning disabilities. She offers a unique point of view from a psychologist's standpoint. Assessing students with learning disabilities who often play the "victim role or poor me attitude" (Bridgeman). Her approach is based on empowering**

students through her experience of gaining knowledge through the previous experience of teaching students with learning disabilities. She educates them on how to take charge and to get the most out of life by not playing the victim, which was different from most sources I talked to. While Bridgeman stresses the psychological aspect of teaching students with learning disabilities, others speak on how to students can prepare for college.

Colleges bound learning disabled students have a variety of strategies outlined for them in articles. Harris's and Robertson's article "Successful Strategies for College Bound Students with Learning Disabilities" was important because it shed light on the fact that students with learning disabilities can go on to college with the proper preparation beforehand. "It's is our contention that many students in college who have LD, ADD, or ADHD fail not so much because of poor aptitude as because of faulty preparation" (125). If students have the proper preparation and follow strategies they can be successful in college. This article discusses strategies for students, while other articles discuss students' rights and responsibilities in the setting of higher education.

Andrew Beale's article, "Preparing Students with Learning Disabilities for Post Secondary Education: Their Rights and Responsibilities" was an even more important article than Harris's and Robertson's article. Beale's article laid out exactly what rights and responsibilities a student with learning disabilities is entitled to on a college campus. He argues knowing what accommodations are available is vital to a student's success. This knowledge allows them do well in their classes and not feel short changed. Students have the right to disclose, or not to disclose, their

learning disabilities if they don't feel comfortable. Regardless of disclosing their disabilities, students with disabilities can still learn strategies from their professors.

While some professors focus on methods, others look at this issue on a case-to-case basis. Nancy Fetterman, a college instructor shares tips that are specific to certain disciplines within education. She was extremely helpful in offering an instructor's perspective on the all important but difficult subject of teaching math to disabled students. She has uniquely proven methods that cater to students with learning disabilities. She stresses the point that every student is an individual and each case is unique. She really exemplifies what it takes to be accommodating towards students with learning disabilities "Each situation is unique. It is important to work individually with the student, to encourage persistence, and reward successes" (Fetterman). None of the instructors I interviewed except for Nancy Fetterman mentioned this approach. While working with each student individually is important, so is being in touch with the disability office at the institution the student is attending.

The more in touch with the disability office the instructor is the more can get accomplished when working with learning a disabled student. One such professor who is connected with the disability office is Diana Garcia. She emphasized the importance of working in synch with the disabilities office on campus. This ensures both the instructor and disability office are well informed about the student's needs. The disability office is a key lifeline for college students who have disabilities; they provide hands on assistance that can't be found in a book. "Once I confirm which texts I'll be using for a class, I respond to the Disabled Students' Program requests

for textbook titles (and sometimes copies of books) in advance so that texts can be scanned” (Garcia). One instructor who did agree with Garcia was Cabrillo College Professor Charlotte Morrison.

Charlotte Morrison allows students who have disabilities to have the option of altering their assignment to best fit their disability. This approach offers a hands on way that no textbook can teach. “I have allowed students to complete assignments in non-traditional ways such as an audio or video recording of an assignment that might otherwise be written. Sometimes the assignment itself might be modified to better suite the needs of the student (Morrison)”. Professor Garcia, as mentioned above, would strongly agree with the methods mentioned by Professor Morrison. Another agreeing instructor is Richard Griffiths.

Griffiths wasn’t available to interview but his books provided valuable information about the current state of working with students with disabilities. The more resources that are available to students with disabilities in higher education the more likely they are to succeed. Richard Griffith’s book, Learning Differently: A Handbook for Students with Learning Disabilities at Cabrillo College is a practical guide for students to access if they need assistance on how to help them become successful in college. “According to Title 5 regulations colleges must make reasonable modifications in academic requirements, where necessary, to ensure full educational opportunity for students with disabilities (34)”. The handbook for students is important because they can reference it whenever needed, and look up what exactly a learning disability is, and how to deal with the disability. Because

**this is such a new book not all students with disabilities in the past had access to it, just as important as having prepared students is having prepared instructors.**

**The more prepared faculty members are to teach students with disabilities the better they can help suit student's specific needs. Griffiths other book: Support Services for Students with Learning Disabilities at : Cabrillo College a Guide for Faculty and Staff, is an important resource for instructors to turn to on how to teach to students who have learning disabilities. "Supplemental educational services for students with disabilities came about as a result of the civil rights movement to provide students with disabilities with equal access to educational opportunities (9, Griffiths)". The book serves as a how to guide to point the instructor in the right direction if they struggle when trying to accommodate students with learning disabilities. Not all faculty are aware that this book exists which makes this an under utilized resource. While these books serve as reference guides to instructors and faculty, other articles explore and address the desire and determination it takes for a students with a learning disabilities to be successful in higher education.**

**No task is complete without hard work the same holds true when it comes students with learning disabilities succeeding at the collegiate level. Karen Pierce and Tali Herman's article "Students with Learning Disabilities in Higher Education," lays out to students with disabilities how to be successful in higher education it's more complete article compared to my other articles. It is all about working hard and never giving up. The article pinpoints that organization and time management are the keys to success. Also the article stresses for students to access every resource available so they can have every opportunity to succeed. While this**

article discusses students in higher education, some discusses the different accommodations between high school and college.

The transition for students with learning disabilities from high school to college is drastic. Bobbie Lindstroms and Michael Skinner's article, "Bridging the Gap between High School and College Preventing School Failure" was a key article I researched. A topic in Lindstrom, and Skinner's, article that was heavily discussed was self-advocacy. For students with learning disabilities to be successful, self-advocacy is a must at the college level. Literature on this topic is hard to come by due to the lack of research on the topic. While some articles stressed the all-important skill of self-advocacy, some of the other instructors I interviewed stressed communication between faculty and student.

One underlying factor that most talked about was the importance of communication. For instance, one such person was Professor Dave Schwartz a Cabrillo College professor. Schwartz illustrates, his focus, on the important skill of communication. Keeping in constant communication with each instructor is important for students who have learning disabilities. Without communication the student falls behind. The art of communicating should be taught early on to a student who has learning disabilities, to ensure success later in life. "I make sure I have lots of communication, (Schwartz)". While professors give a good perspective so do those who work directly with the student in the disability inside the office.

Students with learning disabilities who familiarize themselves with the Student Disability Resource Office have the opportunity for more success in college. One person who works in the Disability office is Nicki Onito of Cabrillo College. She was

crucial to my project because she stressed the fact of treating students who have learning disabilities with respect. For example, she makes sure not to make students with learning disabilities feel inferior or less valued. No textbook or article teaches an individual how to work with students who have learning disabilities. It must only be done through interaction can it truly be learned. “Each student is an individual and ALL students should be treated with respect (Onito).” While respect is key to consider when working with students who have a learning disabilities so is taking a hands- on interactive approach to their learning style.

Using an interactive approach when working with students who have learning disabilities will only ensure their success at the college level. One such instructor interviewed who uses this method is CSU Monterey Bay Science instructor Myriam Weber. “I use an interactive approach to teaching. I also use strategies of hands-on, inquiry based learning, cooperative learning, using visual, kinesthetic, and text driven learning, (Webber)”. Using this approach is sure to connect with all learning styles.

All the sources offered insight of expertise in their specific area. In a whole acquiring these interviews, books and articles only reassured the importance of researching this pressing issue. It’s critical for those considering going into the education field to take a look at this specific topic. One element lacking in my research are the voices of learning disabled students, But getting students to open and talk about their experiences as a student with a disability is very difficult to do because of the stigma that is attached with having disabilities. Being a student with learning disabilities is no easy task. There is a wealth of knowledge on getting to

college for students who have learning disabilities but not enough on what to do when they actually get to college. The goal of my project is to make students with disabilities fully aware of the resources offered to them at their universities.

## **Body**

In this research paper I hope to shed light for those students who have learning disabilities and are lost at their institutions of higher education and don't know about the services offered at these institutions. There are many different approaches educators take in the varied levels of student knowledge when it comes to teaching at the college level. In 1990, The American Disabilities Act was passed and made a level playing field, for those who consider themselves differently-abled in all aspects of daily life. "The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 require postsecondary institutions to make education accessible for students with disabilities". (National Center for Educational Statistics) since this act was passed, there has been profound progress in the field of best meeting the needs of this group; more specifically college students.

I am focusing solely on accommodating students with learning disabilities at the college level because very few students, who have learning disabilities, make it all the way to college. Once a student reaches college there is no more hand holding its sink or swim. With each new grade level the course work only gets more intense. The research that has been done is mostly on transitioning from high school to college, not accommodating students with learning disabilities while in college. The research that has been done on junior college and four year universities focus on

mainly on transitioning, prompting me to focus on acquiring knowledge on how to accommodate college students with learning disabilities. Along with accommodating those students who do have learning disabilities there the students who are on the cusp and are unsure whether or not they have a learning disability.

These students in college who think they may have a learning disability but still want to access resources to succeed. They must go through the process of getting tested for a learning disability. University facilities aren't equipped to test students or give diagnosis; they are referred to their health insurance provider who can distribute the adequate tests needed to diagnosis a learning disability. Students who think they have a learning disability can also take a diagnostic assessment at a junior college and be tested for a learning disability. Junior colleges have the necessary resources and personal to test students for learning disabilities. "Where as universities simply talk to students and give them suggestions about how to go about getting diagnosed, but we are not medical professionals or a testing facility (Daniel-Harteis)". The third option for student who thinks they have a learning disability is to pay between \$800-3,000 to be privately tested by a neurophysiologist (Daniel-Harteis).

