

Abraham Lincoln, Isaac Newton, Lionel Aldridge, and Patty Duke. What do these four people have in common? They each have documented cases of mental illness. What does that have to do with me? I am the professional parent of two special boys, one of whom is diagnosed with bipolar disorder and AD/HD. What is a professional parent you ask? A professional parent does not have an academic degree, but the colleges would be hard pressed to teach professionals what we as parents have learned through years of first hand experience. Professional Parents are parents who expect to be on a level playing field with the rest of the professionals who work with their children.

I would like to tell you about my journey with my oldest son Lorenzo. From the time Lorenzo was born I knew that he was a special child. I carried him for 9 ½ months before he decided to grace the world with his appearance. That was my first indication that no matter what I expected of him and wanted him to do, it was going to be at his pace not mine. While I was pregnant I read dozens of books on how I could be a great mother. Not one of them prepared me for raising my son.

Lorenzo has always been a very active and bright child. As a baby he did everything ahead of schedule, yet I had concerns. I had this sixth sense that something was not right. Lorenzo was always in high gear, much more active than the other children his age. He seemed to not have any regard for danger or limits, and limit setting usually turned into something being broke. Around the age of two he started having a difficult time with transition. I was told by family and professionals' this is just a phase or either that it was typical two year old behavior. All I needed to do was set firmer limits and be able to follow through on consequences better. I tried just about every piece of advice given, yet I was unable to get him through this phase. Somewhere between the age of two and three Lorenzo stopped sleeping for days at a time. He wouldn't take a nap and he wouldn't sleep at night. I discussed this with his doctor on several occasions and somehow the advice given always pointed to the fact that it was something I was doing wrong.

I went back to work when Lorenzo was almost three. This meant I had to put him in daycare. He had a hard time interacting with his peers. The staff at the daycare would tell me that he wouldn't take naps, he would bite others, he would throw things, and the

list kept getting longer each day. I would spend much of my time apologizing and going home crying because I didn't know how to help him. One day after work I went to pick up Lorenzo and I was met at the door by the director of the day care. I was told that Lorenzo needed one on one care and that they were not equipped to deal with his needs at their facility, which was a nice way of saying he was not welcome there anymore. Once he was removed from daycare I knew that I had to do something. I went home that evening and started going down the list of psychiatrist and therapist in the yellow pages to see which one would see my son. Out of around 10-15 people called not one psychiatrist would see a child that young, and only one therapist agreed to work with me on how to be a better parent.

This therapy did little to help our "episodes" and I was unable to get any further treatment for Lorenzo until later that same year when he sustained an injury in which I had to take him to the emergency room. This was the first time he had ever been in the emergency room for an injury, but DSS was called and an investigation conducted. I can look back nine years later and call this a blessing, because until I went through this ordeal with DSS I could not get any professionals to evaluate my son.

At the age of four Lorenzo was finally evaluated by Dr. Russell Creech. Dr. Creech did a number of extensive evaluations on Lorenzo. I will never forget the follow up appointment after those comprehensive tests. I sat down in his office and the first thing he said after rustling some papers was "The good news is your son is smart, the bad news is your son is very smart and I believe he has bipolar". I was pretty sure I had heard the term bipolar in the past and I am also sure I associated it with being crazy. I listened to everything he had to say, and then I dismissed it all. I thought this man was out of his mind! My son did not have bipolar.

Once Dr. Creech had evaluated Lorenzo it was easier for me to get a second opinion. I took him to another psychiatrist who did not repeat any test on my son, but told me that AD/HD was more common in children this age and we began the complicated chore of the medicine game. I am convinced we tried every medicine on the market before we came to one that he was mildly successful with. We still had problems at home and public school came with its own set of issues. I attributed every problem that Lorenzo had to some flaw in my parenting ability.

When Lorenzo was around the age of ten I became pregnant with my second son. He was excited to know he was going to be a big brother. Somehow though all of this emotion caused him to start spiraling out of control and I did not know what to do. What I used to call intense tantrums escalated into hours of rage and erratic thinking. My husband and I managed as best we could until February of 2006. After another intense rage Lorenzo now decided he wanted to kill himself. This was to be the first of three acute care admissions and one residential treatment stay of six months. It was at this time that I figured out that Dr. Creech was not the idiot I thought he was.

Lorenzo is now diagnosed bipolar and AD/HD and receiving treatment for both. He has also been diagnosed with sensory integration, ODD, and a learning disability. The last couple of years have proved to be a roller coaster ride. Sometimes it is like having two different children trapped in the same body. He is kind, considerate, outgoing, loving, helpful...but when he is unstable then he can be the opposite of these wonderful qualities.

I know I am not a perfect parent but I also now know that I am not to blame for my son's medical condition. I love my son with out a shadow of a doubt, but I can honestly say there are times I don not like him. I realize though that it is at these times when he is not my son. It is his illness that is in control and not that beautiful young man that I know he can be. There have been just as many joys as there have been challenges in raising Lorenzo. I have come to realize that understanding my child's medical condition better equips me as a parent to handle the everyday challenges that occur at home, school, and in the community.

When I started my journey I felt very much alone and isolated. I had no idea the services that were available to me, and most of them I found out about the hard way. I have had people ask me how can I be so bold about telling others my son has a mental illness. It makes me wonder if my child had asthma, diabetes, or even cancer if I would get the same question. The bottom line is my child has a medical condition and I am not ashamed of him for it. In fact, it is quite the opposite. I am proud of who he is despite the adversities he faces everyday.

I dream of a world where there is no more stigma surrounding mental illness. I advocate for a time when mental illness is recognized for the true neurobiological

medical condition that it is. Often our children are not treated as equals in the medical world or the world of special needs children. This adds even more to the isolation that parents feel.

It was this journey that has made me the Professional Parent that I am today. It also led to the development of Parents of Bipolar Children for South Carolina families. All of our children have the potential to accomplish great things like Abraham Lincoln 16th president of the United States who suffered from severe depression, Isaac Newton accomplished scientist who suffered from bipolar disorder, Lionel Aldridge defense end for the Green Bay Packers who suffered from schizophrenia, or Patty Duke academy award winning actress who suffers from bipolar disorder.

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