

**The “Little” Decisions:  
Seeing My Brother, Differently, Through Ken  
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“Are you retarded or something?” These are the cruel ignorant words that people with Learning Differences used to have to face day in and day out. Fortunately, while there will always be these cruel and ignorant beliefs floating around schoolyards, through educational programs like S.O.S., Project MOVE and other such programs dedicated to youth with Learning Differences more and more people who were once ignorant will begin to understand a little of what it actually means to have a “Learning Difference.” Through hearing the stories of these young people that work hard to combat the weaknesses that come with their Learning Difference people will not only see the sort of everyday challenges that they face and succeed against but the agency that they take to be major successful figures that their peers with Learning Differences look up to.

**I. Augustus**

My little brother Augustus was five years old when our parents decided to get divorced. This was a critical time in his reading skills and literacy formation. Whether it was that fact that my parents were so involved with their own divorce to give Augustus one-on-one attention to his reading skills or whether it truly was because he needed a specialized teacher to help him learn how to read no one will ever know, the facts read that he ended up six years old and far from being able to read. Luckily for Augustus our parents had sent him to a private school that frequently held parent-teacher conferences if there was ANY signs that future problems were foreseen. The teachers saw two problems: Augustus refused to read and do his exercises and he was getting into fights with his peers. While my parents were very concerned with what was to be done to counteract this behavior the friction and resentment that existed between the two of them kept them from fully being able to deal with the situation together. They hired a tutor for Augustus to go see who could give him the one-on-one attention that he needed. While his reading skills slowly came along he still was getting into fights.

The next year, my mother decided to move to a town that had a “good public school system” so that Augustus could start again in a new school with a clean slate. Once he got there however, the fighting continued and even got worse. He was also picking fights with the teachers and when my mother went in for parent-teacher conferences with these teachers she got a cold reception and was told that Augustus was simply lazy and had a bad attitude. My mother asked the teacher if she had asked Augustus one-on-one about the problems that he was having with acting up in class. She said, “No.” and that as a result of the number of kids in the class she didn’t have that kind of time to devote to a child that “wasn’t even trying.” Augustus was upset about something and we all had to figure out how to help him.

## **II. Ken**

I met Ken when he was fifteen years old in Pittsburgh’s Oliver Public High School’s S.O.S. (Start On Success) program where Carnegie Mellon University students (mentors) come together with select students with Learning Differences (scholars) to complete a Journey Book that discusses the “Good and Bad Decisions” that the scholars have had to make in their lives, looking at them as a group and coming up with “rivals” (different decisions and outcomes that could have come out of other actions that the scholars could have taken in the particular situations that are discussed. There were classroom forums in which the scholars discussed their memories of their lives before S.O.S. and before they truly understood their Learning Differences. Many of the scholars discussed how they used to deal with the taunts and teases from their peers about being “slow.” Ken had told me a story that sounded so familiar. When asked if he ever had any trouble with other kids in elementary school he immediately responded with “Yes, and I responded with these,” as he holds up his fists. At fifteen, Ken had the maturity to step back and objectively look at himself and the schoolyard situation and know that he was responding to his own frustration that he was different from the other kids in his class because he had specific trouble learning specific things. He could look back on this situation as a coping mechanism for the frustration that he felt for not knowing “What was wrong with me?” As a very active voice in discussions in the S.O.S. program Ken only uses his tough persona from his schoolyard days to serve as a warning to other

teenagers who pick on his fellow scholars, but to this day still has never had to regress to his fists. When I spoke to Ken about his Learning Difference he told me that it still frustrated him to be categorized as a kid with an “L.D.” It still frustrated him that he was grouped with kids (while he completely respected them as his peers) that had more severe problems than he did. It really frustrated him when he felt that teachers treated him “with special” attention because of the preconceived bias that “Ken is ‘special.’” He said that most of his friends who weren’t in S.O.S. didn’t know that he was even in a special program where he got one-on-one attention to help with his Learning Difference. The S.O.S. program isn’t even advertised as a group of students that learn differently and many times other students apply to get into the program who don’t even have Learning Differences. This group is a group that supports and challenges the scholars and teaches them to hold a certain amount of distance from the bad things that some of them have had to deal with as a result of being “different” whether it be because of their Learning Difference or some other thing. They talk about their frustrations with their Learning Differences so that they don’t regress to their sometimes-harmful coping mechanisms that got them into trouble in elementary school.

