



# First Person: MY EAGLE SCOUT

We are at my son's Eagle recognition ceremony, an accomplishment that so few young men ever achieve. He has been in scouting since first grade, before we knew there were issues in his life that might make getting to this point a problem for him. He is sitting on the opposite side of this very large church, waiting to be called forward to receive his award. I am standing near the wall, poised to take his picture and thinking that he has no idea where I am. But in true fashion, he spies me and acknowledges my presence, just like he does at all his functions. We are connected, he and I. He is not embarrassed to be seen with his mom. What a joy he is—gentle, kind, loving, and totally uninhibited in his expression of joy or excitement. I tell my other children that while I love them all, I like him the best. For what is there about him that you wouldn't like? At 15 he is tall and handsome, a musician, an Eagle Scout, an avid Bama fan, a good student, a young man of faith, and a friend to anyone who will simply give him a chance. At times like this I often pause to reflect on how blessed we are to have him in our lives. Life has not been easy for him academically or, perhaps more important, socially. He has severe learning disabilities in some major areas such as math and reading, which impact every aspect of learning. He also has Tourette syndrome, which impacts him socially, and this is perhaps what hurts him the most.

Having a child diagnosed with anything that means his or her life is going to be more difficult is a blow to a family. Hearing a doctor or a group of educators tell you that your child will likely not have the academic skills to go on to college is hard to hear. Watching peers shun and make fun of your child because of his speech and social skills is even more painful, and you are left trying to figure out how to proceed. How to help your child achieve his or her goals? It is like trying to negotiate a complex maze. You don't know where to go or what to do, and you often have no one in particular to ask about what to do or where to go. Parents often have to learn as they travel this course, and having educators who are willing to work with them can make all the difference in the outcome.

Reflecting back fifteen years, there was nothing unusual about my son's birth or development—well, for the most part. As a young child he was always a bit intense. He would pick up and put away everything he got out—not a bad habit, but unusual for a 2-year-old. He would try and clean the glass doors if he saw they needed it. He was extremely sensitive to loud

noises and to light. Once he was even called an ugly name by an adult because he began to cry while in the gym at our church when the noise level had become unbearable to him.

So up until he was around 2 years old we thought, "Great, a child that will just move on easily." He was sweet and gentle and developing in a normal fashion. Then we began to notice that his speech was not coming along as it should. I was not blind. I was the mom of three kids, one of whom already had problems, and I was not about to wait to see if everything would turn out OK. So we began our struggle to find out what was going on.

Speech therapy was first. This was when the educational system first began to help. Therapy was provided by the school system, and he improved. But kindergarten started, and concerns began to surface. His reading was slow. He had difficulty making eye contact with his peers. He overreacted to being touched and didn't seem to know how to respond when socializing with his classmates. If his hands were dirty or sticky, he simply had to wash them and could not focus on anything else until that task was complete. In fact, if he got something in his mind that had to be done, then it had to be done before he could move on to the next thing.

In first grade he was tested by his school, and indeed, what we suspected was true. There were some issues with academics. But it seemed to be more than this. At this point I should say that the school was wonderful. It was at this time I realized just what an ally a good school system could be. Over time, more tests, outside consultations, and meetings were held until, finally, a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome was given. This diagnosis, however, never seemed to fit. As a parent, I continued to try and figure out if the experts were right. As it turns out, they were not. Around 7 years of age, my son was diagnosed with Tourette syndrome. Subsequently, he was diagnosed with a severe reading and math disability. This made sense and finally fit what we had been seeing. In every other aspect of his life, though, he did fine.

As a parent, it was like being hit in the stomach. I was sad for my child, and irritated at others around me who had children that seemed to be developing fine and who seemed unwilling to give my child a chance. I was angry with adults who wouldn't invite him over or include him in activities. Even relatives who thought he acted strange were the subjects of my irritation. You