It often takes a variety of methods for a learning disabled student to fully grasp a concept. Speaking from personal experience during my educational journey it sometime took the instructor working with me through two or three different methods before I understood the material presented. "Prior research indicated that academic success for students with learning disabilities (LD) is enhanced when faculty members are willing to make accommodations"(leaonline.com) Students

**with learning disabilities need to have a sense of security that an instructor is going to be willing to take the time fully needed to help them be successful in their class.**

**College is where the spectrum of methods for accommodating students with learning disabilities really widens. “About three-quarters, (72 percent) of the nation's 5,040 2-year and 4-year postsecondary education institutions enrolled students with disabilities in 1996-97”(National Center for Educational Studies). With this said there a large population of college students with learning disabilities who need accommodating.**

**As a student with multiple learning disabilities, I knew the experiences I had with my college professors in the field would benefit this project. These individuals work closely every day with students who have learning disabilities of all types and their words hold weight. I conducted my research by doing personal interviews with college professors. From my interviews, I found what works for instructors isn't just knowing the students learning style but also to knowing how to accommodate those particular learning styles. While instructors have responsibilities so do students. They need to take the initiative to let their professors know what they need. There is no other way for instructors to know about the students needs if they don't identify themselves. Other professors strongly encourage students to sign up for tutoring, form study groups, type their notes and limit TV/computer time. Once a student gets to college, there is more personal responsibility on the student to communicate what they need.**

**Not only does a student need to communicate what they need, instructors need to document the strategies they develop to accommodate these students. It's**

**important to note that there are a thousand different ways to accommodate students in higher education with disabilities. There is no one single accommodation that will help everybody. Each student's case is unique and teachers must approach students with an open mind and willingness to try different accommodations until they find a method that works for that individual student. Each student is an individual and no two cases are the same. "Each student is an individual and ALL students should be treated with respect (Onito)". Because no case is alike the documentation of each student's individual needs will help instructors have a wealth of resources to utilize. While individuality is important so is developing self-advocacy for students who have learning disabilities.**

**Self-advocacy is a technique that is rarely taught when the student is young but must be honed when they get out in the real world. It's crucial for students with learning disabilities to succeed; they must be the ones who stand up for themselves and fight for the rights they deserve! No one will else will; it's a task the student must take on. Professors such as Debra Schulman support self-advocacy. "I think the most important issue is for the student to find you approachable, patient, and accessible. I also want to encourage students to become better self advocates, (Schulman)". Along with the all-important skill of self-advocating is having an instructor who allows students with disabilities to alter assignments.**

**One such instructor is Cabrillo College Communications professor Charlotte Morrison. "I have allowed students to complete assignments in non-traditional ways such as an audio or video recording of an assignment that might otherwise be written. Sometimes the assignment itself might be modified to better**

suit the needs of the student (Morrison)” Most colleges and universities have lower class sizes once the student is taking classes in their major. This allows students with disabilities and non learning-disabled students to have relationship with their fellow classmates. Those students who chose the junior college, route encountered a similar benefit in lower division classes. “The keys to helping a student with a learning disability are flexibility and continuing teacher/student dialogue” (Griffiths 41). This occurs more frequently in smaller class sizes. While having smaller class sizes is important knowing what resources are available to students with learning disabilities is equally important

Students with learning disabilities at a Junior College can participate in a program called Disabled Students Services. This program works with students in helping them find the best approach to succeeding in college. Here they work with counselors to get the necessary services such as free private tutoring and there are office employees to help get them everything they need to succeed in a class. Students are allowed to spend an entire hour talking with their instructor on getting help with an assignment, this is the time in private when students can work with and communicate with instructors on finding the best approach on how to be successful.

Utilizing instructor’s office hours and communication between instructor and student is so crucial in being able to find methods that work for a particular student. If a student can’t communicate well with an instructor its only going to be difficult to develop a steady approach for success in an instructor class. Students develop accommodations that help them best understand methods used by instructors.

The amount of services a student with learning disabilities receives at a four-year school is not much different than what they received at a junior college. All four-year universities have a program called Student Disability Resources. They help students outline accommodations and allow them to talk with a counselor. Students also can receive priority registration and assistance with reduced course loads. “ Numerous individuals stated they took reduced course loads because they required more time than other students to complete assignments and papers” (Murphy 50). The office also assists disabled students with orientation to campus and coordinates note takers (In-class peer note takers).

Another service provided is Alternate Formats of texts (Such as e-text, mp3, books on tape, Braille). The SDR office also gives strategies for self-advocacy about disability-related needs, act as Liaison with Instructors, campus offices, and other community members (including Department of Rehabilitation). When it comes to taking test students with disabilities can request a quiet room or ask for extended time. For those who students who are deaf the Student Disabilities office will provide them with a Sign Language Interpreter, real-time captioning, Video transcription, or captioning assistance. Another great service that is available is Drop-In Disability Advising, Alternative course pathways/Course Substitutions, Adaptive Computing, assistive technology and Accommodations for On-Campus Housing (CSUMB) while knowing what accommodations students with disabilities can receive so is getting help with the difficult subject matter.

One area of subject that is notorious for being difficult for students with learning disabilities in college is mathematics, especially algebra. Most students who

have learning disabilities are rarely taught algebra until college because of the remedial coursework they are forced to take in high school. So when it comes to learning algebra it's like learning a foreign language. Some math instructors in particular are known for using a variety of methods to get the concept across. "I am aware that there are several learning styles that students utilized to learn in a classroom. For example: visually, orally, auditory, etc (Loboto)". While I was at Cabrillo junior college in Aptos, Ca I had two phenomenal math instructors by the name of Nancy Fetterman and Alfonso Loboto. Both instructors worked countless hours with me and used a one to one approach to help me best understand the complex subject of algebra so I could be successful. While using a variety of methods to teach math is beneficial working one- to one students.

One such instructor who does that is CSU Monterey instructor Adrian Andrade "My approach is to work one-on-one with students who require the extra help, (Andrade)". Maximizing office hour and tutoring sessions are crucial for a student with learning disabilities to be successful at a four-year school. Aside from extended time on an exam, instructor office hour is single handedly one of the best tools used to help find the best approach to accommodating a student with learning disabilities. "Someone with dyslexia usually has a specific way to work with dyslexia. As such, I try to allow them to use the techniques with which they are familiar. Oftentimes, they are the ones to teach me something new, (Greg)." It's critical to have one to one time where difficult material can be broken down until the right method is reached. "Knowing the student's disability and learning style is important for any interaction" (Eveiden). It's essential to find the best methods,

**approaches and techniques to ensure that students with learning disabilities in college can be just as successful as students who don't have learning disabilities. While approaches and techniques are important so is parental support for students with learning disabilities in college.**

**One aspect that is highly critical for students with learning disabilities to succeed is parental support and involvement even at the collegiate level. This can make the transition to college easier. It isn't always necessary for a learning disabled student's success. Some successful students with learning disabilities have come from poor home environments and have been successful. A student who has a learning disability can be better helped when they have an accepting and open-minded home environment. Weather they have parents or not. Parental support is helpful and has even proven beneficial for me.**

### **Conclusion**

**Although they are often held to the same standard as the general Population, students with disabilities must overcome serious obstacles that can interfere with their education. "To graduate from high school, students with disabilities may need to work harder, study longer, or possess greater academic ability than their peers without a corresponding physical, emotional, or learning handicap. The added work and frustration associated with a disability can take its toll over time.(National Center for Educational Statistics).**

**Students need to not be timid and identify themselves as a student with disabilities so they can have the best chance at success. Instructors need be patient**

**and try various methods with a student who has a learning disability until they find the one best suit the student. The only way to find the best approach to accommodating students with disabilities in higher education is to keep using the proven methods that have worked in the past and continuing to make students more aware of all they are entitled. All the sources offered insight of expertise in their specific area. Overall, acquiring these interviews only reassured the importance of researching this important issue. It's important for those considering going into the education field to take a look at learning disabilities and their impact on students and instructors.**

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# **Miracle on 701 Monterey Ave: A Book about My Life as a Student with Learning Disabilities**

## **Dedications**

**This book is dedicated most of all to my parents, older brother Andrew, and my late grandmother, Rose Bettar; I wouldn't be here today if weren't for their never-ending love and support for me. I want to give many thanks to all the doctors and nurses who took care of me at Stanford Medical Center; all the teachers, instructors, counselors, and tutors who have helped me all throughout school at Capitola Elementary School, New Brighton Middle School, Soquel High School, Cabrillo College, and California Sate University Monterey Bay. Also, my late mentor Richard Griffiths who always believed in me. I would like to also thank my vision tutor, Connie Unsicker, and my psychologist, Dr. Diane Bridgman. Finally, I would like to thank my lord and savior Jesus Christ.**

## **Introduction**

**I am writing this book as Senior Capstone project at CSU Monterey Bay. I am a student with learning disabilities. The term "learning disability" is defined as: "Any of several conditions characterized in school aged children by difficulty in completing specific tasks and associated with impaired development in the central nervous system" (Webster's). Learning disabilities can be continuous and can range from mild to moderate or severe. Students with learning disabilities deserve a level playing field just like anyone else and it's my dream that other students with learning disabilities can benefit from me and we can learn from each other. This book is a guide for teachers, parents, doctors, students and mentors. Through this**

**book I hope to remove the stigma that is so often associated with students who have learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities are really not all that different from anyone else. Give us our chance to flourish.**

