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Title: Two Mothers, Two Stories,

Raja and Lois

We met online, as many people do. As mothers, we shared a history of children who struggled with learning to read, battles with school bureaucracies, and the consequent lasting impact. We didn't choose the emotional roller coaster ride or wish to see it repeated... but here we are, bonding through traumatic experiences.

Mt. Everest sits at the top of the world, the pinnacle for any mountaineer. Rarely do non-climbers attempt to climb this peak without considerable training and high-altitude experience. Yet, as parents of children who struggle with learning to read, we are thrown into such journeys, starting at base camp in a blizzard, unaware of the perilous steps ahead and unprepared for the hazardous journey.

In 1994, my six-year-old son Nicholas failed first grade. An evaluation on the Weschler IQ test resulted in a stark assessment.

"Your son can read ten words," the diagnostician stated, "has no strengths, and a below-average IQ." I felt the oxygen sucked out of me, just as the Everest-ian climb began. Under-resourced, blinded, and with no obvious trail ahead, this judgment was an enormous blow.

Nicholas's infancy was plagued by ear infections. I was unaware of their life-long impact. I noted his slowness with speech and language, and I needed his full attention for him to follow directions. But he was an expert in doing puzzles.

Trouble began on day six of first grade. Nicholas was reticent to go to school, bit his fingernails to the quick, and daily wet his pants.

"Oh, Lois," Nicholas' teacher began, "Nicholas is so far behind; I don't know how I will teach him! He struggles to follow the simplest instructions and stares into space most of the day. I don't know what I can do for him."

Throughout the year, I noticed his lack of progress and thus my concern increased, but what can a mother do? Nicholas was exhausted after a full day of surviving school.

Panic consumed me. My journey was transformed by a change in the weather on my 'Everest.'

For six short months, I home-schooled Nicholas. This fortuitous time changed his life trajectory and indeed my own. Beginning with books titled "Success for All." Which turned out to be abject failures as Nicholas appeared to have no recall of sounds, letters, or words.

Facing a white-out of opportunities, I opted for writing poems. The transformation was dramatic. I read and Nicholas listened. We laughed, found rhyming words, and illustrated the poem. I wrote another, then another. Nicholas' changed as I saw him start to scale the beginning slopes of reading, millimeter by millimeter. My mind was consumed by writing, refining, and re-writing each poem. A pen and paper were always on hand, so I could capture every thought, every idea to aid Nicholas' learning.

I became a reading specialist, teaching children who had failed to read through standardized reading programs.

The pain, the constant panic, and an overwhelming sense of "What else do I have to do?" never really left me.

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Raja faced a different experience. She, too, felt as if she were at base camp, searching for answers for her sons whose behaviors were described as extreme—disruptive, withdrawn, or non-compliant. Their non-compliance, unacceptable actions, and compensatory literacy performances hid their true struggles.

During Jonathan's kindergarten years, his behavior caused concern. Raja received daily phone calls from the private school he attended, describing her son's terrible behavior. Concern mounted. Initially, Raja felt she was to blame as she had failed to discipline her son appropriately. Jonathan was just a "bad" kid.

By the age of five, his behavior rapidly deteriorated. He refused to go into the classroom. Once inside, he hid under the teacher's desk.

At Jonathan's kindergarten, the classroom teacher approached Raja.

"Raja," she began. "Jonathan's behavior is limiting his learning. He needs to be tested for special education. I suggest enrolling him in the public school."

"Look at all the things he can do," Raja thought. "His comprehension appeared years ahead of his peers, his conversation intelligent. He was more mature and understood grown-ups better than his friends."

The teacher continued, "You are your son's best advocate. You know him better than anyone." Her words stuck. They were the best advice Raja ever received and put her on her "Everest" journey.

Raja's second son Omar Jr. survived as 'average' in elementary school until the fourth grade. Then her journey became one of scaling K2 doubling in magnitude.

Testing revealed a twice-exceptional, highly-gifted, yet learning-disabled child.

Transferring schools. Engaging Attorneys, implementing 504 plans, attending, recording, and transcribing IEP meetings were followed by more attorneys, bullying, and lack of due process that ended in a Ninth Circuit Federal Court lawsuit.

Visits to the School Psychologists, testing, tutoring, and advocacy costing hundreds of thousands of dollars led to constant panic culminating in a ruined marriage and financially and emotionally stressed. By now Raja's documentation was as high as Mt Everest, but instead of reaching for heaven, she went through a 'personal hell.'

Finally, Raja set up **The Jonathan Foundation for Children With Learning Disabilities**. Her goal was to help other parents who faced similar complex journeys navigating the education mountain with glacial-like responses and numerous crevice-like traps for novices, one after another.

Although Raja and I have faced different routes on our separate Everest journeys. We share the constant pain, the continuous problem-solving, and the all-consuming passion for changing the world. No other person in the world should have to repeat these journeys.

There are human and financial costs for every family member. Often marriages are under strain or fall apart. Businesses still have to be run or work completed as the family attempts to deal with children who simply do not fit "normal."

Yet, we are two moms working to show that we can and must teach children to read. These are our stories.