

I would like to thank Dr. T for not only inviting me to speak with you tonight, but for having the vision and the fortitude to create a second home for my son and all of the other children who thrive because of its existence.

For our family, SLCD has been the answer to our prayers. I will never forget the overwhelming feeling of relief that I felt the day we first entered the doors at SLCD. It was welcoming, safe, nurturing, productive and alive with smiling faces! It was the “AH HA Moment” I had been struggling to find for so many months and years.

I would like to tell you a little bit about our family and journey with our son so you can understand how important your support for SLCD is to not only our family but to all the families who attend now and in the future.

We struggled for many years with miscarriage and loss to build a family. Then through the miracle of adoption our prayers were finally answered. When we adopted our first son, I was a first time mom with all the fears and concerns of a new mother, but my biggest fear was since I had not given birth to him how would I instinctively know what he needed and be connected to him. I quickly realized that every mother learns to know their child, no matter how their family is made. My first son Mark developed along the regular milestones without a hitch and I became confident mom along the way.

When we decided to adopt Andrew 3 years later, I was sure that it would be easy since I already knew what to expect. Well I am sure any mom will tell you; expect the unexpected because no 2 are alike. Little did I know that I would soon need to tap on all my knowledge and resources as a former educator, combine it with my newly learned parenting skills and venture into the challenging world of educating and raising a child with a disability.

Andrew was and still is a very mushy, delicious and lovable boy. We like to say that God made him so irresistible so that it would be easy to forgive him. Anyone who meets him, even for the first time remarks on how his smile lights up a room and lovable and affectionate he is. His kindness and empathy is rooted deep in his soul.

However learning and growing has always been a struggle for him. As he began to develop he lagged behind in some of the milestones that his older brother had hit so easily. I remember him crying every morning from very early on with a blood curdling cry when he awoke as if he were in extreme duress. He never lay in his crib and cooed or talked like Mark did. He needed to be picked up immediately and held tightly to calm him down. When we adopted my daughter 11 months later, it became more evident to me that Andrew was not progressing as he should. She was 11 months behind him age wise but was developing quickly and catching up to him as the next 2 years went by.

He did not speak until age two and had a vocabulary of only about a few words. My doctor told me that I was overreacting and that there was no reason for him to speak, because his big brother was talking for him. When we went to Mommy and Me classes I noticed that Andrew could not jump in the air like a frog like all the other children could.

He did not seem to have the same control over his body, almost like one side was acting separately from the other. He did not seem to know his relation in space. He could not climb the tiny plastic slide and would not even attempt to slide down it on to the living room rug while his sister, 11 months younger easily conquered it before him. He seemed to also be easily overwhelmed by loud sounds and sensitive to certain touches. He loved to take a bath, but screamed in pain as if being murdered if the shower were put on. His first trip to the circus was a disaster because as we later learned, the sensory overload issues made him feel as if he were in the middle of a war zone. Amusement parks and rides at the carnival were enough to send him into a frenzy so they too had to be avoided. Something as simple as attending a movie was a nightmare until we figured out that a hat and earmuffs could make all things right again because the combination of the loud sounds and darkness put him on sensory overload. He cried through his first haircut, as so many do, but it wasn't until a few cuts later that I realized he could not tolerate the noise from the razor or the sensory feelings of the scissors and comb or brush touching his hair or scalp. So I became his barber until the age of 10 when he said very cautiously (so as not to hurt my feelings) said, "Mom you know I think it might be Ok if Dad took me to his place for my next hair cut because I am not a baby anymore!"

At an early age I had him tested and he was diagnosed with multisensory integration disorder and I found an exceptional early intervention program for him. He was thriving there and was placed in an integrated classroom in the NY city public school system. Unfortunately his inability to self regulate his impulsivity and modulate caused him to stand out from the other children in class and his learning lagged behind. He is a bright boy and had vast discrepancies in his learning. He would excel in some areas, but be so far behind in others that it was becoming too difficult for him to keep it all together. Upon further testing ADHD was added to his diagnosis. By the middle of second grade it became obvious to us that the city public schools were not helping our son reach his potential and had actually begun to have the opposite effect. He became sad and depressed all the time. He cried every morning and did not want to go to school. At his therapist's urging we got him a new puppy to try and ease his pain. It helped tremendously but, it was not enough. It was as if his little shining face was having its light drained out. I could not stand by and watch one of my most precious gifts be swallowed up and disappear.

