

Podcast Transcript: *Behind Enemy Lines: How THAT student became a Vice Principle*

By Michael Karras, Keynote Speaker, 2016 Educators 'Institute

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Welcome to TalkLD, a podcast by educators, for educators designed to challenge you and assist you in the way you run your classroom. In this very special edition of TalkLD instead of me, Lawrence Barns, and a guest in the studio, we are instead going to share a keynote from our Educators' Institute. The EI runs annually and, if you keep your eye on the LD@school website, you'll be able to see the current plans for the next version of the event.

Our speech today comes from Michael Karras, by his own admissions not the world's greatest student and he will frankly share his stories with you. You'll see they will link to his LD but also, in part, to the teaching he received. However, he went on to earn a BA and Special Education from the University of Saskatchewan and has worked in the Prairie School Division since 2000, first as a Special Education resource teacher, then as a capacity-building Special Education resource teacher, and currently he's vice principal at a pre-K to grade 12 school. His stories will reflect on the challenges that he had in school and, hopefully, will challenge you as an educator. What amazed me most about this speech from Michael is just how willing he was to share the raw details of a life, frankly, that was turned around by teachers.

Michael Karras: So where to begin? How that student became a vice principal -- yeah, I was one of those students. But yeah, I have a learning disability and ADHD. But yeah, it was difficult. I grew up in a very small community, a farming community, a mining community in the town of Rocanville, which is located in the southeast corner of Saskatchewan. And it's one of those kind of small towns where everybody's your aunt and everybody's your uncle, and everybody's your cousin. They're not really your aunt and uncle and cousin, but that's how you're treated when you talk to everybody. It was very friendly family-oriented.

My first experience going to school was kindergarten at the Rocanville School. It was actually kind of traumatizing for me, being able to run around town and do whatever you want, and people would help you, and so on and so on. It was just very different for me. I had a lot of difficulty right off the bat. And my parents kind of knew, you know, my dad struggled a bit with reading, and so did his father, so they knew there was a good possibility that I might have that difficulty as well. Now I have an older brother and a younger sister, and as a family, we all tried to help each other. We went to the same school, and so on and so on. But as we started to go to school and grade one came around, I continued to have some pretty extreme difficulties, you know, picking up language, letters, decoding, things like that.

And then we moved. We ended up moving to Regina. And again, new community, new school, having difficulty. My parents thought, we'd better do something here. So they ended up sending me to a program at the University of Regina. And for the entire summer after grade one, I went every day, Monday to Friday, for the entire summer, and I went through a battery of tests; all different types of psychological tests and speech and language tests, occupational therapy tests, and I did this the whole summer. And after it was over, we sat down as a family and we sat down with the professionals that were there in this research group. They talked to me and told me all the different things that were going on with me, and said, you know, you're quite bright, you're intelligent. These are the strengths that you have, and these are the things that you struggle with, and the weaknesses that you have. And they said that you have a



learning disability called dyslexia, and ADHD. And these are some of the things that you can do about it. And this was all fairly new at the time.

So my parents took this information and they went back to the schools. And at that time there was Special Ed like we have today, but it wasn't quite the same way. And I'm sure many of you that are a bit older might remember this, and those of you who are younger would know this going through the system. There wasn't a lot of information about learning disabilities, about ADHD. So even though my parents had this diagnosis and had this information, the teachers just didn't know what to do with it. They didn't know how to help.

So from there we moved again, we ended up moving to a different school, or moved in Regina and ended up in a different school. And again, switching schools, another grade, I've now been in three schools in four years. The teachers there wanted to help. So they tried doing different things, and they did. They started to help. The following year, they said that I didn't qualify for that help anymore, because I had improved so much. Now, I've heard this expression throughout my career as a teacher, well, when do we take the crutch away from these kids? When can they do this on their own? Why do we keep giving them these adaptations and accommodations? They need to be able to do this on their own. And to some extent, they do need to be able to do it on their own. But would you take a wheelchair away from someone who has no legs? That's my question. Would you take a crutch away from someone who absolutely needs it, who has a broken leg? You don't. You don't take it away until it's healed. So this was baffling to my parents. Why would you take something away that's working?