### **III. Augustus**

After Augustus finished seventh-grade in public school, the teachers told my parents that he would have to repeat seventh grade. My mother was fed up with the lack of one-on-one attention that the teachers at this school were willing to give to Augustus. One of the major problems with Augustus was that between school and home his home work assignments would get “lost.” My mother would try to help him with his homework and he would say he didn’t have any, only to find out when his report card came back that he had had a major paper due. He had an assignment notebook but would never write down what was due. He was failing almost all of his classes. Something needed to be done. My mother asked his teachers if they could check his assignment notebook before he went home each day and they refused saying that he was old enough to keep track of his own assignments and homework. My mother fought and fought with the teachers and anyone that would listen to her and got no suggestions or help. Then they told her that he would have to repeat that year all over again. She decided to find another

place for Augustus to do seventh grade again. Luckily, after talking with a private-school counselor she found Hillside School, a all boys boarding school that dealt specifically with promising young boys that had problems with organization, responsibility, and getting into fights in school. The teachers were incredibly involved with each individual student and really took the one-on-one time to encourage them and give them the confidence that they needed to push them to work hard against any of their difficulties with schoolwork.

Although at first Augustus was weary about switching yet again to another school it did not take him long to realize why he changed to this school. Augustus had to go through a Summer Program at the school to get used to the teachers and some of his peers. Part of the strength of this school is its strong schedule that provides scheduled times for the boys to do their homework, chores around the school and community service. Each morning the boys must get up early and shower and make sure their rooms are clean. Augustus would be starting out as a day student and would be commuting from our mother's home as hour away. Almost immediately he begged my parents to let him board. He wanted to be with his peers and teachers more and he wanted to be more involved in more leadership responsibilities. The sense of community at Hillside was exactly what Augustus and the other students needed to give them the confidence to ask their teachers for help when they were having trouble with their schoolwork. They each had a completely different problem, however, the frustration that they had with these problems were the same across the board and it was this sense of unity and support that made success stories of all of them and role models to all the younger boys coming into the school for the first time.

#### **IV. S.O.S**

While there are many special schools and programs (such as Hillside School) not all of these programs are available to all students that deserve to be in them. Luckily for my brother Augustus my parents were financially secure enough to send him to this high-priced school. Other students who don't come the same kind of family situation (financially or other) are not as lucky and are not able to be sent to a private school or program. Luckily some public schools are beginning to develop programs that give these talented and promising young people a chance to create a discourse with a handful of

specialized teachers who are pioneers/founders of these programs and other students who know what it is like to learn differently. Project MOVE a program that works with the scholars that are involved in the S.O.S. program and the S.O.S. program are great examples of such programs that give students who don't have the opportunities to go to expensive private programs.

The S.O.S. program and journey book served many purposes. One important one was to give the scholars an opportunity that otherwise would be pretty difficult and frustrating for them to do on their own. Many of the scholars have trouble writing long papers that express all that they want to say. By creating this Journey Book they were creating something special that told their stories. Another important part of this Journey Book was the discourse that it created between the scholars and the mentors that acted as an enlightening learning collaboration.

## **V. Davon**

I was assigned to be Davon's mentor in the S.O.S. collaboration program between Carnegie Mellon University and Oliver High School. When I first met Davon, he was very quiet and I think a little weary about working with a mentor on his Journey Book. The way that the Journey Book worked was that each "Step" of the book explored a different aspect of the scholar's decision making. While going through the different steps, I learned about some of Davon's "Bad Decision & Good Decision" stories. One story that really interested me was a decision that Davon made when he was a freshman at Oliver High School.