### **Foreword**

**“In the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins—not through strength but by perseverance” H. Jackson Brown**

**My daughter, Kathleen, has been a fighter since she struggled to take her first breath 22 years ago. She defines motivation, determination, and success. In my 35 years as an educator I’ve never met a student who worked harder. She is my role model, my inspiration, my hero, and my angel.**

### **Preface**

**Everything I know about my type of birth is what I have been told by my parents, doctors, and nurses. It wasn’t until I was older and at an appropriate age that I could really understand everything I went through. My parents sat down with me and told me about the struggle we all went through in the fight for my life. School was no picnic for me. I had to work twice as hard as my fellow classmates to succeed, but that’s what drove me to do well. No words can explain the desire in me to succeed, never stopping until my task is complete, and no job is complete without hard work. Being a student with learning disabilities made me develop a work ethic early on that can’t be taught -it’s deeply rooted in my character and a drive that goes far beyond the classroom but to the workforce as well.**

**Throughout school I won numerous awards for perseverance and overcoming the challenges life dealt me. My learning style is very hands on and I**

learn by doing, since I am a very visual learner. I have to have someone show me how to do a task then I can complete it on my own, this is why I struggled to grasp certain concepts like critical thinking and math. I was tutored from the second grade all through college and everything that I have accomplished in life is a milestone. I did the things people said I would never be able to do like play sports, drive a car, or run a cash register, but none of these compare to finishing my college degree. By society's standards I wasn't supposed to be successful (I even shocked the doctors and nurses at Stanford Medical Center), but I was able to succeed because my parents did everything in their power to make sure I had every opportunity to succeed. My mother accessed every resource that I was entitled to and she left no stone unturned!

When I was in elementary school my first vision tutor (who was assigned to help me deal with the everyday needs of school) as well as many others professionals thought my mother was crazy and too "pushy" to drag me to all the extra curricular activities and/ or tutoring. My days were filled with these extra curricular activities and appointments to help me develop the skills that I was lacking. Many people thought my mom was overworking me and not allowing me to have time for anything else, but in fact she was doing the right thing and the only thing she knew. She was taking a chance to help me develop my refine gross motor skills so I wouldn't fall behind. I wanted to play sports, have art lessons, take ballet, or get pediatric occupational therapy. It would later prove that I benefited from all those after school activities, so looking back it those who doubted my mother and her decisions were wrong. Now twenty-two years later, other parents are following the

path my mother paved. Taking their kids who have disabilities or any type of disorder such as ADD or ADHD and signing them up for various after school events to help develop their skills and have an outlet for all their pent up energy. “Your mother was trend setter, a woman ahead of her time” (Uniscker).

I was so blessed to live in two-parent household, since in this the day and age it’s very common for kids to live with only one parent. My parents were phenomenal in making sure I was successful in school. They read to me constantly and my mom spent countless hours helping me with my homework, even after putting in a full day at work as a high school teacher. She never said no to me when I needed her. I couldn’t imagine my life without two parents; there is no way I would have been able to have to all my practices, art lessons, games, or therapy session without the support of both parents.

Something I stress to students with learning disabilities is to never use their disability as crutch, or let the disabilities define them. If learning disabled students let their disability define them then they will sit around moping and never accomplish anything in life. Don’t sit there and feel sorry for yourself. “We don’t want the person to take on a ‘victim role’ or ‘poor me’ tendency, but instead to learn how to move forward even with their disability while being realistic and yet positive” (Bridgman). To all those students who have learning disabilities: Get out there and grab life by the horns, come out of the comfort zone, be something, and surpass expectations. Do everything possible to achieve success, such as accessing every resource, tutoring services, assistance program, and accommodation you’re

entitled to. Don't hold back, break the mold! Don't let anything or anyone get in the way!

Many famous stars in Hollywood and in professional sports have learning disabilities. They have continued to live their life despite it. They never gave up their goals and didn't let a learning disability hold them back. Some stars that come to mind are late night talk show host Jay Leno, who has dyslexia, Anderson Cooper TV host of AC 360 on CNN who has a mild form dyslexia, (Dispatches From the Edge), mega investment owner, Charles Schwab, current San Francisco 49er's running back, Frank Gore, and of course the most famous of the them of all Albert Einstein, who suffered from ADD and dyslexia. But nothing stopped celebrities from succeeding; they are just everyday people so nothing should stop anyone else in the world from achieving their goals and dreams just because they have a learning disability.

## Chapter 1: Miracle Birth

My birth seems to be one of fate. I was born on May 17, 1985; exactly three months and twelve days before I was supposed to be enter this earth. I was born to Lisa Steingrube a high school history teacher, and Dan Steingrube, a water quality technician. They also had my older brother, Andrew who was 2 years old at the time.

My mother had a rare chronic abruption of the placenta so she was ordered to stay in bed at Stanford Medical Center, which at that time had the highest level of care for premature babies. My mother was put on bed rest for about four months and she was also given drugs to delay her labor, however, they stopped working

and she was told that I could be born any day. The doctors and nurses told my mother that they hadn't saved any baby born at twenty-five weeks. Hope was slim so my dad went out in the hall and called all my relatives to them that If I was born I would die and to come down to say last prayers for my mom and I, but by some miracle of God I wasn't born until May 17. I guess I couldn't wait any longer and finally was delivered on May 17, 1985 at 10:06am. As soon as I as born everything became a blur and happened so fast that my mother didn't even have a chance to hold me. I was immediately whisked away and taken to intensive care, placed in an incubator, and put on life support with various wires, tubes, and IV's. I had very undeveloped lungs and the doctor and nurses who delivered me weren't sure if I was going to live and told my parents to hope, pray, and to be ready to plan a burial service if I didn't survive.

I was abnormally tiny weighing only two pounds, 1 ounce, and could fit in the palm of my father's hand. I was in the hospital on life support for almost four months. Day after day my parents drove over Highway 17 to come visit me. My mother had to take significant time off her from job in order to visit and care for me. She even went daily to the hospital chapel to pray for me. My father would also drive over at after work with my older brother, Andrew. Both my parents never left my incubator even though they were only allowed to touch my hand through a hole in the glass. They were always making sure I was getting proper medical treatment and ensuring there no mistakes. They took the liberty of even calling every night and morning to check my prognosis before they made the journey to the hospital. Once during my stay in Stanford a doctor moved me out of my private

room I was staying in and put me in a room with other sick babies because they needed my room for a teenage suicide victim. The doctor moved me even though he knew full well that I wasn't supposed around other sick patients. Since I had very weak lungs, I was vulnerable to catching their viruses and could die. My mother found out when she came to visit me the next morning and went to my room only to find that I wasn't there. She scolded the doctor and said "If this was your child you wouldn't let this happen and I will sit with her in the hall until you find another private room for my daughter". Needless to say I was given my own private room. The doctor couldn't even look my mom in the eye and hung his head in shame and walked off to get a room in order for me. The nurses would later say that incident was the talk of the break room that day. My parent's tireless love and devotion to me means more to me than they know and there are no words to thank them enough.

My parents would sometimes stay with my grandparent's Rose and Joe Bettar who lived in Redwood City, not far from Stanford Medical Center. On July 18<sup>th</sup> 1985, my father's birthday, I had retina surgery fusing my retinas together and preventing me from living life in darkness. My parents and brother stayed with me instead of going out to dinner or taking my brother Andrew to the zoo, instead all three of them sat in the waiting room while I had emergency retina surgery performed by Dr. Gaynon. I was finally transferred to local Dominican hospital in August of 1985 where I stayed for a month to gain some weight and was released home in September of that year.

After four long grueling months on life support and/or oxygen being able to be home with my family was a welcome relief, but I still had to have help breathing on my own with an oxygen tank. My stay at home didn't last long because a little less than a year later I came down with an air borne strain of pneumonia. With weak scarred lungs due to the months on life support, I was very susceptible to catching colds and other illnesses. I had to be rushed to Dominican Hospital by ambulance, and from there I was transferred back Stanford Medical Center. It was there that I spent my first birthday. Most one year olds have huge parties with family commemorating their first year on earth but I spent mine lying in a hospital bed with a paper crown on my head made by the nurses, with tubes and wires sticking out from all over my body. After over a month I was released from the hospital and my parents worked with me to regain my strength and get me up to proper baby weight. I talked and walked later than other babies due to my prematurity.

My early birth left me with a visual disability and I started wearing glasses before I was even two years old (I later got contact lenses at 12 years old). I also was left with fine motor delay, gross motor delay, dyscalculia, and dyspraxia. My parents also hired different therapists and specialists to help me with my fine motor skills so I wouldn't fall behind my peers. I was always going to the doctor whether it was a retina specialist, physical therapist, or pediatrician. My parents had to be extremely cautious when taking me to public places for fear of me contracting any type of virus, so my family rarely left the house, entertained friends, or attended

holiday family dinners. When I did catch a cold as most kids do, I had to have the help of a nebulizer to keep my airways dilated to avoid pneumonia.

Another way in which my parents had to exercise great caution was with my older brother Andrew, who was only 2 years old and couldn't have any friends over because little kids carry big bugs! I had one on one baby sitter who came to our home to watch me so I wouldn't have to be around little kids and risk getting sick. Since lighting had stuck twice with me being so sick, my parents weren't sure I was even going to live past two years old and my mother couldn't stand to buy me any *big girl* clothes for fear I wouldn't live to wear them.