From there, my parents became very frustrated with the school system. And we ended up moving again. We ended up moving to Calgary this time. And this is where things really fell apart. Now, some of these stories I vaguely remember them, but lots of them come from my parents. And this one comes from my parents. We moved to Calgary, and they went to enrol us into the local school. And the school went there, they went there and they said, "This is my older son, David, and this is Michael, and this is Lydia." And they said, "But Michael has some learning issues. He has a learning disability, and ADHD." And the school administrator told my mom that they could take my brother and my sister, but they don't take kids with disabilities in their schools, because they can't help them. This is a public school in Calgary. So my mom said, "Well, the hell with you, we're taking all of our kids and we're going to go to a different school." So they ended up going to Sundance School, which was quite a distance away, it was a half hour bus ride every morning, half hour back. And at that school, they did accept my brother, my sister and I, but I was placed in a segregated part of the building in a segregated classroom. Now, and that's how Special Ed was done in the past, and is still done somewhat today. But even the teachers in that classroom that I was in were just baffled at why I would be in this classroom. And to explain, no problem for me, I didn't care. I was in a class, and I was the smartest one for once, you know? So it was awesome. But, you know, I was in the classroom with people with severe intellectual disabilities, you know, people who were on feeding tubes, and severe physical, mental, intellectual disabilities. And for me, it didn't make much of a difference, but it kind of broke my mom's heart in a way, you know, like seeing -- well, he's not really moving forward. And I wasn't. I wasn't going anywhere, academically, that is.

From there, we ended up moving back to Saskatoon. As you can see, I've been in a lot of schools. So we moved back to Saskatoon and I had some difficulty there, but this is where I kind of noticed that teachers started to make an effort, and there was teachers who did just the opposite, to make my life worse. I started to realize this. And I had some excellent teachers at this new school, and I had some teachers who really made my life difficult. And the teachers that did what they could, they did. And I respect that. They did everything they could to help me. They went out of their way to do things. And again, they just didn't know. They didn't know what to do. They tried everything they could, and they did the best that they



could. Now the thing that I do remember very clearly are those teachers who were very negative. They would call me "stupid." They would show my work in front of the class on how not to do things. And the list -- I could go on forever about these things, but that really hurts, you know? It's really hard on a kid. I was in grade four and five at the time, and you've got teachers singling you out on how not to do work to the rest of the class.

Anyway, from there we ended up moving to the east side of Saskatoon, and I went to a school called Alvin Buckwold. And there is the first time that I actually got Special Ed resource room help. And I started to learn how to read, and different strategies on how to cope in school. The teachers took time before school, after school, at lunch, they didn't punish me if I did something wrong, like they didn't take gym away from me, or recess away. They would give me consequences in a different fashion, right? Being ADHD, you kind of need that recess and that lunch break and Phys Ed, otherwise I'd just be a little bit worse, right? So they recognized that. So they would make other consequences.

And I want to actually bring up one specific teacher, because I know she was the French teacher, and I know there are some people from Quebec here that are French speaking. And this is quite funny, because we were at parent-teacher interviews, and Madame Mooney was the teacher, the French teacher. And she said, "You know, Michael is really not picking up the French very well. He's quite struggling. He's having difficulty with just saying, 'Bonjour,'" you know? And my mom said to her, she goes, "Well, he has a learning disability and ADHD, and he has enough trouble with English, let alone trying to pick up French." And she said, "Well, is it okay if I just not teach him French? I'll teach him English. I'll teach the French to the kids, and when I'm done, I'll give him some different type of work." And she did. And it was wonderful, because I got a little bit of extra help, while everybody was doing the French work. And I was able to start picking up on the English work. And it was very difficult, because I was getting kind of sad. You know, you're sitting there in French class, everybody's learning this language, and is just having -- you know, very, very difficult for me. Now, I'm not saying people don't teach kids French. My daughter, five years old, decided, we actually had to take her to different schools, decide what school she wanted to, and she's in French immersion at Lakeview School near our home. So picking up a second language is very important. But for someone who has difficulty with just their own language, you know, they need to learn that first, right? And so that's an important thing.

From there, I went on to high school. And things got a little bit better, but the resource room help was taken away again. I didn't qualify for it. And I struggled a lot in high school with English and Social Studies, the heavy reading classes, right? And I did okay in Math and Science. You know, Math and things like that, it wasn't heavy language. And I was able to get by, and I even made honour roll in grade 11 one time, I think, when you only had to take the one English in grade 11. But had a lot of difficulty. And I had a couple of teachers in there that would give you a novel. Now, I guess I should explain, too, that I couldn't read at this time. I was reading somewhere around a grade one, two level, somewhere around there. So they were giving me 'Lord of the Flies', and 'To Kill a Mockingbird' to read. Well, I can't read these books. So people always said, one of the questions I get is, how did you ever get through high school? Well, back then it was called cheating. Today we call it accommodations and adaptations. But yeah, one of the big accommodations, I guess, I made for myself was that the first day of class, I would sit in the English class and I would look around, and I would go, there's a good looking girl, and she's probably pretty smart. So I'd go sit beside her and I'd make her my best friend in the whole world. And I would, I'm not kidding you. I'd make that girl my best friend in the whole world. And I would sit beside her and I'd get her to tell me, you know, "Yeah, this story's great," I hadn't read a word of it, right? "Maybe we should meet up and talk about the novel that we're reading." "Oh yeah, for sure." Geeks love that kind of stuff, right? They love it. And that's how I learned, right? And I wouldn't take any notes in class, I would sit and listen. I didn't know this at the time, but if I sat and listened to the teacher talk, I could pick up a lot of the stuff, and I didn't

