

Conversation with Nina Transcription

Karen: Thank you Nina G. for allowing me to interview you today. Let me begin by introducing myself. I'm Karen Wasco, a Senior Speech Language Pathologist at the University Center for the Development of Language and Literacy at the University of Michigan.

I'm here today because Nina G. has shared with me that she is an individual with dyslexia, and yet has become an extremely accomplished individual. She said that she will talk with me today and share a little of her story so that our site users can learn her story and benefit from the lessons she has had to learn in her life. So thank you very much!

Nina: Thanks Karen for having me.

K: So let's begin by asking you if you would tell us a little about your story. What was your experience in school, the struggles that you had, and now that you are a professional?

N: I was diagnosed with a learning disability in third grade, but really the signs of it came much earlier. When I was two-and-a-half, my mom and dad noticed that I wasn't speaking at the developmental level that I should be, and what I would do is jibber-jabber. And what my mom started to do was fake understand me, so she would act like she understood me, when she didn't. One day, I started to catch on, and I stopped talking after that. When I stopped talking, my mom was really concerned, and that's when she got me into speech therapy.

What I always say, is that was an early sign of a learning disability. I also have a central auditory processing disorder, so when I hear something, it can go "woh woh woh" and so that's what I heard, and that's what I said as a kid. And those issues I still have to a lesser extent, but I feel that I had remediation really early.

Then in third grade, that's the point when it's not 'learning to read, it's reading to learn.' So in third grade is when I was diagnosed with a learning disability because that was the point when we had to read science in order to learn and read math in order to learn. Because I couldn't do those things like the other kids, I started to fall behind. It would take me immense amounts of time to do homework, and I'd be at the table crying, and my mom did a lot of my work at the time, and I'd just copy it in my own handwriting just because it was so rough on me and on her too, because she had a crying kid on her hands. So third grade was the time I was diagnosed with a learning disability.

Around that same time I also started to stutter. And what's interesting is stuttering and learning disabilities are both brain impairments on the left hemisphere. It's sometimes common that if you stutter, you have a learning disability, but it's not always true, it's probably 40% true. It's something that not everybody has who stutters, but it's definitely something I do have.

K: So then what was your experience then like in grade school and high school dealing with things? I know you said your mom had to help you a lot, and you would copy things she would do. Do you feel that your teachers were understanding of your dyslexia?

N: Not at all, not at all. I remember the first time I got an accommodation, in the third grade, because I got an assessment, and the assessment was really good. My parents went to the teacher — and this was in a Catholic school in the '80s, so it's kind of a different story than it is now — and my parents said “Okay, Nina needs these accommodations, so when she has a test that isn't language-based, like when it's not a spelling test, when it's a geography test, test her orally so she can tell you where everything is on the map because she knows it, but she can't spell 'Sacramento.' ”

I remember getting that first accommodation. The teacher called me over to her desk, I got it, and I passed it, and I got an 'A' on the test — I was the first one done — and then I don't remember many accommodations after that. So that accommodation was pretty bittersweet because I knew that I had the capacity, but I wasn't getting the right kinds of services. So I started to turn off from learning a bit from that point and my self esteem really started to suffer.

From third grade to eighth grade, it was really hard on me because I had other experiences like this. Like one of my teachers in eighth grade, my accommodation was I got to do every other problem. It's a really important accommodation, so then a person with a learning disability can prove they can do the work, but they can also not have to put in all of that time, since it takes double time, so that we can do well on the ones that we need to do. Doing every other one means you're doing easy, middle, hard, and that's why it's better than doing the first ten instead. So that was my accommodation for English and math.

And at the end of the term, I asked the teacher why I was getting an 'F.' The teacher said, “Well you're only doing half the work!” Well that's what an accommodation is — you're not supposed to grade me like everyone else, you're supposed to grade me based on the work I did. And she said, “Well you only did half the work.” Well that means the best I'm going to get is an 'F' because that is 50%, but “that's the accommodation.” So that was really upsetting. My parents had to come talk to her, but it didn't do very much.

By the time I was exiting eighth grade, I had very low self esteem. I had a teacher in high school say that she knew that my self esteem was so bad that I thought I was retarded. I really did think that coming out of the grammar school I was in. But through high school and through my parents and through different things I did, I started to know I was smart. Part of that was getting the right kinds of accommodations to prove that I could do the work. It was also finding things I'm good at. When I was 14 years old, I started to work at a day care, and I loved it. For me, doing something like that was a really important way to address my self esteem issues. You just can't tell someone they're doing a good job, you have to let them see it and experience that.

Also, my parents had done such a good job advocating for me, because my mom would always lecture the teacher and my dad would have to kick her underneath the table. So hearing about those meetings and seeing that, I was able to take on some of that advocacy on my own, too. All of those things helped me get out of high school and on to college.

K: Well it sounds like you had a really good support system, which is extremely helpful for anyone, especially someone with dyslexia. Now that you're a professional, how are things now? What's your experience like now?

N: I do many things. I'm a disability activist, I'm a disability education, and I also do stand-up comedy. For me, organization is still an issue. My desk isn't always the cleanest, but I do use assistive technology. I track everything on a calendar — sometimes I have multiple calendars, which is an issue — I have an iPad that I do a lot of work on. I also read — because I still have dyslexia and it's something you don't outgrow — all of my books through Bookshare.org, and there is an app on my iPhone and my iPad that I can read any books they have up there. It's great because I'm able to keep up that way.

K: It sounds like you have a really good handle on your strengths, and sometimes areas where you need to improve. So having told me your story, you said a lot of things that helped you out were the fact that your parents were really good advocates and you had good people around you to take you out of your low self esteem. Is there any advice or words of encouragement that you would give someone with dyslexia or to parents; do you have any additional things you'd like to add?

N: I went to graduate school and I have my graduate degree, and that is something that my teachers never thought I would achieve, and in fact, they didn't even think I should be in the school I was in. I did my undergraduate degree at UC Berkeley, which was really ironic, because that was the place my mom contacted when I was in third grade to get information about accommodations for students who had learning disabilities. She showed me that when I was a kid saying, "Look, you can go to college."

She had high expectations of me, and I think that is a really important thing. Research shows that kids meet the expectations that we give them. If you have low expectations, they will meet those but they won't surpass them. So it's important to have high expectations with the advocacy piece, because you can remediate all you want when you read. I read fairly okay independently, but I still need accommodation. But it's so much more important that I knew how to ask for an accommodation than if I could read independently. I think training kids to be advocates is almost more important than any of the academic stuff they might do.

K: I couldn't agree more. I only wish that the people that I saw knew that ahead of time. One last thing: many successful dyslexics, such as yourself, talk about their dyslexia as a gift. What do you think about that statement?

N: I think it's a double-edged sword. The pain of dyslexia really comes from the environment. There's nothing really painful of dyslexia in and of itself, it's the reaction other people have, and I think it's really important for us to understand that. With that though, I look at things completely different way than my friends. Doing stand-up comedy, that perspective that I have is really important and I'm able to have very divergent thinking in a way that most people don't. I can come up with new ideas, and people come to me about a project that they are doing. I can say, "why don't you can try this, this, and this," and I outline it all. As long as I don't have to outline it and execute it, it's great.

K: Well great! That's wonderful. Thank you so much, Nina G., for sharing your story. I know I learned a lot and I know our site users will benefit from your story. So thank you so much.

N: Thank you for including me on this.