In order to prepare me for preschool, Stanford Hospital sent a psychologist who tested my intelligence and the exercises required me to repeat five sentences or look at pictures in a book. However, my mother felt the tests were invalid, because any four year old with my visual disability wouldn't be able to pass their tests. The psychologist from Stanford suggested that my mother apply for programs through the school district for kids with special needs and thought I would be a good candidate. After applying my mother was introduced to a specialist named Marilyn Torp. She helped me learn directions and other countless exercises to get ready for pre-school at the age of four.

## **Chapter 2: Pre- School and the Programs That Made it Possible**

The Pre-School I attended had a small amount of kids to teacher ratio and was very focused on getting the kids ready for kindergarten. I was very stubborn when I was little (I am still today). It was in pre-school that I started getting pediatric occupational therapy in Soquel; occupational therapy helped me with my

**fine and gross motor skills. As I got older I worked with a number of different people at pediatric occupational therapy. I also learned how to safely cross the street and learned different ways to get to places around town being a person with a visual and processing disability. (I continued to receive sessions at pediatric occupational therapy until I was fourteen and in the seventh grade). I am eternally grateful for those who took the time to work with and help me at pediatric therapy. I couldn't have made it through my early years of life without help from them.**

**It was also in pre-school that I had my first vision tutor provided to me by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education. The service is free to any family who has a child with a vision disability. The services included helping me learn the alphabet, counting, and reading. However my tutor didn't last long; she didn't prove to be a good fit with my learning style. She was someone who wasn't patient with little kids. For example, she would pull me out the jungle gym or group story time to work with me instead of being patient and waiting until I had my turn. She also failed to use a properly lit room, when working with the visually impaired! After an incident observed by one of the pre-school teachers, involving my tutor pulling me out of line to work with her, my mother had heard enough and wanted a change. Pulling me out of line during my turn for the swing was unnecessary because it's essential for little kids to have playtime and socialize. My mother politely requested that I be work with someone else better suited for the job, since I would have to work with the person until I finished high school.**

### Chapter 3 Elementary School

I was a year older than most of my peers when I started kindergarten at the age of five—almost six. I started school late, which was advised by the doctors to my parents. Because of this, I was, of course, teased by my classmates constantly being asked if had been held back or failed kindergarten. Also starting in kindergarten, I was tested by a school psychologist provided and paid for by the school district. It was required by federal law to have me tested to check my progress on a yearly basis. I was tested every year from kindergarten until fifth grade.

I was also given a new vision tutor in the fall of 1990 when I was set to transition into kindergarten at Capitola Elementary School in Capitola. My new vision tutor was Connie Unsicker; she was simply a vision tutor and had never worked with a student with learning disabilities before. Boy did she have a lot to learn and had no idea what kind of student she was working with! It wasn't until years later that Connie told me she learned and benefited so much from working with me. Before anything was set in stone my mother wanted to meet with Connie. I was too young to know if someone would be good match for me or not. My mom wanted to get feel to see if Connie would be a good fit to work with me. Both my mom and Connie were nervous about meeting each other since they didn't have much information on one another. It was a gamble that would later pay off through the years. It only took one meeting for my mother to instantly hit it off with Connie and approve her to be my vision tutor; she was the perfect person for the job. She

was a kind, gentle, warm woman, who had motherly instincts even though she wasn't a parent. She was extremely patient and understanding. I was five years old and had just started kindergarten when I first worked with Connie. I met with her two to three times a week but as I got older and moved on to middle and high school I saw her on a stand by/consultation basis. Connie was there to provide appropriate materials, re-teach any visual concepts that I didn't understand such as maps or math drawings, help with visual tasks including how to draw shapes, straight lines, using scissors, and learning to write cursive. As I got older she helped me learn to type, and made sure any reading material I needed was enlarged. When I was young, Connie advocated for me making sure I was given everything I was entitled to as student with a visual disability. What was hidden from me at the time was the fact that with every grade higher teachers actually thought I was lazy because I could understand concept A for example but not concept B and this frustrated the teachers and they felt I that I wasn't working hard! I had no idea that was going on. It was Connie who came to my defense and drilled to my teachers over and over again that by no means was I a slacker! I was one of the hardest working students to ever come through their classroom and they better damn well understand!

It wasn't until I hit middle school and on in to high school I began to strongly advocate for myself, making sure I got every service I was allowed. I left no stone unturned. Connie sat back and was there if needed her but she really let me figure what I needed for myself. She was one of the kindest gentle hearted people I had ever met. She didn't have a mean bone in her body and never once

reprimanded, raised her voice, or gave up on me when I didn't understand something we were working on. She would tell me patiently over and over again until I finally understood. Connie would always have a big smile on her face when we would have our meetings. As I grew older Connie became much more than just a vision tutor, but a friend. My tenure ended with Connie in 2002 when she left due to medical reasons. Though it was hard to say goodbye to Connie after all the years she helped me, I felt so blessed to have worked with someone like her.

Along with having a vision tutor and continuing to attend weekly sessions of pediatric occupational therapy, I also took private art lessons to help me with my fine motor skills, coloring in between the lines and painting straight. I went to a private art studio in Aptos twice a week for a number of years. Along with private art lessons also I took private swimming lessons in the summer from the local Elks Club in Santa Cruz. My parents felt I needed one-on-one swimming lessons so I wouldn't be overwhelmed in trying to learn how to swim with a big group of kids. In addition to learning how to swim I enrolled in a dance class at the Dance Center on 41<sup>st</sup> ave in Capitola to help me with my gross motor skills. Dance lessons taught me balance and coordination. I was in numerous recitals and met many friends through dance class. Dance, swim, and art again stressed the importance of developing my fine and gross motor skills, which I lacked due to my premature birth. Unlike most parents, mine spent countless hours and money to make sure I wouldn't fall behind, even though for the most part at the time I didn't know what the programs were for and thought that all the extra curricular activities I was doing were something new

to have fun and make new friends. Had my parents not taken me to all my lessons I don't know where I would be today.

In second grade I got my first math tutor who was my neighbor and was exceptional at math. He was the first of many to tutor me in math (I would be tutored in math until I finished Cabrilo College). My neighbor who tutored me was very patient and fit my learning style, which was important to my success in math. A few years later when I was in fifth grade I got another math tutor who was an older woman but who was also a phenomenal tutor and fit my learning style.

I also enrolled in a program through the public school system called Adaptive Physical Education, or APE for short. The program was an extra dose of physical education but focused on honing my gross motor skill such as running, large movement, or jumping. APE included only other five other kids and was mostly one-on-one. My teacher was a very kind hearted and patient woman. APE was five days a week for an hour day. I was in APE all through elementary school finishing the program when I graduated from elementary school. If I had not been able to receive the services of APE I would probably still be physically challenged. It was my parents who noticed the help I needed and accessed the resources I was entitled to in order to grow up to be just like my peers. In addition to being enrolled in APE my parents thought it would a great opportunity for me to play recreational sports to get to know kids my age and to help me my further develop my gross motor skills. I started out playing soccer when I was seven years old, then I moved on to softball. Unfortunately, I could only play softball for a few years because as

**the girls got older the pitches became harder and faster, and it become more dangerous for me to play with my vision disability.**

**Another sport I discovered in the third grade was basketball. All my friends were playing and so I decided I wanted to play too. I immediately loved playing basketball; The feeling of pushing a ball up the court, making a steal, sinking a three pointer beyond the arc, or executing a perfect pick and roll made my heart leap for joy. It was also much safer for me to play basketball then softball due to my vision disability. I could see a big orange basketball coming toward my face much more easily then a small white softball.**

**Not only did I love playing sports as a youngster but I also loved to watch sports on TV. I watched baseball, basketball and football, but it was football that became my true love and still is today.**

**I don't know where I got my football gene but I love it more then life itself. I can never get enough football; I eat, sleep and live football!! I would watch it for hours with my older brother and dad. On Sundays my mom goes shopping or to the gym with her friends and I am glued to the TV watching football. I also loved to watch Monday Night Football, but before I could watch it I have to make sure I have all my homework done. I also fell in love with college football and remain a die-hard university of Oklahoma sooner's football fan. (Too bad CSUMB doesn't have a football team).**

**Through playing sports, in elementary school I met my best friend Samantha Thomas. We were in the same first grade class and actually met at one our brothers' sporting events. We hit it off immediately and found we had a lot in**

common including being sick as babies. We both had difficult births and learning issues in school. She happened to live down the street for me in the Capitola Knolls. Samantha and I became inseparable and we could always find something to entertain us. Samantha was someone who I could always relate to and has remained my best friend after all these years.

Elementary school also introduced me to the Lord. I formed a long lasting relationship with God. I started attending church at a young age with a girl named Suzanne Rupp who lived down the block for me. One summer I even went to bible camp in the fifth grade. That was the summer I accepted Jesus into heart. I was later baptized at the age of 19 on August 30, 2004 and My Christian faith has remained strong and deep rooted in me even as I grow older. It's in times of struggle and hardship that I've turned to God for help, such as issues with fitting in or having trouble with schoolwork.

It happened to be in elementary school that I picked up my love for reading. I'm sure it began with my parents always reading to me. That subject happened to be my strong point even though I had a learning disability. I would read anything from classics to mysteries and from sports to science fiction magazines. In fourth and fifth grade, I won top reading awards beating out my fellow classmates.

Elementary school came to end in 1997 when I completed fifth grade from Capitola Elementary School. My graduation ceremony was unique in the fact that it was held at the old Capitola movie theatre in downtown Capitola. Although I was sad to see one chapter in my life come to an end I was excited to see what layer ahead for me in middle school.

