



FEAR OF THE STIGMA

DEFEATED

By Jeanetta Bryant

As an advocate for my daughter and community leader for those with special needs I have had many conversations with parents receiving new diagnosis. Most often we overlook the emotional turmoil that is within us as we begin to fight for our child's success, or we enter a realm of denial trying our best to mask all the "issues". Believe me when I say navigating this journey is the hardest thing I have ever attempted, it is likely that it will knock you down from time to time too- but your resolve and love for your child will propel you forward.

In our case, my daughter Lindsey was diagnosed with Autism and a host of other acronyms. In that moment in time, we were given a harsh prognosis- something severe autism symptoms often dictate, and we were robbed of hope. The instant flashbacks of whatever limited access I had to the special needs class at high school filled my mind and I was devastated. It almost felt like if I accepted the diagnosis, I was accepting her bleak future.

I was fortunate to have others guide me and our family, through candid conversations with friends and strangers I learned that here was hope. It was only in retrospect that I realized I minimized issues and tried to cultivate a plan where she would lose the diagnosis. I pictured her being "mainstreamed" in "x" number of years and with each level of success we found I pushed harder for this- at least for the first several years.

Then like a bolt of lightning it hit me- she is thriving, doing well with friends, school and extra-curricular activities. In that moment I realized that the only person that mattered was her, not my expectations of her or my visions of what her

future should hold. I realized that the girl who was never supposed to talk was a chatter box and the fact that she was never to have social or academic gains didn't slow her down from becoming a self-confident, independent, funny and caring child. She has no idea that a "stigma" of going to a special needs school exists- she just knows that she loves her school, teachers and friends.

Don't get me wrong, I am not "settling" for a less than optimal future for her. I don't expect less for her. I simply learned that her process in growing, learning and accomplishing would be a different path than that of my son. I can't wait to see how the rest of her story unfolds and what other odds she will defy.

If you are struggling with a diagnosis, or not wanting a "label" on your child- I caution you- are you protecting them or yourself? This diagnosis is not their identity, but it could help them find success more easily with the right IEP, therapy or simply giving others more patience. Universally, every parent I speak with – has a fear of the stigma. When we learn that the fear of the stigma is worse than the actual diagnosis and get out of our own way- that is when the beauty begins. Use every tool to fight for your child to overcome the odds, that means get the evaluation, diagnosis and label. Start Early intervention programs, let insurance pay for therapy and learn what tools are available to you and your family. Embrace your child for who they are, work with them to be their best selves and watch them blossom.

Jeanetta Bryant is the founder and executive director of Abilities Workshop, Inc. She is dedicated to helping special needs families find answers and children impacted by a special needs diagnosis be their best. www.AbilitiesWorkshop.com