take any notes. So when I'm with these young ladies, "Hey, could I borrow your notes? I want to compare them to my notes." And I never compared anything. I just took their notes and I tried to read through them, and I'd circle stuff. And through conversation I would know, hey, this is important, because the teacher brought it up, it's in her notes, and she brought it up as well. So I would circle that, and that would be really important.

Then you'd come to the essay portion of a class. And what the hell am I going to do now? I've got to write this essay, it's got to be five or six or ten pages long -- I'm screwed. Well, good for me, my sister is an English Nazi. And I mean it! She's a year younger for me so she hasn't read these novels, but what I would do is, I would sit down with her and I would talk, right? I would talk, I'd say -- "What do you want me to write down, Michael?" And I'd say, "Well, this is how I want to start off." And she'd just write down word for word what I would say. And she'd write it down. And then we'd go sit down at the computer, my mom would sit down at the computer, she could type really fast. And I would read what my sister wrote, and she would type it up on the computer. From there, my sister would come down and she'd say, "Now, here is a capital. Why is it a capital?" Beats the hell out of me. "Well, it's your name, Michael." "Oh! Okay, so my name is a capital." "And here's a comma. Why would you put a comma there?" "I don't know." And she goes, "Well, read the sentence out loud." And she would teach me little tricks, almost like a Special Ed teacher. And for the most part, those little tricks work 90 percent of the time, and they do. Like, when you're reading a sentence, and you kind of have to take a breath, good chance there's a comma that goes there, right? Not always, but there's a good chance that it does.

So I started doing those things, and I was able to start writing a bit more on my own. Now, when I would hand these papers in, I had one specific teacher in grade 11. And I handed this paper in, and they want your rough copy, right, so I'd have the copy my sister wrote out for me. I've have the typed copy without the changes on it, then I'd have the good copy with the changes on it, and I'd hand it all in. So anyway, she was handing out these essays, and I remember this very clearly. It was on Macbeth. And it's funny, for some reason, I can read fricken old English, but I can't read regular. I don't know why, but so anyway, I hand this in. I'm proud, because this is, like, the best essay I've ever written in my life. All my own ideas, I didn't really cheat, but you know like, because I used to do that, really cheat, as well. So anyway, I'm, like, really proud of myself. I hand this in, and she says, "Michael, I want to keep you, I want to talk to you after class." And I said, "Okay." So she sits down with me, and she's, like, "Who wrote this for you?" And I said, "Well, nobody." I said, "I wrote it." And she said, "Well, it's too good to be yours." And I said, "Too good to be mine? What do you mean?" And she says, "Well, these aren't your words. You didn't write this." And I said, "Well, I did." I said, "I sat down with my sister and I told her what I wanted her to write down, and she wrote it down. And then I went down into the basement with my mom, and she typed it up. And then my sister came down and sat down and edited it with me, and explained why -- capitals go on your first name, and commas go here," and so on and so on. And she flat out said, "That's cheating." She changed that 65 percent which was too good to be mine to a zero. Now, I was devastated, right?

So at this time, I was in grade 11. Things started to go kind of downhill for me academically. I started to care less and less about school, so I just focused on the stuff I was good at. I was captain of the football team, great. Captain of the wrestling team, great. I played on the provincial soccer team, travelled all over the country playing soccer, had a great time doing those things. Could care less about school. And my grades really, really plummeted in grade 12. I was even on the Student Representative Council, just did all those things just because it was easier to do those things than it was to do the school work. I ended up failing my grade 12 English, and I wasn't doing very well. I wasn't doing very well on the football team, I wasn't doing very well on the wrestling team anymore, I wasn't doing very well on the soccer team, because I started to get depressed.