## **Chapter 4: Middle School Going from Child to Adolescent**

**Middle school: the onset of changing of hormones, puppy love, going from the big person on campus to the new kid on the block, making and letting go of friends, wanting to be popular, and trying not to be a dork or *uncool*. I had the pleasure of being able to have the middle school just across the street from my house. The school was New Brighton Middle School and was interconnected to the elementary school. Sixth grade was quite year a in itself, I had one of the hardest teachers in my life. I would spend hours upon hours on homework every night, with my mom helping to get it all done. My typical afternoon started with working on my homework, taking a break for a snack, doing more homework until my mom got home to help me, eating dinner and going to back to homework until late into the night.**

**Being a Special Ed kid in middle school brought its own set of problems and I was made fun of time and time again by my peers who thought I was stupid because I couldn't do math. I was also made fun of for wearing glasses. I just learned to ignore the immature behavior from my insecure peers, and what I did was develop a tough skin and didn't cry or run to my parents every time someone said something nasty to me. I knew those kids who made fun of me were just jealous and insecure inside for one reason or another, so they would put me down to make themselves feel better about themselves but in the end I am one the one got the last laugh. I ended up having tremendous success. It was also in sixth grade that I made a major decision concerning my appearance.**

One of my major milestones in the sixth grade was when I made the decision to get contact lenses and ditch my glasses. I wanted to change my image and overall feel better about myself. In October 1997 I was fitted with hard contacts lenses at the age of twelve. Let's just say that when I got to school the next day, my friends, teachers, and even my enemies were wowed. I sure felt good!

At the end of sixth grade I met a girl named Shauna Ringquist at a summer pool party at of one my parent's friend's houses. Shauna and I just clicked because we had a lot in common. We were the same age and in the same grade but we went to different schools because I lived in Capitola and she lived in Felton. Shauna and I would talk daily on the phone or over instant messenger and we hung out as much as we could mostly on weekends, holiday breaks, and during the summer.

Seventh grade brought whole new group of teachers, trails, tribulations, and my first ever experience playing on a school team. I was blessed to have some really great teachers in seventh grade that really worked with me to succeed and make sure that I understood the material they were teaching me. In every one of their classes, I made sure I worked my tail off to succeed. I would make flashcards to study material for quizzes, write my spelling words over and over until I could do them without getting any wrong, read only a few pages at time instead of the whole chapter at once, stay after school to talk with my teachers, organize my binders, and I even bought a day planner to write my homework in. All of the minor things I did where strategies I used to be successful. I was still made fun of in seventh grade but this time not for my appearance, but for being a student with learning disabilities. However, I did gain some popularity when I was a starting midfielder for the school

soccer team. I played in every game and even some of my enemies were on the team and I played more then they did. Though I did have a big group of friends, Samantha Thomas remained my best friend. Next up was the last leg of middle school--eighth grade.

Eighth grade during the year 2000 was a very interesting year for me as well as my family. Again I was blessed to have great teachers to help me get through school. As always I gave my all in each and every class. I still needed help in math and was still struggling in it mightily, so my mother hired a private tutor to help me succeed. I also continued to see my vision tutor Connie on a stand by basis. The winter of 1999 was particularly hard for my family. My grandfather Joseph Bettar fell ill with pneumonia and had to be taken to Dominican Hospital over Christmas break. My grandfather had been making progress but then one day took a turn for the worse. He passed away the day before my brother's birthday on December 29, 1999.

Not long after my grandfather's death did my mother suggest that I go over and have dinner with my grandma once week to spend time with her so she wouldn't be lonely, and that I could get to know her more. In all honesty I didn't really spend all that much time with my grandma until I started having dinner with her. She had lived in Redwood City but moved to Capitola down the street from us in 1992 she also worked as a cashier at the local OSH in Capitola. Though she lived a block away, I didn't see her much except for when my mom had her over for dinners, holidays, or on to other occasions. It was a good decision on my mom's part to convince me to spend time to my grandma. She would cook me different

pastas dishes each week or we would dine out and try different restaurants. Getting together each week was just the beginning of my relationship with my grandmother, and it would only grow from there and get stronger throughout the years. The year 2000 ended on a high note when I graduated from middle school in June. My whole family was in attendance to watch me receive my diploma and best of all I graduated with my best friend Samantha Thomas. Next, I would be attending high school at Soquel High where I would be joining my brother who would be a senior.

Prior to entering high school, I got my learners permit and was finally able to learn how to drive. I was already fifteen and half when I would start high school and a year older than most of my peers. Learning how to drive would turn out to be a daunting task and more than I ever bargained for.

### **Chapter 5: High school and a Big Time Decision**

I was freshman in high school in the fall of 2000 and once again I was the lowest person on the totem pole. I could look forward to *swirlies* and trying to be a popular kid. A little known secret is that I had originally planned to attend San Lorenzo Valley High School in Felton where my mom worked. I ended up choosing to attend Soquel High instead because most of my childhood friends went there and it was my extra curricular activities I participated in through out high school that cemented my stay at Soquel. My brother and I carpoled to school, and of course I thought it was “cool” to ride with someone who was older than me, not mention my brother. Unfortunately, after middle school most of my friends and I went our separate ways but I still remained best friends with Samantha Thomas. I was still in

**Special Ed for math but high school also required that Resource Specialist Program (RSP) students be in a morning tutorial to get help with homework.**

**It was in the morning tutorial class that I met a woman named Gloria Barrett who was an aide for the class. Gloria, from the first day I met her struck me as a kind gentle hearted woman. Every morning when I saw her she always had a smile on her face and was ready to help me with my homework. We became fast friends, talking in the morning before class or exchanging e-mails. As I continued to get to know Gloria, she helped me out more than the teacher, so after a while I just went right to her for help on my assignments. I even had my own little spot right next to her desk. It's my true belief that Gloria is an angel sent down from heaven to be my friend and help students with learning disabilities.**

**It was my dream to play basketball in high school, after all basketball was my favorite sport to play and I wanted to be just like my older brother who played on the boys varsity team. A funny thing happened that actually changed my path in high school was on my way to tryouts in the fall of 2000 when my agricultural teacher stopped me and asked if I would like to fill in at a Future Farmer of America Event being held the next day. I was taken aback; I had heard of FFA before but never really thought much of it. Honestly I had thought it was for down home country folk and hicks at the school, so I just stood there for moment thinking about my teacher's offer. After a minute or two, I said yes, turned around, and walked with my teacher to fill out the liability forms. I walked away from a chance at playing high school basketball, but little did I know the decision I had just made would change my life in more ways then one. Later that evening I discussed the**

move with my mother and she advised me that I had made the right move. Had I tried out for the basketball team and made it, there was a good chance I wouldn't see a lot of playing time and the bench would become my only friend. The next day I went to the FFA event and had a blast. I wanted more, so I attended more events and the monthly meetings. A few months after my first event there was an opening on the officer team, and I was voted into the Sentinel position by the rest of the officers, replacing the person who had moved away. My job was to welcome and greet guests, help organize meetings, and help with opening ceremonies. It was at the end of the year banquet that I beat my freshman classmates to win the Star Greenhand Award, an award given to the most outstanding freshman in the club. It was also the night I found out that my FFA adviser was leaving. She had been so wonderful and motivating, and she was the reason I joined in the first place. Now that she was leaving I was devastated, but I didn't want to quit because I was having so much fun. There were still plenty more opportunities for me to grow as a member, compete in more events, win more awards, and even one day become president. Even though the school year came to end, I wanted to get ahead so I took independent study summer school in Santa Cruz. I completed my freshman year by watching my brother graduate from high school.

I was sixteen when I started in sophomore year but I didn't have my driver's license. Driving proved to be more challenging than I thought with my visual disability, so I had to practice every day until it became second nature to me. It was my mom who practiced every day hours on end with me, and every time she needed to go somewhere she let me drive so I could learn how to drive and get more

practice. I was someone who needed the everyday practice to master the skills it took to drive. She was so dedicated in helping me learn how to drive that she would make up errands to do just to get me driving.

Also that year, we moved my brother down to college in San Luis Obispo to Cal Poly. Not having my brother around was something I had to get used to, we grew up under the same roof for the last eighteen years and he had been someone I looked up to not only as my older brother, but a role model. I missed him so much.

Though both my brother and my FFA adviser were gone, my relationships with my best friend Samantha Thomas and Gloria Barrett remained strong. My relationship with my grandma also continued to blossom, and as we grew closer I was able to share more and more with her. I would look forward to our Friday night dinners. We didn't just go to dinner but we would run errands and catch the latest movie. Even though she was my grandma she was becoming one of my best friends.

It was in the fall of that same year that I decided to do volunteer work and be a candy striper at Dominican Hospital in Soquel. I would work one day a week in the hospital's gift shop. I was partnered with a young girl named Maria Henning who was my age and attended a private school in Monterey. To be honest, I was bit nervous at first and didn't know what to think of her. As I got older it was harder to make friends my age since I had a close group of friends who had known me since I was little. However, I found that Maria surpassed all my expectations; she was a really sweet young woman who shared similar interests as me. She was by far one of the most intelligent people I have ever met. She was truly gifted but didn't brag

or flaunt her intelligence to me, nor did she ever make me feel inferior to her. Even though her family was financially well off, her parents insisted that she volunteer, and that blew me away. The designated day for Maria and I to volunteer was Saturdays. As I got to know her better I began to like her more and more. Maria and I ran the cash register and did minor housekeeping such as vacuuming, sweeping, stocking candy, blowing up balloons, and arranging merchandise in the gift shop.

