

## Embracing Quirkiness

By Deb Lehman

**O**n my son's last day of middle school, I arrived home to find his baby blues flooded with tears. I was stunned. It was supposed to be a happy occasion.



“What’s wrong?”

Josh hung his head and burst into tears.

Before I could even reach him, my husband Steve called. The assistant principal had just phoned with unpleasant news. Josh had been bullied.

My heart started pounding and my mouth went dry.

“Bullied!? How long has this been going on?” Dizzy with panic, I wanted to march up to Josh and demand an answer.

“Don’t grill him,” Steve exhorted. “He must be feeling so humiliated. Just let him be.”

*Let him be.* Okay, I could do that.

I reached out to my son and held him close in a rare moment of intimacy. Though Josh kisses me every morning and night, he doesn’t like to be hugged.

Josh had not sobbed like this since he was a colicky baby. Five or ten minutes went by. Then Josh pulled away.

His alabaster skin was blotchy from crying. Pain emanated from every pore. He was so fragile, I was frightened that the slightest touch might break him. He reminded me of Laura Wingfield, a character from *The Glass Menagerie*, who Tennessee Williams portrayed as a highly sensitive, sickly girl with a narrow interest in glass figurines as fragile as herself.

Josh ran upstairs to his room.

My daughter Samantha, who just graduated from elementary school, was invited to a friend's end-of-year party that afternoon. I was so *not* in the mood to celebrate, but needed to get away from my son, run from our mutual misery.

As Samantha rushed to join her BFFs, I remained in the car, crying in self-pity, then howling with rage.

The following day, Steve and I met with Assistant Principal Howard.

“What happened?” My husband and I asked at the same time.

Howard explained that a popular jock who lived to wrestle, had bear-hugged Josh. We were also horrified to hear that during the graduation ceremony the night before, this jock and his buddies had faked applause when Josh's name was called.

OMG. The clapping Steve and I heard as approval was really jeering. Humiliation stung my cheeks.

Howard continued. There had been another “incident” earlier in the year with a different student who almost jabbed Josh in the ear.

I wanted to shriek: *Why the hell did you wait until the last day of school to tell us?* But it seemed pointless now.

After my experience with Josh, and reading about cases like Phoebe Prince, who committed suicide as a result of bullying, I've reached the conclusion that school officials cannot cope with this epidemic. We parents must advocate for our children, and vigilantly, or they're at risk for bullying and worse.

Ooh, I wanted revenge. I wanted to pummel those bullies. Or, at the very least, clunk their heads together like Mo from the *Stooges*.

But I'm not a violent person and I loathe confrontation. So I did what I usually do: smoldered with passive aggressive rage. Then inspiration struck. I would pour my feelings out in an essay, maybe even spin this crisis into a life lesson.

Writing is cathartic. Sifting through a myriad of feelings, thoughts, and facts, I started to write the story of Josh.

**W**e were hardly strangers to bullying. Josh had been targeted by a string of aggressors in grade school. Fourth grade had been hell. I still cringe at the memory of his elementary school graduation. While his peers ran around slapping each other on the backs, merrily signing books, Josh froze. My husband and I squirmed in discomfort until Steve mobilized Josh by offering him a dollar for every autograph.

I can't begin to describe the anguish we felt.

But instead of wallowing in self-pity, we took action by enrolling Josh in Tae Kwon Do. Josh became a black belt, mastering discipline, self-defense and other valuable skills. However, despite my highest hopes, martial arts didn't unleash his inner Ninja.

We also sent Josh to a male therapist who encouraged him to talk about the bullying and vent his feelings. The therapist reinforced what we already knew. That Josh was highly intelligent and sensitive. That he related better to adults than peers. That he wasn't a psycho or sociopath.

I told my shrink, Dr. E, about the bullying episode. She had treated Josh for pediatric depression when he was seven.

"He's quirky," she said.

Quirky. Hmm...I liked the sound of it. Better than challenging or gulp, *autistic*.

I looked up quirky on dictionary.com: A peculiarity of behavior; an idiosyncrasy: "Every man had his own quirks and twists." (Harriet Beecher Stowe)

In all fairness to Josh, he was born into a charged atmosphere. I became pregnant at the age of thirty-nine after several miscarriages. Josh reached developmental milestones late, but mastered reading at three. As a toddler, he loathed loud birthday parties, preferring to gaze at trains and planes. Josh was introverted but could light up a stage. He had an astonishing memory and excelled in every subject but math. He was a miracle, a mystery, a boy.