And I'm going to share a little story with you, which sometimes brings a little tear to my eye, and I didn't know this until I was much older. But the O-line coach, named Mr. Seale, came to my parents' house one day. Now, Mr. Seale, I never took a class from Mr. Seale, and I played defence. So I had very little contact with this guy throughout my entire high school. And Mr. Seale came to my house and he talked to my parents, and he said, you know, "What's going on with Michael? He's really struggling this year. You know, he's always been so happy and he's popular, and he's very outgoing. And, yeah, I know he struggles in school, but he's struggling in everything right now, even football and, you know, the things that he enjoys." And my mom said, "Well, the teachers are just killing him. He said they're marking him on his spelling, they're marking him, you know, saying he's cheating, and this is the stuff we're doing," and so on, and so on. So anyway, apparently he went back to the school and brought this up at a staff meeting. And again, I was not aware of this. And all of a sudden, my marks started to go back up. And apparently, he had talked to the teachers at a staff meeting and said, "Look, this guy's got a learning disability. You're calling him 'stupid,' and he's not doing anything that an editor wouldn't do. Right? You write a book, you take it to somebody and they edit it for you. How is that cheating?" So the teachers started to change their kind of outlook on how they would mark me. So they didn't mark me a whole lot on my spelling, they didn't mark me a whole lot, you know, on the different things that they called "cheating" at the time, and marked me on what I actually presented, as long as I followed through with that kind of process that I mentioned earlier. Well, my marks went up a bit, not a lot. And because of that, I was able to get into university.

Now, I applied to probably 20 different universities and colleges, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I would say close to 90 percent of my friends were going to the University of Saskatchewan right there in Saskatoon, and that's where I wanted to go, too. But I was getting denied, I'd get, you know, deny letters, yeah, average isn't high enough, here, here, here, all over the place. So I started to get a little sad, and I was, like, what am I going to do? You know? What am I going to do with my life here? And then one day, I get a letter in the mail, "You've been accepted to the University of Saskatchewan College of Education." And I was, like, "I hate school." [LAUGHTER] "Now I'm going to go to the university, which is more school which, okay, I can handle that. But I'm going to be stuck in a school the rest of my damn life." Well, what the hell, well, I'm ADD, let's go do it anyway, right? Okay.

So now we go to College of Education. And we're doing all right, we're going through there. And the very first year, you have to take, you know your -- in Saskatchewan you have to take a certain amount of Arts and Science classes, so you've got your English and Social Studies, and all these kind of classes. And then you take a few education classes on the side. And then your second year, you're pretty much -- you know, you go into your areas in the education classes. So I totally neglected the Math, because I'm okay with Math, I can do that, I never struggled with it. But I'll really focus on the English. And so my sister, she's 10 months younger than me, but was in university at the same time as I was. So I made sure that she was in my class, because I don't know if there's going to be any hot, smart girls in that room, right? So I know I can trust my sister. So anyway, I get her in the same English class as me, and we worked really, really hard. And I think it was more difficult on her, because she would have to help me with mine, right, and I would share on my ideas, and she would write it up. And she was, like, that bastard stole all my ideas, and now I have to write something completely different. But she was really good about it. She was really good about it. And I was so happy, I got a 75 in my first year university English class, 75! And I actually got more help from the university professor than I did from any single high school teacher I ever had. Any single high school teacher I ever had, which just kind of blew my mind that a university teacher, or a university professor, who has no education in how to teach -- because I'm sure many of you have had university professors, no clue what they're doing, right, they just throw information at you -- but he would help me. He would stay, he would come early, he would talk to me about -- and he would hand my papers back, "You should change this and then hand it in before I mark it." He'd do all kinds of stuff to help me do better. And because of that, I learned. Hey, you shouldn't do this, this is how you should do it, because he



showed me this, right? Those things kind of stuck with me. But because I focused so much on the English class and that Social Studies class, or History I guess it was, I neglected all the other classes. Now I didn't fail them, but it brought my average down to 64.73. You just happened to have to need a 65 average to stay in education. So I got the letter in the mail saying, "You have been asked to discontinue education for one year." I gave up. That was it. I'm done.