My sophomore year brought me another group of teachers to guide me academically. One that stood way out was my English teacher Deb Caterina; she was so warm and wonderful. She worked tirelessly with me to help me organize my essays so I could put together my ideas and show my true ability to write. She would take the time to edit my papers and what was so amazing about her was that she gave me constructive feedback then let me learn from my mistakes and rewrite my paper in order to receive a better grade.

For the second straight summer I took independent studies in summer school. I took a big leap with two courses instead of just one. Completing the summer courses and assuming I would pass all my courses next would put me over the top credit-wise would allow me to graduate a year early if wanted. Now I had a huge decision to ponder, skipping a grade and graduating high school a year early seemed very appealing and like a great chance to get a head start in college. I also could avoid the dreaded High School Exit Exam, which would be difficult because I couldn't complete the math portion. I discussed the idea in great detail with my parents, decided to reclassify myself as a senior, and was able to escape the exit

exam. After all I hated high school; it was a miserable period in my life. This would be a gamble because if it didn't work I would have never really known what it was like to have a junior year, or it could turn out to be the best move I ever made in my life. Telling my friends though was another issue to tackle. My announcement took my friends by surprise but they were very supportive of my plan.

I was now officially a senior, skipping my junior year. But there was one thing I wanted to accomplish before I graduated and that was being president of the Soquel FFA chapter. Before the school year started our chapter held elections. I figured I would run unopposed and win easily, but this wouldn't be the case. Another member of the club who was a friend of mine decided to run at the last minute even though she had no prior officer experience, which didn't go over with me, but my advisor at the time stated that anyone could run. Experience meant nothing but I was sure the election would be a landslide in my favor. I could hardly sleep the night before the election because I was a bundle of nerves. The day finally arrived and I was ready to face a duel for the presidency. I had big plans for our FFA chapter. The election results were to be the shock of my life. There were an odd number of people at the meeting and the election was a nail-biter. I lost by one vote. I was devastated, heart-broken, outraged. I wasn't going to let my opponent see the defeat and sadness in my eyes. So, I simply got up looked her in the eye and shook her hand, offering her my sincere congratulations. It wasn't until I was outside in my mother's car that I let my true emotions and anguish show. The tears streamed down my face as my mother tried to comfort me. The newly elected president was inexperienced; she didn't know what she was getting into. It was like

throwing a rookie NFL quarterback into a game and have them run the offense. A recipe for disaster! I was, by default, named Vice President and threw myself head first into making our chapter better. After all it's often the second in command who runs the show behind the scenes. I sat back quietly watching, at several meetings as the president didn't get a darn thing done! What she wanted she was the title and no work. The FFA advisor finally told the president that she wasn't doing her job so she decided to resign. The reigns would be handed over to me. A little over a month after I lost the election I became president. I called both my parents at work and told them the joyous news. We celebrated with a nice dinner out.

Along with all the FFA drama in this fall of my senior year I was still struggling with math class. I happened to be at Cabrillo College for Career Night and stumbled upon a booth that advertised private math tutors. I spoke with the lady who ran the booth and she recommended a tutor by the name of Tracy Van Gundy. My first tutoring session I knew Tracy was gold and fit my learning style to a T. She was kind, patient, understanding and if I didn't grasp a concept she would explain it in another way until I understood. That same year I also started seeing an Educational Therapist, Eleanor Stint, who would begin to teach me Algebra. I saw her twice a week for almost year; she was both a wonderful person and teacher. The steps and methods in math made sense to me. I was finally beginning to understand the complex world of Algebra. Trying to learn Algebra, for me, was as complex as learning a foreign language. I did all the homework, studied every day and as mentioned, went to tutoring twice a week but Algebra still wasn't totally sinking in. I would discover later why this was happening.

As my senior year progressed so did my stress level. Adding insult to injury, I found out that my best friend, Samantha, would be leaving Soquel High and finishing school through Independent Studies. It broke my heart to know that I wouldn't graduate high school with my best friend. We had grown up together and I couldn't imagine not being with her at graduation ceremonies.

Also in the winter of my senior year my grandmother, Rose, had a shoulder operation to repair her rotator cuff; I loved her so much. I was waiting at the hospital until her surgery was complete and I visited her every day while she was recovering. I would often sit with her when she ate meals so she wouldn't be alone. Her time in the hospital really solidified our already close relationship.

My senior year went by in a flash especially since I was graduating a year early. I capped off the year with a graduation ceremony filled with family and friends watching me as I hit another milestone in my life. I had once again defied the odds and exceeded expectations. Next up I would attempt to conquer the challenge of college. My journey would be beginning at Cabrillo Junior College in Aptos.

Before entering college I hoped to get my drivers license. After three years of countless hours of practice driving and five attempts to pass the driving test I finally got my license. In those three years I had been disappointed time and after time but finally after all the hours, hard-work, and a no quit never say die attitude I able to drive. Getting my drivers license ranks as one of the happiest days of my life; It also happened to be my late grandfather's birthday which made it all the more special. My parents were just as excited and happy as I was. When I arrived home

and told my brother he was so happy for me that he picked me up lifted me in the air and spun me around. I proved I could drive just like anyone else.

## **Chapter 6 Cabrillo College: A World of Opportunity**

As I enrolled in college I was ensured I would continue to get help and accommodations for my learning disabilities. I would this through an agency called Disabled Students Services Program (DSPS). I worked with two wonderful ladies Niki Onita, and Alta Northcutt, and these two women were instrumental in helping me in anyway they could. At Cabrillo I learned that I was entitled to quite a few learning accommodations. I got to register early, was allowed a note-taker, given extended times on tests, could receive several hours of free tutoring. The road to success was right before my eyes

My first semester at Cabrillo was quite a learning experience and a bit of a culture shock. The coursework at college was far different than high school. Every class needed time and effort to do well. There was a ton of reading, papers to be written, math problems to be solved and tests to be taken. Being the studious person I was I accessed every resource that I could. I enrolled at the Tutoring Center and received tutoring in my weakest subject math twice week. At the Tutoring Center I reconnected with Tracy, my former math tutor, once again she helped immensely. In addition I also did my math homework at the Math Learning Center which allowed me to do my work and if needed I could request a tutor to help me. I spent many hours in the Math Learning Center and without their service I wouldn't have been able to get through math. I am so thankful for the opportunity to have worked with them.

Along with spending many countless hours in the Math Learning Center I also lived at the library writing papers, studying, and getting help on essays. I quickly found out that getting help on papers meant you had to seek out the instructor, not the other way around. Once I understood that my instructors were more than happy to lend me a hand. In fact I visited them during their office hours every chance I got. If I needed help I would go back two to three times a week to talk to my instructors. I wouldn't have been able to make it through Cabrillo without their help and support.

In that same semester I met an instructor who would later be one of the most influential and inspirational people in my career at Cabrillo. His name was Richard Griffiths and I was enrolled in his Study Skills Class. The course was designed to help people learn how to succeed in college and in life beyond. Richard had a wonderful heart and always a smile on his face. He was one of the nicest people I had ever met in my life. We formed a long lasting friendship that got stronger the longer I stayed at Cabrillo.

I was delivered an emotional blow after my first semester; my dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer in January of 2004. Everyone in my family was shocked with disbelief. My dad was my protector, one of my heroes, a strong provider, and now here he was facing a difficult fight. It made me think about life in a different light. My mom, grandma and I waited at the hospital all day long. My brother was taking finals at Cal Poly and couldn't be with us. My dad came through the surgery fine and the doctors were able to remove all of the cancer.

I was determined to make my second semester better than my first. My dad was on the road to recovery but, unbeknownst to me, the road would only get tougher as the years went on. Richard Griffiths became my mentor as he took me under his wing, giving advice on what classes to take them from and who to avoid. He encouraged me to get a laptop and even told me where I could get the best deal. Anytime I had a problem I could go to him; our friendship was growing stronger with each semester that passed. Sometimes I would just drop by his office if he had a free moment to say and ask how his day was going. He always had a kind and supportive word to lift my spirits.

At the end of my freshman year I was shocked to learn I had made the honor roll at Cabrillo and I was invited to join Alpha Gamma Sigma, an honors club on campus that focused on volunteering and hands on learning. I had again accomplished another goal. I had a blast in AGS; it was so much fun. I met many amazing people who were just as dedicated to the club as me. I helped out on college tours and club fundraisers. At the end of my freshman I found out I had made the National Dean's List. Boy oh boy, I was a student with learning disabilities and I made the honor and the National Dean's List. From then on I knew that anything was possible, not just for me but for all students with learning disabilities.

That summer at my friend, Shauna, high school graduation I met a friend of hers, Sara Wood. Sara is a carbon copy of me. She struggled in school, but like me, worked her hard to succeed. We quickly became friends. Sara is one of the few people I have ever met with a learning disability who gives 100% in school, just like me.

My second year at Cabrillo proved to be vastly different and more difficult than any other year thus far. It was single handedly the defining year that tested my faith and commitment to staying in school. I was struggling in my classes; all though I had wonderful instructors the course work was difficult in science and math. One instructor, in particular, that stood out and gave there all in helping me was my algebra was instructor, Nancy Fetterman. Her class was a one-semester class spaced out over and entire year. Nancy, was a strong willed, no nonsense, right down to the point person. She really knew her math and was willing to do anything she could to help me succeed. She presented Algebra in a way that made sense to me. She would present different methods so each person could really understand the concepts. Her teaching style fit perfectly with my learning style. I would go to Nancy's office hour every day to get extra help on homework or with test. In addition, to going to tutoring with Tracy twice a week, I also would spend morning after morning in the cafeteria sipping hot chocolate and reviewing math problems. Math was my hardest subject but I was determined to succeed. Nancy was always wiling to help me in any way she could and she never turned me away. If it weren't her kindness and willingness to help me in my future math classes I would not have been able to make it through her class.