Andrew is a special soul and his little heart is so full of love, empathy and compassion. He has always been keenly aware of suffering, pain or injustice in others even from a very young age. Whenever he saw someone hurting or in trouble he would immediately be drawn to them to offer comfort with a kind word or gesture of assistance. This is something you admire when you see it in your child, but worry when you see how it may somehow make him stand out from the other children and become ostracized.

I remember him coming to the rescue of his opposing teammate during his first soccer game and not understanding why what came so natural to him, was not received the same way by his coach. As he headed down field, coming close to the goal, he tried so very hard to move fluidly amongst the sea of noise and people without covering his ears or shying away from the ball. It was painful to watch him trying desperately to fit in with

the others. Suddenly, the little boy blocking his shot fell to the ground in the action. Instead of Andrew running over the boy and kicking it into the goal, he stopped in his tracks, bent down to the ground, extended his hand, got the boy to his feet, and dusted off his pants for him. He suddenly realized that he had done something wrong because his coach was screaming at him, asking how he could be so stupid. His confused and pained face scanned the sideline desperately looking for me and when his eyes met mine, tears began to stream down both our cheeks. He ran to me screaming as everyone looked at him as if he were a freak. It was in that moment that I knew I would have to find a place where Andrew could be Andrew without fear of ridicule and failure or his tender heart would be torn beyond repair. I knew it would not be an easy road for him, but I was determined to take away as much of his pain as I could and would forever become his advocate.

It did not take very long for SLCD to have an effect on Andrew or us. I still have the pictures in my phone that Andrew took as we sat in the lobby waiting for him to have a trial day in the school. He especially loved the large picture of the pretty lady on the wall and remarked how he would like to meet her. Of course that was Dr. T which he eventually got to meet and was even more thrilled to find out she lived really close to our house. We were impressed that anyone would actually want to observe him interacting with the students and teachers in the school before they could establish if the program would be a fit for him. What a novel idea! As a former educator with a masters degree in elementary education I was thrilled to see that they were actually going to watch him function in the classroom setting for an entire day. As we toured the facility and learned about the programs and resources that the school had at their fingertips, we grew more hopeful with each step that we had found the place for him to thrive and come alive again. We spent the day in Glen Cove worrying that perhaps he would not be accepted into the program or we would not get the funding and we vowed that we would do whatever we had to do to send him to this unique and there at whatever the cost would be. When we picked him up and asked him how he likes this new place. He said "This place is so great; I hope I can stay here forever." The light in his eyes had been turned back on and that was just the beginning!

Within just a few short weeks Andrew was coming back to us. He was happy, relaxed and filled with excitement. The overwhelming feeling of not fitting in and struggling to put the learning pieces together had begun to ease ever so slightly. His self esteem soared as his teachers, therapists and aids tailored his program to his needs and smothered him with love and affection. He gobbled it up like a starving child. The constant communication and monitoring of his progress by the staff was such a relief to me as we had spent quite a few years in the dark without any communication or plan for his growth. He comes home telling stories of his wonderful days where before you could never get him to talk about it even after intense questioning and here he was engaging us without even an inquiry. He jumped up out of bed every morning and was ready and waiting for the school bus to get him there. Although he recently wrote a letter to Principal Katzman protesting the extended school year and advising her to enjoy her "very short summer" he truly loves going to school every single day!

As we moved through that first year, things only got better. We were amazed at his progress and even more amazed at what a tight family and integrated team was at our service to ensure that Andrew became Andrew once more. In September the progress continued and when I met his teachers to conference on his progress I was sure that had the wrong child. As they told me about all of the things he was doing, I kept asking are you sure you know who I am? I am Andrew Matinale's mom and there is no way he could be doing all that you say he has been doing. They reassured me that yes in fact they were talking about Andrew and they too were so happy because they had shared his progress with his teachers from last year so they knew how far he had come.

As the second year progressed, we saw growth everywhere. He can do his homework on his own now (something we never thought would happen) and in fact does a better job of getting all done without constant monitoring than his 13 year old brother. As I sat beside him a few weeks ago watching him thoroughly enjoying the circus (he only covered his ears a few times and shielded his eyes once) tears came to my eyes because these little things help remind me just how far he has come. Because of the work done here at SLCD his self esteem is soaring. This has helped him to have the courage to participate in several sports that would never have dreamed to even be a possible choice for him. Last year he told me he could not be in the talent show because he didn't have any talent and this year he already has his comedy routine ready for the show because he has come to realize that indeed he does have many talents and the teachers and staff at SLCD have helped him figure that out. Thank you Dr T and all the staff for giving us back our son. He may now actually have the chance to some day be the astronomer or veterinarian that he dreams of becoming one day.