

# A STUDENT'S JOURNEY WITH

# ADHD

by Keath Low, MA

**FROM AN EARLY AGE MORGAN PLOWMAN STRUGGLED AT SCHOOL** with the challenges ADHD can bring, yet as a ninth grader she is confident and thriving. In 2010, she was honored by CHADD, the Learning Disabilities Association of Georgia, and Kids Enabled with the KIDS Gift Award (KIDS is an acronym for Kids who Individually Discovered Success). Morgan is a great example of a student who struggled with learning differences but developed into a successful and motivated student through self-advocacy and determination to learn.

I was in the audience when, in front of 365 people, fourteen-year-old Morgan walked to the podium, accepted her award, and took to the microphone. Everyone was moved by her words, poise, and grace as she thanked those who had helped her along the way. Though Morgan has struggled with issues of inattention, writing skills, auditory processing, and working memory, her great strengths include her verbal and social skills and her positive thinking.

I learned later that Morgan had no idea she would be speaking and was completely unprepared. Among the members of that audience, only her mother knew.

## First signs of concern

When she entered kindergarten, Morgan was very easily distracted and unable to rhyme words, something her classmates could do easily. In first grade, she was diagnosed with ADHD. "Everybody, even my pediatrician, kept telling me I was overthinking things and I wasn't giving her enough time," remembers her mother, Tina Plowman. "But I had had two other kids, and to me it was obvious that there was some kind of struggle going on that was not just normal slower learning. There were other things. Something wasn't clicking. She could do complex things, but some of these basic things were just too much. I would do flashcards and everything you normally do with your kids to try to get them going. One day she could do it. The next day she couldn't." Morgan underwent comprehensive psychoeducational testing and began a trial of stimulant medication, but continued to fall further behind in school.

"In fourth grade it was getting really bad and I had to just demand that she get some help at school, but everyone kept telling me I was being too concerned," Tina recalls. Another significant red flag worried her even more. "Morgan was a bubbly, outgoing child by nature. A friend of mine said to me one day, 'You know if I didn't know Morgan outside of school, I would never know that was the same child.'" The friend noticed that

Morgan had become extremely quiet and withdrawn at school.

Tina began volunteering in the classroom and met her daughter for lunch several times a week. "I wanted to see how things were going without making it too obvious," she explains. "Morgan would hold my hand and walk real quietly and she would whisper. Totally not her personality!" Morgan was becoming completely overwhelmed with the school environment.

Morgan recalls feeling different and somewhat isolated as her struggles became more pronounced. "My first memory that things were different was when the teacher put headphones on me in the classroom. Also, things like having to go outside to a trailer classroom while my friends stayed in the regular class and missing game day reward for good behavior to go get extra help from the learning teacher," she recalls.

"Morgan's learning disabilities were significant. The school finally did testing because I demanded it. I think they were glad we finally moved away," Tina says with a chuckle. "I wasn't ugly with the school, but Morgan continued to struggle and the solution they came up with was for me to take her to Sylvan Learning Center for two hours after school every day. Morgan was in class for eight hours a day. They would send home the work she couldn't complete during the



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school day and then they were telling me to have her do two more hours after school of tutoring and then finish up that school work, too!”

Though Tina was frustrated, she understood that the school had limitations in what they could provide. She doesn’t blame the teachers, but rather the system and the vast misunderstanding many have about learning disabilities.

Morgan was frustrated, too. “I knew she was capable of learning, but personally I didn’t know how to help her,” says Tina. “When I would sit down and try to go over work with her, she would get so frustrated because it was so difficult for her to figure out what to do. I didn’t have the knowledge for how to teach her differently because what made sense to me, made no sense to her.”

### The beginning of change

A job change led the family to relocate to a new city. After exploring school options, they enrolled Morgan in the Howard School, a private day school for children with learning disabilities.

During her four years at the Howard School—fifth through eighth grade—Morgan made a complete transformation. Her confidence grew and she began to feel she could succeed. Tina attributes the changes to smaller classes and a faculty that understood how Morgan needed to learn. Her teachers not only taught her skills, but also how to advocate for what she needed.

After eighth grade the family considered moving Morgan to a larger private school so she could begin to feel more comfortable in larger settings. “We tried to get her into a private school that had a lot of accommodations in place, but they took one look at her learning profile and testing and would not admit her,” recalls Tina. “She functions way higher than her paperwork looks.” Instead, Morgan began ninth grade at a nearby arts and sciences public magnet school. The transition was a scary one—from a ratio of two teachers to ten students at Howard to a school of eighteen hundred students.

“I’ve been stunned at watching her handle it,” shares Tina. “The first few days were very tough. Her biggest fear was not making friends and not being able to find her classes.” The first day of school was a major challenge, as the new computer system had malfunctioned and the class schedules were all incorrect. “We had already had her IEP meeting and she had her schedule of what she was supposed to be in under that IEP, and yet this new schedule had her in all the wrong classes,” recalls Tina. The school said it could take five days to straighten out and suggested that



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Morgan go to the classes on the current schedule—which had her in several advanced science classes and Chinese—and switch it later. *Absolutely not*, thought Tina.