As the fall semester came to close, everything began to come crashing down. I had withdrawn from a couple courses and cutback on my involvement in AGS. I also found out that I didn't pass the first half of my Algebra class by just a few points. When I received the new I nearly wanted to die. I had worked so hard, put in so much time, and effort, only not to fail. I was in such shock that shut myself off

from my friends and family and sank into depression. I was so angry at my self for failing that I couldn't think about anything else. I would lay awake at night and rack my brain for answers, I felt like such a failure. I finally made the decision to retake the first half of my failed Algebra class during winter session at the Watsonville campus.

The winter session of this course was an intensive three-week condensed version. I was assigned Alfonso Loboto as my instructor and my experience with him was nothing but positive. He did everything he could to help me pass his class. He would sit and help me after class with any questions that I had and he even would arrive early to give me additional help. He accommodated me more than I ever expected. During the intensive winter math course my social life was non-existent. It was math all day, everyday. I didn't drive the freeway so I got up everyday at 6:00am to catch the 6:45am bus Watsonville bus. I would sit and do six hours of math then catch the bus back home, and do math my homework for hours or study for an exam. My parents also hired Tracy during the winter session to give me addition help with homework or study for a test. She was phenomenal, as always, in preparing me for exams or lending me a hand with my homework. She was patient and calm, taking the time to really make sure I understood the material. The course flew by and I passed Alfonso's class with flying colors. To my surprise I earned a B in the course. I did it with hard work, determination, and a no-quit attitude. I pushed everything aside and devoted all my time and effort into passing the class. I couldn't think about anything else; it consumed me! I was going into the second part of Algebra in Nancy's class with a little fear because of my failure in the

previous semester. . My confidence level was rising after passing the winter math course and I knew everything was going to be ok. It

Things were really starting to look up for me, but was head football coach, Steve Cox, who pulled me out of my slump and changed my life forever. Steve approached me at the end of the season football banquet and asked me to be his Administrative Assistant for the 2004/2005 seasons; I was in shock and jumped for joy. Here was the head football coach coming up to me and asking me to work for him. I was in heaven it would all football all the time. Whatever Steve needed done I would do. Steve was even was willing to let me start in February after my winter math class was completed. Off the field he is one of the nicest people I have ever had the pleasure of being around. He treated everyone with the same respect.

At the beginning of the spring semester I was tested by a learning specialist at Cabrillo to test my extent of my learning disability in math. I needed to know this to determine whether to apply for math course substitution at a four-year college. My friend/ mentor Richard Griffiths, gave me the battery of tests. My results were inconclusive as far as defining the exact nature of my disability. I needed to get more extensive private testing. He recommended a woman in Santa Cruz who was a neurophysiologist. The private testing was money well spent a decision I wouldn't regret. I had a total of three sessions and the neuropsychologist and she picked up right away I that I had brain/math related disabilities. . She also met with my mom to get a better understanding of my medical and educational history. The neurophysiologist performed an array of tests that were vastly different from the tests Cabrillo performed. I was diagnosed with dyscalculia a math/brain disorder.

Finally, the reason math so difficult for me could be put to rest. I had never breathed a bigger sigh of relief. After being diagnosed with math this disorder, it was time to take it to the next level apply at four year school exemption to taking anymore math classes. I set my sights on CSUMB and would apply in the fall.

Meanwhile I was having a great spring semester, I was doing well in all my classes and I had a dream job with the football team. I only had one year left of junior college then I could apply to a four-year college and fulfill another life long dream of mine. In mid April I was given a high dose reality check. A little more then year after my dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer he suffered a heart attack. My mom and I had been away that evening at a friends Eagle Scout ceremony. We came home to find no one home, all the furniture out place and all the lights on. My mom and I saw the blinking light on our answering machine, so we played the message not knowing to what expect. To our disbelief our neighbor had left us message telling us my dad had suffered a heart attack was in the Emergency Room at Dominican hospital to have an emergency procedure done to clear up a blocked artery. My mom and I didn't even let message finish playing before we jumped in the car and raced over to Dominican. Upon arriving at the hospital we went directly to see my dad who had come out fine from his procedure and was now resting. I was still in utter shock that my dad had suffered a heart attack. He already battled cancer now this. Lighting had stuck twice in little more than year. My dad was out of the hospital in a few days and continues to enjoy good health.

As I finished my second year at Cabrillo I wanted to lighten my load for the fall. So I enrolled in two summer school courses: Political Science and a Health Science course. In order to do that I needed special permission from my counselor at Disabled Students Program; I begged her to do this promising her she wouldn't regret it. I ended passing both my political Science and Health Science class with flying colors keeping my promise to counselor at DSPP. I once again cracked the glass ceiling. Pushing the envelope a little further with each new task I accomplished. I was out to show the world and all the learning disabled students that the sky's the limit and anything can be accomplished if hard work and effort is put in!

In the middle of the fall semester I applied to CSU Monterey Bay a small university not far from Capitola and a school my parents had always wanted me to attend. My application was different than any other student. I was applying for a special admission with exemption for math. I wanted to go four-year college so badly I could taste it. I wasn't going to be denied or go down without a fight. My mom, who had done everything in her power to help me go on to school, drove me to meet with head of Student Disabilities Resources, Margaret Keith, to see if I even had a chance of being admitted. . Margaret did all she could to help me get into the school and she told me exactly what I needed to give me the best chance to be admitted. She also told my mom and I that I only had a slim chance that the school would grant me a math exception. Dejected after the meeting with Margaret, I considered not applying to CSUMB at all but my mom said we have come this far why give up now. Together we wrote the letter to explain why I was entitled to a

math exception. In late October I applied to CSUMB giving them all I had, every piece of documentation and letter of support to win their approval. My battle with the CSUMB Math Department would drag on for eight months. My mom would call every day to check on my progress of my case. Each we called we were told they hadn't yet reached a decision as math course substitution had rarely been awarded. Margaret was always sympathetic and supportive so I never completely lost hope.

I did extremely well in all my classes that Fall, all my hard work had paid off. I spent hours in the library every morning before classes studying for exams or doing my homework. My job working for the football team came to end as the season ended. I capped off the fall semester by watching my older, brother Andrew, and graduate cum laude from Cal poly. I was so happy and proud of him.

I went job hunting when the New Year began I was also decided on a major in communications. Also in early January my grandmother's health took a turn for worse. She fell out bed shortly after New Year's Day and had to be in the hospital and than transferred to a rehab/nursing home facility. My mom and I visited her everyday and it was hard for me to see her like that. This was only the beginning of her downfall, which went on to tear me apart. One bright spot was that I got a job at orchard supply hardware where my grandmother had worked for the previous ten years.

The first person I called was my grandma who was still in the rehab center recovering; I could her feel her smiling through the telephone.

My final semester Cabrillo would again prove to be challenging in life experience and test my heart and commitment to school. I took a very difficult

Oceanography course. . The course was the most challenging one I had ever taken. It involved all kinds of different learning methods and it necessitated the use of critical, which wasn't one of my strong points. I did whatever I had to do to pass the course. I threw myself in it, cutting back on my hours at Orchard, going to every study session, attending the instructor office hours, and receiving tutoring from the teacher's aide once a week. At the end of the course I passed with a B and felt a great sense of accomplishment.

My relationship with Richard Griffiths was growing stronger I would drop by and say hi to him every morning and tell how I was doing in my battle with CSUMB.

On his recommendation I became a campus tour guide in the middle the semester and Richard would sometimes be one of the stops on the tours. He would always praise me front of groups of students. One time he told a group of students with learning disabilities, as I was finishing up a tour, "You want to see success, you want to be successful? Well you just saw success walk out the door. Your tour guide, Kathleen, is one of the most successful people with a learning disability I have ever met in my life". I loved being a tour guide I was able to share my experience with students of all ages. They were incoming freshman or students with learning issues. On tours I told all; not holding back for minute on what is like in order to be successful in college. My personal favorite was giving tours to incoming students who had learning disabilities. To be able to give back share my experiences with my tips with them warmed my heart and were so gratifying.

In mid February my world began to crumble, there still was no word from CSUMB, which left me feeling powerless, but I still didn't give up hope of getting into the school. My grandmother's health began to decline dramatically and she was diagnosed with COPD, an acute respiratory disease. The news shocked our family and no one could quite believe it, especially my mom and I. Seeing my grandmother lose her independence broke our heart; having to let caretakers watch her round the clock and not be able to do anything for herself was devastating. She was woman who had done just fine on her own after lost her soul mate for a numbers of years. As the months went by watching her suffer ripped my heart out, I loved my grandma with all my heart and other than my mother she was one of my best friends. All I could do was continue to visit and comfort her. I often tell people watching my grandma suffer was one of the most painful things I have ever had to go through in my life. On June 1<sup>st</sup> 2006 I graduated with honors and with AA in Liberal Studies from Cabrillo College. My family was so proud of me. Graduating from junior college was just the beginning. But If I can do it so can any student with learning disabilities it takes is hard work devotion and sacrifices. Though I had graduated from junior college I hadn't reached the top of the mountain yet; that would come after graduating from a four-year university. Cabrillo helped me set a foundation for how to succeed in college and I will carry that on for the rest of my life.