Davon's freshman year at Oliver High School was a slow one at best. Davon had absolutely no interest in his classes and was completely "bored." He liked his friends but as far as he was concerned he would've had those friends even if he weren't in school at all. He had no teachers that seemed to care about him as an individual and the only reason he stayed in school was so that he didn't have to deal with his parents if he did in fact drop out. Davon decided to push through and not give up. He learned to be more open to more activities and found a love for sports especially basketball. His mother suggested joining JROTC and he came to appreciate the strengths and skills he gained from it. It is amazing to me that Davon, a sophomore, can objectively look back at an experience that only happened a year earlier with such maturity. He could pinpoint what

the problems were and the specific solutions that solved his unrest in school. Davon appreciates all the doors that JROTC and S.O.S. bring into his life and he appreciates the dedicated teachers that make up the S.O.S. and Project MOVE that support him and his peers. All of these things help him understand all of these important decisions that make impacts on his future. By talking out all of these decisions with a peer scholar, teacher or mentor, Davon learns how to access a collaboration discourse with individuals when it comes to written expressions in school or opportunities in his future.

## **VI. Augustus**

After two years at Hillside School, Augustus gained many leadership positions and finally had gained the confidence to learn how to ask his teachers for help when he didn't understand something that they were teaching. He had gained the position of "Proctor" which he had pursued completely on his own (which is a very long and detailed series of interviews and essay/applications.) As a proctor, Augustus "watches over" a younger boys' dorm and wakes them up every morning and acts as their "mentor." Just because Augustus acted as a mentor does not mean that all his problems with organization when it comes to his school work are gone.

As he enters his freshman year at Hillside School he must face that this is his last year as a student in this warm family community. Next year he must begin applying to other boarding schools and must face how he will take agency to get the extra attention and help that he might need at the school of his choice. One thing that he is doing to get him used to this is working every week with a tutor.

Augustus showed interest in getting a younger tutor so my mother looked into a tutor who had recently graduated from MIT and was looking to tutor as a second job to directing a high school choir. The tutor meets Augustus at the library and they challenge themselves each session with a theoretical essay that Augustus must then research and write. The tutor helps Augustus learn how to take notes while he is researching and "talks out" the way that Augustus will form the paper. This is very important for Augustus to do with his tutor because he has a very hard time actually writing essays and getting what he wants to say across. He works best when he can have a discussion with a person about the topic that he is writing about and then he writes out an "outline" or notes

and then he types it out. Augustus must do it this way with someone else's one-on-one attention before he tries to do it on his own or else he gets super frustrated and then just rushes through the essay if he doesn't just give up all together. The comradery that exists between Augustus and his tutor is vital to the progress that they make every time that they meet. The trust that exists between them builds Augustus's confidence writing and researching and thus will strengthen his confidence in his school work and will make him work hard to find the help he might need with his writing in his new high school.

All this progress that Augustus has made shows the confidence that helps Augustus take agency to go after all these great future opportunities whether it be in school or in leadership among peers.

## **VII. Ken**

Ken and I worked together several times and I learned so much about him and from him. We talked about many different decisions that he had to make when it came not only to schoolwork and any difficulty he had with his teachers to everyday decisions in which he had to make a specific decision that came with specific consequences. What I learned from him and Davon is that these scholars make important decisions everyday and that they make these decisions based on a different system of rivals than most other people would consider. This is Ken's story:

### **The Assessment Test**

All tenth graders have to take the Assessment Test in English and Math. The points that you gain from the first test can be transferred to the second test –the PSSA that we take in eleventh grade. One day they take Math and the next day they take English. A couple days before the test we practiced writing mini-essays to practice for the test. The students had to write a persuasive essay to the school board about why they should have freedom of speech in the school newspaper. For the mini-essays the students read stories and wrote essays about the stories and about what they would be doing in the next few years. Ken wrote about what he would be doing in the next five years, college and then eventually owning my own construction company. Coming out of these practice essays Ken felt confident, but when it came down to the actually test he was initially struck with Writer's Block. Ken needed to get it done, and he started thinking fast. He thought about if he were writing a newsletter in the newspaper and if someone told him

that he couldn't write something what would he do? Ken wrote down what immediately popped into his head and started writing. He was rushing to get done because he was frustrated and ready to get this done. A teacher walked over and started looking over his shoulder, which Ken really hated, and telling him to do this and that, and that just made him want to get done even faster so that they would stop.

The second and last part of the test was about reading many different stories and comprehending them. Ken started reading one of the stories and got through the first paragraph and then looked at the questions to see what he would have to write. After reading the first paragraph Ken thought that he could predict what would happen at the end of the story. The story was about a little girl from China who came over here to live and she would know the answer in class but because she couldn't speak English and her parents couldn't speak English she wouldn't answer the question. The question was: Who do you think the story is about? Automatically Ken thought that the story was about the little Chinese girl from China. He finished quickly and handed in his test.

