

Reaching Your Potential

By Ellen and James Malayer

I have a wonderful son. He's social, well behaved, seemingly bright, articulate and yet, I felt like something was not quite right from the time James was in first grade. He is the fourth of five children, my only boy. James is surrounded by four gifted sisters. In school, James's grades were never horrible, a couple A's, a couple B's, and a couple of C's, but in comparison to his sisters (and I tried not to compare) he didn't like to read, homework took longer, he worked far harder and was not rewarded with the kind of grades and success in school as were his sisters. Sometimes it seemed like James was only half-way plugged in. When I raised concerns with teachers, they would tell me not to worry. "He is a boy." And, "You know, boys mature slower than girls." I was told, "James is a great kid and a pleasure to have in class; he will catch up and be fine."

This pattern continued on until high school, and then the bottom seemed to start falling out. His freshman year was a real struggle, but we once again chalked it up to new school, new situation, and more rigor. We gave him the speech, "James, you say you want to go to college and your grades are okay, but not good enough to get you into college." His sophomore year was no better. James appeared to be putting in effort at home but was now being met with a few teachers remarking that he was just not taking school seriously. I saw James begin to withdraw. At that point, I asked the school to evaluate him. We were turned down because his grades and standardized test scores were above average and again the words, "He is a boy and just not finding much motivation right now."

When it was time to start his junior year, I could see James actually becoming depressed. One day during the first week back at school, James said, "Mom, I just hate school!" My heart broke because I knew that he was trying. There were other things that didn't quite add up either. James was hanging with some very bright kids, he was doing homework and forgetting to turn it in, his grades were all over the board, in addition to other subtle behaviors that I just chalked up to adolescence.

At this point, my husband and I decided to have James evaluated. We wanted to know if we were dealing with a "can't do" or a "won't do" problem. Much to my surprise, James was open to the idea of testing, which further indicated to me that he did have the desire to learn. And sadly, through writing this article with my son, I have learned that for years James's recollection of his school experience was running a hidden parallel to what we as parents were intuiting. The following is James's account.

My name is James Malayer. I go to a large school and have a few close friends. I enjoy playing lacrosse and I am an avid guitar player. For many, I appeared to be an average boy especially for teachers, due to my slightly above average grades. However, this is not the case. Growing up with older sisters really set the stage and expectations for me. All throughout my school career I have been told about my sisters' amazing grades and accomplishments. With this family history placed in front of me, I had a constant desire and felt an obligation to match my older siblings' success. When I was younger this posed no problem. I was told that I was gifted and bright. I had

no stress. Then I made the transition into 5th grade. This is where I saw my real first struggles. I just made the transition into advanced math and managed to do an average job in there. I had trouble finishing the tests and quizzes on time, I missed out on details, and I was extremely slow. As I neared high school, I grew more concerned as my classes became harder to get above average grades. Ironically, by the end of junior high I was still ahead of the curve in many of my classes, but still being reminded of how great my sisters were in school. I was not reaching my potential.

When I moved into high school, school really beat me. I became an average student struggling to keep up. It was taking a toll on me. I began to get discouraged and started to believe that I just wasn't capable of being a "straight A" student. With every issue, you reach a "rock bottom." For me this was the first semester of my junior year. With the combination of several hard classes and no study hall, my grades were starting to fall below average in some classes. From almost every eye around me I came off as lazy, stupid, and as the school told my mom, "just an unmotivated boy." Yet, almost "every eye" didn't see me work my hardest to meet what was expected from me. I had many late nights on a regular basis as well as a few nights where I would work through the night. I felt like a disappointment and stupid. I wanted to give up. Finally my mom told me they were testing me to see if I had a learning disability. Up to this point I did not even think that I had any issues regarding my abilities. I had just accepted that I was not capable of being an "A" student. The news of being tested gave me mixed emotions. I didn't know what to think but ultimately hoped they would find something.