“I told Morgan I would meet her there as soon as I could get there,” recalls Tina, who first had to drive her younger son to his new school. “I said, ‘Go to the guidance office and you tell them you have an IEP and that they have to fix your schedule because it is not right.’”

When Tina arrived, the guidance office was very crowded, but Morgan was at the head of the line. “She was not intimidated at all. I think now she has learned—and this is what she learned about herself at the Howard School—‘I am not damaged goods because I have these learning disabilities,’ which is what she felt like before,” explains Tina. “Now she [tells herself], ‘Well, I have to figure out how to do it a different way and there is nothing wrong with that.’”

### A positive role model

Morgan’s fear about not making friends at her new school was for nothing. She has tons of new friends and is a star athlete on the school swim team. Her team members voted her female MVP. She is in regular curriculum classes with accommodations and special services like team teaching with a support teacher, use of a MacBook, and a study skills class that includes a study hall so she can get work done at school. Her classes have websites with homework assignments, study sheets, and other relevant class informa-

tion. Her IEP is being successfully implemented.

“Before, Morgan would get so overwhelmed. She wouldn’t know where to start with her school work. It was such a struggle. She would just shut down and not even try,” remembers Tina. “Now she sees the challenges and she says, ‘Let’s see how I’m going to attack it.’”

Morgan’s peers even come to her for support when they are having difficulties at school. “I think that she likes that she can help other people. She knows how bad it feels to feel like sort of a loser kid or have that feeling. And she just doesn’t want other kids to feel like that because it is just not fun,” says Tina. “She’s learned how to be very accepting of people where they are no matter what their issues and needs are.”

Morgan has used that empathy to help others understand differences. When she sees someone being teased because he or she is different, Morgan speaks up. She tells others not to make fun and shares openly about her own learning disabilities.

### Asking for what you need

Some areas continue to present day-to-day challenges. “Sometimes I will react stronger than I should to small things,” Morgan shares, “but I have medicine to help me with that so it is only harder for me when I don’t take it—which I don’t always like to do, especially on weekends because I feel like I don’t need it, but I know it helps me and I need it for school to stay focused and calm.”

As her confidence has grown, she has learned that asking questions is a good thing and encourages her peers to do the same. “It has helped me to know that if you have a question, ask it and don’t feel stupid because Einstein said ‘No question is dumb.’ And I guarantee you that other people may have the same question, but just don’t want to ask so as not to feel or look dumb,” says Morgan. “I know I can always go to my teachers and guidance counselor or my case manager for help if I need it. I know if I am not getting what I need to tell people and fight for what I know I have rights to get for my learning.”

Self-advocacy is a skill of tremendous importance for teens with ADHD, and Morgan learned it at a young age from her mother. “I am the oldest of seven kids,” explains Tina. “You had to ask for what you needed.” Tina lost her own mother when she was young, which affected her thoughts on parenting. “I might not be here tomorrow. My kids need to



know how to survive because no one is going to do it for you. You have to figure it out and life isn't always fair."

### **A hopeful message for others**

Knowing she is not alone in her learning disabilities and that they don't define her has helped Morgan. "At the Howard School they helped me to be open to how I learned and helped me realize the things I needed to do to learn better. This really gave me the confidence I needed to go to the school I am at now, public school again," she shares. "One of my new friends at North Springs came up to me and asked me what was wrong with me, like why was I in team-taught classes, and I told her I have ADD and auditory processing disorder. She was so happy to hear that and I just made her day—because she was not the only one at school with learning disabilities. She also liked that I seemed very socially normal and not like I have a learning issue. I told her we are not different and that everyone learns

in their own way. We just have a little harder time than others, but nothing is wrong with us. She said she couldn't wait to go home to tell her mom she met me and that she was so happy to have met me!"

When asked her advice for kids with ADHD, Morgan replies, "I would tell them not to be ashamed of who they are or how they learn, but it is not going to be easy. It is hard work. I have come a long way to get to where I am. It was years of hard work, but I am so happy I got here and am still working to get even higher. I have developed the main thing a person needs for success, which is confidence and good role models and good people in my life to give me help. You need people to encourage you to do your best."

Morgan emphasizes that you cannot give up when things get hard, but instead you have to push yourself through. "Have confidence in yourself and believe you can succeed and ask questions and go get help if you need it," she

encourages. "Good teachers and school and friends who help you gain confidence and our parents help and family support and a good home to come home to. I believe in every kid out there who is struggling that they can succeed and I pray for parents and teachers to open their eyes to help kids who need it. It cannot be done alone. It is a group effort to help kids gain confidence."

Though Morgan has come a long way, she stresses that it is an ongoing process and that she continues to deal with setbacks. The main difference is that now she is better able to stop, regroup, and brainstorm with her family and teachers to find new solutions. Her confidence, hopefulness, and optimism are contagious. It has been a long, bumpy road, a team effort that began with a mother's strong advocacy, unconditional love, and neverending belief in her daughter. "Morgan really does know herself very well," adds Tina. "And she laughs when she realizes I know her very well, too!" 🗣️