After the test, Ken felt like he didn't try his hardest or show his full potential in the essays that he wrote. He felt that he should have read through the entire story to get the whole picture instead of skimming through it and writing down the first thing that he thought it was about. Ken felt like if he had read it and tried his hardest he would have probably done a lot better than how he did and gotten a better score and gotten more points on the next test.

Ken decided with me that he thought that this story showed some of the problems that he sometimes faced when having to write essays. Ken realized that he tended to rush through reading the story and then when writing the story he didn't write everything that he wanted to say because he was rushing.

We determined that we thought that the problem was that while Ken didn't like expressing his ideas in physical writing and thus he usually always rushed it, that Ken was very much interested in expressing his views and ideas. We discovered that Ken works and expresses what he wants to say better when he talks it out. One idea we had



was to get a tape recorder and have Ken speak his mind and then listen to it to make sure he gets down everything he wants to say.<sup>1</sup>

This story is an example of the agency that Ken took because not only did he choose to learn from this story by deciding to ask his teacher if he can have extra help but he also decided to take agency and find a solution to his difficulty with writing papers and getting all his thoughts on paper.

## **VII. Davon**

When I worked with Davon we would talk about the troubles that he had with his classes and the specific things that got him confused. I asked him if it was specific subjects or specific assignments. When asked what was the hardest thing he had had trouble with over that year he simply said “Social Studies.” I asked him why and he told me this story.

### **The Nate Smith Essay**

Davon is a very shy and quiet kid. When I first met him it was very hard for me to get him out of his shell. That’s why I was so impressed when he told me about his Social Studies problems and the agency that he took to try and fix the problems. Apparently the way that Davon gets by in class without having to contribute to discussions is by not making eye contact with the teacher. (A very familiar technique that I myself must admit I have used.) In Social Studies his class was learning about the Civil Rights Movement in America and they were coming to the end of the term and were assigned a paper to write. The paper was a 5-6-page paper on Nate Smith. As the teacher was describing the paper she handed out a sparse sheet that said exactly what she was saying what the paper was about. Her directions were very vague and more than just Davon was having trouble what was expected of him in this paper, so Davon took agency and went up to this teacher (that many students had had trouble with) and asked her if she could describe it again in a different way for him to understand. Instead of helping Davon, the teacher simply dismissed Davon and without even looking his direction casually tossed the same exact sheet that she had handed out to the entire class to him.

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<sup>1</sup> This story came from the Kirk’s S.O.S. Journey Book and came out of collaboration between the author of this paper and Kirk. Spring 2003

He asked her again and tried to meet with her but to no avail. He didn't end up handing that paper in to the teacher, and looks back on that decision mournfully.

While the end of this story was not a happy or victorious one, I was so proud of the agency that Davon took in persisting in asking his teacher for help. It was not his fault that she ignored him and when he looked back on it while he was writing his Journey Book he came up with so many different options for help that I never would have been able to come up with. Since that situation, Davon has learned that if a teacher refuses to help him with a paper (which is his weakness) he goes to his L.D. counselor and his peers and ask their advice before he just quits. I really was amazed at the agency that Davon took in this situation and feel like I learned a lot about what it means to suck up your pride and just ask for help.

### **IX. Conclusion: Agency**

It was not until I met Davon and Ken and all the scholars in the S.O.S. Program that I really and truly understood all the “little” but very important decisions that students, who have trouble with specific skills in school, have to make everyday. For them just going to school and avoiding the bad gangs in their less than safe neighborhoods is a huge hurdle. To go and ask that teacher “who doesn't seem to like me” for extra help and attention, knowing that they will probably say no, that is taking a huge risk of their ego and shows a great amount of strength in the agency that they are taking in that one action. Most importantly to me, it was not until I heard all of their stories and all the support and compassion that they showed their fellow scholars that I began to understand a little bit of what my brother Augustus had been struggling with over the years. It wasn't until I saw the agency that these kids took in their lives that I began to see how much agency my own brother took in opening doors and opportunities for his future.

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May 9, 2003

