

Power of Perspective: My Experience At LD Day of Action

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Being a part of LD Day of Action, a time where young advocates like myself travel to D.C. to advocate for issues that impact students with LD, was an incredible experience to say the least. Every other minute, I was pinching myself, thinking “Is this actually happening? How did I get so lucky? I can’t wait to meet the people I’ve been talking with on zoom for so long!” But as the amount of distance between me and D.C. became less and less, my thoughts became increasingly rooted in anxiety. “Am I even qualified for this? What if I’m not taken seriously? Congressional Staff members won’t listen to me. I have no idea what I’m talking about.” I repeated these mantras of fear and inadequacy to myself until I believed them as facts.

When I met my fellow National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) Young Adult Leadership Council members in person, the people I’ve worked with for over two years, a sense of happiness and gratefulness rushed over me. We bonded over our excitement and trepidation about speaking to the staff of our Senators and Members of Congress. The support and mutual honesty that was shared between us gave me all the more purpose to share my story.

A group of us were exploring DC to take in all the amazing things DC had to offer, as well as documenting every second of our trip. During our exciting adventure, we decided to take pictures in front of the Washington Monument when I saw a disposable camera on the ground, which had appeared to be abandoned. I picked it up and saw that there were pictures left to be taken. Being in a silly mood, I took a couple of selfies with my friends in front of the monument, thinking nothing of it. As the eventful day continued, I held the camera in my hand, curious of what the pictures that were taken before me looked like. I figured there would be fun poses in front of famous sites, giant smiles, more poses, and maybe pictures of plaques with interesting historical facts. Similar to the pictures we took, after hours of advocating on behalf of the Learning Disabled community.

Earlier that day, we had the opportunity to participate and listen to a zoom meeting with Miguel Cardona, the US Secretary of education. He responded to a multitude of concerns raised by other Young Adult Leadership Council (YALC)

and Eye to Eye members with an interest and goal of hearing our troubled experiences and suggestions of how the education system needs to improve. He even shared the challenges he faced, being Latino in the classroom. The stereotypes that were thrown at him growing up, and feeling a need to prove those stereotypes wrong by getting an education. His words gave me hope for the future of education as well as gave me more of a perspective on what it is like for minority students in school.

Next step was meeting with the members of staff for our senators and representatives. One of my meetings in particular was with a member of staff that represented the district I lived in. Once we sat down, she told me that she was interested in hearing more about my experience with the education system, and even took notes while I was speaking.

I wanted her, as well as every other person I met with, to see me as this confident, intelligent, strong woman who wasn't afraid of anything. That's one of the reasons I wore a badass cheetah print, shoulder padded top along with pants and a fitted blazer to match. So that no one could ignore what I had to say, even if they tried. It worked, and this woman took me seriously. I explained to her how the public school system has disregarded the needs of Learning Disabled students and ignored their IEPs and 504 plans. How fewer than 34% of disabled students graduate from 4 year institutions within 8 years, even though 90% of them are considered college ready. How the LD research centers are severely underfunded. Afterwards, she told me "Well, it can't be that bad. You turned out to be fine."

I was taken aback by this comment. She had no idea what disabled students go through on a daily basis, and disregarded the collective need to improve the system, just because I was sitting, in my stylish suit, across from her. She had no idea what it had taken for me to get to this point. She didn't see the unsure, scared girl that had her educational needs overlooked for years and struggled to speak up for herself.

I hadn't realized it, but growing up I've always tried my best to drown out that little girl's voice as an effort to move on and escape the pain of feeling like I wasn't enough. I explained to her how lost I had been growing up, and how community is what saved me. That I am the lucky exception, who was provided opportunities

that most people weren't. When I joined NCLD's YALC, and was supported by people who shared similar experiences as me, I realized that the difficult experiences we endured became our collective motivation to change the education system for the better to support Learning Disabled students.

I could see the expression on her face change, as she began to understand my perspective. She had told me that she wanted to be a mother one day, and wanted the school system to be the best it could be for her child. I replied, "My parents wanted the same for me."

I knew in my heart that my story was important to tell. Individuals with Learning Disabilities need to have their voices heard, because changing people's perceptions has a ripple effect. After I came home from D.C and LD Day of Action was over, I had a chance to look through the pictures on the unclaimed camera that I found on the field in front of the Washington Monument (p.s. I'm trying to find the owners of this camera so they can get their pictures.) This camera let me into the lives of these people I've never met, and millions more in D.C alone. Each of these people have experiences unique and personal to them. And 1 of every 20 of those people has a Learning Disability.

I want those people to know: There is room for me and there is room for you in the narrative. Share your story because vulnerability is power.