The day I went to CRG to get tested, I was a little nervous. I wanted to know if I had an issue that could be treated. After the tests I wasn't sure what information they could have received. As it turned out, I had ADHD. I can say I was surprised, but also relieved because I felt like there had to be a reason that I could not reach a level of success that was expected of me. We received the results of our tests from Dr. Kinder, who then educated my parents and me on the type of ADHD I have and what our options were to help manage it. Shortly thereafter, I began to work with Dr. Parker (my academic coach) to learn new tools and skills to help me take full advantage of my strongest learning skills. Throughout my work with Dr. Parker, we focused on a wide variety of skill areas including time management, study skills, making decisions, and being an advocate for myself. In addition to learning these skills, he also educated me more in depth about my disability. Towards the end of my work with Dr. Parker, we turned our focus towards keeping ahead in my school work. He helped me educate myself on colleges with respect to admissions.

Alongside my work with Dr. Parker, I worked with Dr. Rowland to find a medication that would help me focus better. Prior to beginning medication, I was strongly opposed to taking it in fear that it would have a "zombie" like effect on me. However, I was educated by all three doctors that when on the right medication, I would not have issues like the one I feared having. Hearing this, I became optimistic about taking a medication and tried it. At first the medication I took was not helping very well. Soon afterward we increased the dose. We didn't truly get to see the effects of the medication on me until I got to start the next semester of school. The change was incredible. Within a few weeks I was able to see how much time in school I lost from distractions that most students could ignore. In addition to the greater efficiency I had acquired, I gained an ability to become and stay organized in my time management, assignments, and papers. Contrary to my fear of becoming like a "zombie" on the medication, I actually became more conversant and more engaged with others. Working with Dr. Parker and Dr. Rowland has helped me manage my ADHD immensely. In a matter of months I went from the average boy with average grades, to a well-rounded individual who is succeeding in school.

As I look back at myself just a few months ago and compare it to who I am now, it is hard to imagine that I have come this far. I am glad I was tested and took the correct steps to start reaching the potential I am capable of. Since I began working with CRG, all areas of my life have become increasingly better. Previously I was constantly staying up late with homework and unable to keep up with school. School was a tremendous burden and stress. I spent the majority of my time working on school with little time left for other important areas of my life. Now that I am better able to manage my disability, my life is much more balanced. I no longer feel tied down by school, I have time to practice guitar, work on my lacrosse skills and be more social. I wish we would have assessed the situation sooner because my life now is by far less stressful and more manageable. I have no doubt that, by continuing to put in effort, I can succeed in anything I set out to do.



As James mentioned, the testing process brought to light a diagnoses of ADHD, primarily the inattentive subset, meaning he does not display the hyperactivity or impulsivity that is sometimes associated with ADHD. James has been “flying low under the radar screen” for years and, of course, as a parent I do regret not having had James assessed sooner. The initial diagnosis did send us into a little tail spin for a while, but with the help and guidance of Dr. Kinder, Dr. Parker, and Dr. Rowland, James has been able to open up to a whole new way of living. CRG has provided us with options, resources, and support. James has some special accommodations at school. We are taking advantage of academic coaching and the initially dreaded option of medication. Through academic coaching, James has learned many techniques and strategies that address organization, time management, study habits, self-advocacy, and, I think most importantly, James is learning a lot about himself.

I now have a son who is having success in school, is far more self-sufficient, is less withdrawn and most importantly, James is beginning to embrace himself. This is not to say that things are perfect. We are still working though feelings, challenges, and issues as they present themselves. It takes time and effort to adjust to a new way of living. The other day, James said to me, “Mom, I wish we had done this sooner; I had no idea how much I have been missing!” That statement pierced my heart and I, of course, had a case of the “should’ve and could’ve’s.” Our hindsight, however, is always 20/20. As we move forward I move forward cheering James on and take comfort in knowing that he is no longer flying low under the radar screen. James is beginning to soar!