After eight months, and those eight months were the longest eight months of my life, I had finally learned that CSUMB going to let me in with a course exemption in math. I was stunned. The exemptions were so rare at any university,

but at CSUMB's short history they had granted a few in English but so far none in math until me. They had seen something in me and I wouldn't disappoint them.

My mom and I were so overjoyed we cried until we ran out of tears.

My joy was cut a bit short when my mother informed me that my mentor Richard Griffith unexpectedly passed away from a heart attack. It was a matter of just days after I had graduated. I was crushed my mentor was gone and so suddenly. Richard had been so inspirational to me. He had been a cheerleader for me, a champion for all students with learning disabilities and now he was gone forever. I was angry and hurt. He leaves a lasting legacy at Cabrillo and will remain in my heart forever. A week after losing Richard I was given an even biggest blow, my grandmother passed away at the age of 80 just days before her 81<sup>st</sup> birthday. I was away at work at the time of her death and after being notified I left work in two seconds flat to be with my grieving family. I had been over to see her that morning and stayed with her up until I had to go work and wasn't at work more than a hour when she died. When I got her house, I ran to my mom and just sobbed like never before. The emotional pain I was going through was unbearable; the pain in my heart from her loss was excruciating. To honor my grandma I wrote a letter that I would read her funeral service. What I wrote came from the heart and was my way of letting people at knows what kind of relationship I had with her. At her funeral I got up and spoke. This was like no other speech I had given. I wasn't nervous, just overcome with sadness and in shock as I talked. My letter went like this:

Dear Grandma

**It only seems like yesterday that we were going out to dinners on Fridays to movies or trips the store or sitting and talking relaxing after dinner. Every time you told me a story about Grandpa your face would light up. I could talk with you about anything, you wouldn't judge, you'd just listen. You always greeted me with "Hi Dolly" and "What's cookin". You called me your miracle baby and always reminded me of how special I was and how far I'd had come in life. You let me know you loved me. You are with me wherever I go in life; I even feel your presence ever time I go to work at Orchard. I follow in your footsteps. Now that you're gone, I feel as though as part of went with you. I only have memories but they will last me a lifetime and I know you're in heaven watching over me and guiding in wherever I go in life.**

**In the days following my grandma's death I was an emotional wreck, not wanting to do anything or see anyone. I rarely left the house except to go to work or run an errand. My friends tried to get me to go out but I turned them just wanting to be alone and grieve. I am thankful to my friends for being there for me in such a tough time. No one outside my family understood the pain I was going through emotionally and I didn't expect them to. The only friend who did was my friend, Shauna, who had lost someone close to her as well. I was so consumed with my grandma's death, but I was determined to move forward with my life staring new with going away to school.**

#### **Chapter 7 CSUMB: The Opportunity of a Lifetime**

**Wow! Me really going to a four-year school! I still couldn't believe it was going to happen. I felt as if I was living in a dream and didn't want to wake up. My**

family and I had dreamt of this every since I was little and now it was really happening. When I was first born no one would have predicted me living, much less going to a four-year university. CSUMB is the site of the old Fort Ord a military base and is a rather small school of only about 3,500 students, which would suit me perfectly. I was economically privileged enough to be living on campus in the dorms. My parents paid my housing expenses so I could get the real college experience.

I went through a lot of emotions when I moved. I was going to miss my parents a lot but was excited to be on my own. Of course my parents had a hard time letting go because I was the youngest and had been through so much in my life. I made myself known right away to the Student Disability Resources office and reconnected with head of the department, Margaret Keith, who had been so wonderful in helping me get into school. She was so helpful during my first year at CSUMB. Margaret was always positive and encouraging towards me and did whatever she could to help or accommodate me.

Someone who really made me feel welcome at CSUMB as a transfer student was the new President, Dr. Diane Harrison. She, like, me was new to the college (having served over thirty years at Florida State University in Tallahassee Florida) we were both in the same shoes and going through similar experience. It was great to know and share the same emotions as new person on campus. I first met President Harrison at orientation in June. She was going around the room introducing her. She walked right to my mom and I and shook our hands. I was blown away. Here was the president of the university coming up and introducing

herself to my mother and I. That almost never happens at a large university! I liked President Harrison right away. She was a down to earth, honest, kind, and a considerate woman. Who, just by looking at her, I could tell was dedicated to the commitment of students. Like myself she also happened to be a huge football fan. She is fine leader who has great things in store for the future of CSUMB. I am proud to know her and praise her on a job well done.

I selected Human Communication as my major and had great instructors my first semester; they were all wonderful in accommodating me in whatever ways I needed. The coursework during my first semester was intense but I went about accessing every resource, tutoring service, and office hour that was available to students. I was always visiting my instructors for help; they were so willing to help and give me one to one assistance that I couldn't pass it up.

Being that I was brand new to campus and didn't know anyone my roommate situation was very interesting I lived in a two-bedroom upper division suite on campus and had only one suitemate and my own room. My suitemate, Sally, (her name has been changed to for privacy reasons) was ok in the beginning, but she was someone who was very needy and wanted constant attention which drove me crazy. She was also was flat out mean and rude to every single person I brought up to hangout with. She was loud and down right embarrassing, especially when my parents came to visit me. She acted that way because she was jealous that my parents took the time to come and actually visit me and hers didn't, but I was overly nice to her and so was my family making sure to include her whenever we went out

So she wouldn't feel left out. A lot of good that did! I ended up moving out in the middle of my second semester.

To meet fellow people on campus and make new friends I made sure I went to every activity that I could. Though it was hard because I was a transfer student and most people had known each since they were freshman. I wasn't looking for loads of friends just other students like me to share the college experience. I joined a Lutheran bible study group called "Chat at the Movies". They would watch movies and discuss them and they held a bible study class on Thursday nights. Their leader, Inese Putske-Dahl, was one of the most amazing, wonderful people I have ever met. She was so kind hearted and made everyone feel welcome. She always had something fun planned. Esther Ritzik who was from Connecticut and was around my age and she became one my closer friends in the group. She was funny, witty and could make anyone laugh. Esther was someone who got along with anyone and was just a fun person to be around. She never complained about anyone or anything.

I finished my first semester in style as I always do working hard to pass all my classes. I even took an intensive winter online course to get ahead and lighten up my course load. My second semester would prove to be quite a test for me. .

My spring semester was more intense and demanding, than fall. Once again I went about accessing every piece of educational help available. I also worked part time in the athletics office as Student Assistant to the Sports Information Director, which was a lot of fun. I was still involved in Chat at the Movies and I worked really hard my second semester to pass my classes. Putting countless hours studying,

writing papers, and rewriting papers. I lived at the tutorial center, ASAP getting help on essays, studying for midterms and or finals. In the end it paid off. I passed all my classes with high marks not to mention I worked twenty hours a week as well.

### Epilogue

As I look back over my life, it amazes me how far I have come and everything I have accomplished in my twenty-two years on earth. I did everything \ all the authorities told me I couldn't do. Never taking no for an answer or allowing myself to give up. Yes, I am stubborn and a tireless worker but that's what has gotten me through life and that's what I will continue to do. Though my life has been like a roller coaster ride, I wouldn't change any of it for a minute. I have met wonderful people who have touched and changed my life dramatically. Many I have met have left this world far too soon. One thing is for sure; I have been blessed with great parents who deserve a lot of credit because without their tireless love and devotion to me I wouldn't be graduating college. My mom, in particular, deserves most of the credit. If not for her constant love, devotion, and doing all that could for me, I wouldn't be here or have accomplished all that I have. Half of all my success is hers for the all effort she put in. She didn't have to be the best mother she could but she was. She could have threw her hands up in distress and not wanted to deal with all the health and school issues and me. That shows how much of a role model she is. When I have kids I only wish I can be the mother that she was. There will be nobody else in the world like her.

I am only 22 and not ready to get married yet until the right man comes along who will treat me with respect and love I deserve and love me for me. On September

4th, 2007 my prayers were answered, and I met a wonderful young man named Jeff Cooper, who is a Computer Science student at CSUMB. He is everything I have been looking in man for my entire life; spoiling and treating me like a princess. He is a man who doesn't stand in front or behind but beside me and is their every step of the way cheering me on in my quest to graduate. He puts the same amount of dedication and hard work into school as I do. It's rare to put someone in the category of working as hard in school as me but Jeff certainly deserves it. His love for me is real and unconditional, something I have always received from my parents but not a man. My feelings for him need no explanation and no words can explain them. Who knew that after all the hell I had been through in my life would result in me finding someone I could truly love. I can indeed say now I know that I am in love and one day hope to be Mrs. Cooper and spend the rest of life and grow old with Jeff.

I am content on making my senior year at CSUMB the best it can be and getting a good job. I have worked all my life to go away to college. There is no burnout factor insight and I haven't reached the top of the mountain yet. So this is what I have to say about life and school. I am ready for whatever the future holds for me even thought it's uncertain, it excites me.

My vision tutor put it best, "Like snowfall in Santa Cruz, you were never supposed to achieve the success you did or be the poster child for success for students with learning disabilities, but you did. Instead of sitting around and using your disability as a crutch you used it as an opportunity to change the world"

**Upon, graduating from CSUMB in the spring of 2008, and the release of this book, my career plans are to work for a non-profit organization. Helping students just like myself who have learning disabilities. The greatest gift of all is giving back to those less fortunate than I am so they can chance to flourish just as I did. I would like to end with quote from Jessie Jackson, “ Never look down on a man unless your helping pick them off the ground.”**