As a journalist, I had researched Asperger's Syndrome, and Josh manifested all the hallmark symptoms of this "high-functioning form of autism." His motor and expressive language skills were delayed, he showed an intense preoccupation with narrow subjects, clung to routine, was socially awkward.

After the meeting with Howard, I was ready to see a pediatric neurologist or psychiatrist for a formal evaluation, but my husband balked. Steve didn't want Josh being labeled special-need. My shrink agreed. She didn't think an IEP would make a difference.

"I'm concerned about Josh's safety in the public high school," I said to Dr. E.

"You always think of something. You're a good parent."

"I don't feel like one. I feel like a failure."

"Use your sense of humor to defuse the heaviness."

Hmm...sense of humor. I used to have one of those.

Laughter is golden. Research shows that it can reduce stress, strengthen the immune system and heal physical and emotional pain. But forcing it when the heart is not willing is like forcing Josh to a party of populars. Not going to happen.

Then Dr. E said the most remarkable thing of all: “Put a positive spin on your differences. If Josh is abrupt on the phone, say, I like talking on the phone but you don’t. Help him embrace his quirks.”

Wow. Embrace his quirks. That’s a beautiful thought. Not so easy to do.

How could I help Josh embrace his quirks when I hadn’t been able to come to terms with it myself? I wanted my son to be “normal” not quirky. Why? I thought about it. Normalcy reflected well on me as a parent and required little intervention. Intervention took effort, money, and a piece of your heart.

Parents of “exceptional” children know the challenges of raising a kid who marches to his own beat. Quirky behavior is not considered “sexy.” It’s the opposite, freakish. Family and friends try to be sympathetic, but unless they’ve been there, they’re clueless. What’s more upsetting than ignorance is the flicker of pity in their eyes.

And then I had an epiphany. This wasn’t just about Josh, it was about me. I was born into a dark and mistrustful family of Holocaust survivors. My parents were probably the angriest people on the planet. Like Josh, I suffered from low self-esteem and obsessive behavior. Like Josh, I was lousy at sports. But while my parents forced me to go to sleep-away camp every summer where I was jock fodder, I never did that to Josh.

Still, there was a time when he was little that I allowed myself to believe he might grow up to be the happy-go-lucky, star athlete I never was. Wishful thinking. Slightly delusional, but totally understandable. I wanted better for my son. I tried to spare him some grief.

But you can’t fight genetics.

Something had to give. I had to let go of my need for Josh to fit the mold. That didn’t mean abandoning hope, just accepting him for who he was. It was liberating to admit this, but still terrifying. There was no way I was sending Josh to the public high school that fall.

I began exploring other options and found a magnet school of performing arts. It was the school’s charter year and there were only fifty kids in the class. A private school atmosphere without private school fees. Yes!

At first, Josh resisted. My husband and I overruled his objections. Josh’s resistance to change, even the smallest thing like a new food or activity, often maddened us. We had to

act in his best interests and give him a gentle nudge. We weren't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. This was a gift from God.

Josh aced the entrance exams and gave a glowing recitation from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that won him instant acceptance. Josh grinned. I was floating. After hitting rock bottom in June, we both needed the high of success.

I'm tempted to say we lived happily ever after. But there are no quick fixes. Attending a performing arts school has not dramatically altered Josh's personality. Neither has social skills training. Josh still prefers to spend more time with his PC than people. A lifetime of rejection has taught him to hide his love away. To the few he has let inside, Josh is fiercely loyal, but it takes patience to draw him out, and most kids don't have it. For that matter, neither do most adults. I struggle daily to maintain an emotional connection with Josh. His lack of empathy sometimes makes me want to scream.

But I will continue to reach out to him. He will not spend his life in isolation. He will have every opportunity to capture what every parent dreams for her child: an independent, happy and healthy life. Maybe it will even include college, a spouse and children, if that's what Josh wants.

**T**here may not be a magic cure for autism, but if I look hard, I can find magic. It's in the way Josh bounces out of bed every morning, his naturally spiky brown hair all punked-out from sleep, in the way he smiles triumphantly after finessing an abstract scene from *Godot* or swatting a ginormous flying bug as his insectophobic sister runs shrieking from the room.

That's enough for now. Tomorrow will be better.

What gives me real hope is how people with autism are asserting themselves, trying to change the perception that AS is a difference rather than a disability to be treated or cured.

As Temple Grandin has remarked, "I'm different. But not less."

\*All names have been changed for privacy purposes.

## **BIO**

Deb Lehman writes for magazines in New York and New Jersey. In the 1980s she achieved national recognition for a love-letter-writing business that she operated out of her Manhattan studio.