This is where everything really went south for me. And this can be a bit difficult for me to talk about, so bear with me a little. Over that next year, I started drinking, I started smoking pot. I started doing things that were very impulsive and reckless. And about eight or nine months into that kind of crazy life I was living, I was sitting at the table at about noon in the kitchen -- and oh, by the way, I was still living at my parents' house at this time -- and my mom comes down and, or, comes into the kitchen, and she sits down with me and she said, "You can't keep this up, Mike." And, you know, I'm hung over, and I'm, like, "Piss off, mom." Right, "piss off. Just leave me alone. I'm depressed, I'm sad. I don't care what you think. All my friends are in university, they're becoming nurses and doctors and dentists and biologists. And I can't even make it through one year of university. I can't read. I'm 20 years old, and I can't read." And she said, "You can't keep doing this, Mike." She worked at a bank, and she went, you know, so she could see my bank account, actually she still does my banking to this day. But she said to me, she goes, "You've spent \$5,000 in the last two weeks on booze. Five thousand dollars in two weeks on booze." And it's not like I was going out and buying rounds for everybody. I was spending \$5,000 -- I spent \$5,000 in two weeks on booze for myself. And she said, "You can't keep this up. You're going to kill yourself." And she was right. She was right. And she said, "In the paper here, there's a pilot project. And it's put on by EAPD, which, and if I remember correctly, was Employability Assistance for People with Disabilities. And she said, "Will you just give it a try? It's run through the Learning Disability Association of Saskatchewan, just give it a try." And I was adamant, I was going with this, screw you, mom, and it's for stupid people, you know, it's not for me. I don't need to do this. But she convinced me to do it.

So I went to the program, went down to the Learning Disability Association of Saskatchewan, which was located in a one-room classroom of Albert School at the time. Two people employed, very small organization at the time, and I met with a lady name Dale Rempel. And she said, "Yeah, you're exactly the type of people, or person, we're looking for. And we would love to have you, you know, join the program." So I said, what the hell, I'll check it out. So they sent me off. They got retested for the learning disability and ADHD, and they helped me work with my medication and all that kind of stuff. And we ended up going -- the class was run out of SIAST, which is, like, the college for if you want to be a welder, and culinary, and things like that, right? So that's where the class was. So I went there every day, and this is where things changed the other direction. In six months of going through the Learning Disability Association of Saskatchewan in this program, this pilot project, I learned to read. Six months. Something that every teacher that I had from kindergarten to grade 12 couldn't help me with. But they knew what to do, right? They had the background information. And like I said earlier, I don't blame any of those good teachers, right? I don't blame any of those good teachers. They tried. They just didn't know. These people were specialists in the area of learning disabilities and ADHD, and that's the whole class that was in there, it was just people with learning disabilities, and ADHD.

And in the first six months, I learned to read. And they started teaching me strategies. And they started teaching me strategies that would be helpful not just for academic life, but for life in general. And things started to come very quickly. And I was, like, "this is fricken awesome," right? How come this was so hard before? So I asked him, like, "what are you looking at to know what I need?" And they said, "well, this is your learning disability, you're not stupid. But these are the things that you have difficulty with, and these are ways around it, because this is what you're really good at. So we're going to use what you're really good at to get around the things that you're not so good at." So they used my strengths to work around



my weaknesses. And then that helped my weaknesses become stronger. And over time, I started doing that on my own. And I could adapt to different situations, and use that information to change things. And that helped me be really successful at university, and when I say "really successful," I was above that 65 percent average, right? So, but yeah, it was a difficult time.

And to this day, I thank God for the Learning Disability Association of Saskatchewan, because if it wasn't for them, I'd be dead or in jail. I was that close. And I tell people all the time, you know, it might not be the Learning Disability Association, it might be something else. But don't give up on yourself, you know, go, give it a try. And it's hard, especially when you don't want to, right? And I'm sure there's got to be someone in here who has a son or a husband or a daughter or a cousin that has depression or a learning disability. And it's difficult to try to convince them, it really is. But don't give up on them, because you can change their thinking, and you can get them the help they need, because it is out there. To find it can be difficult, but it is there.

Now, I ended up getting back in university, did pretty good. Kept using those strategies of finding those hot, smart girls and making them my friend, and did a pretty good job at that, and ended up passing. And going to university, I went for a long time. Most people would come out as a doctor. But I went for seven years to university. And one of the strategies that they gave me was don't take the full load, right? Don't take the full load. So I didn't. So I'd take, you know, three classes in the first semester, usually two during the day, you know, two during the day and one night class. And then the next semester, again, take two or three or four classes. And then one of the professors told me, take your -- the hardest class, the classes that you have the most difficulty with, take them in summer session and intersession, because they're three hour-long classes, or four hour-long classes I think they were, they run every day, Monday through Friday. But he said they're small, and you can get lots of help from the professor. So that's what I did. I took the most difficult classes. And it was the weirdest thing, those ended up being my best marks, because I was able to sit one-on-one, or in small groups, two or three of us with the professor themselves, and actually get a good conversation going, right? And that's how I learned. Not by reading the textbook, not by going through PowerPoints and listening to, you know, the videos and stuff. But it was actually through the discussion. So I was able to get all of that information. And now that I could read, just like, information overload, I can do this, this is great!

So university became a whole lot easier for me, and I was whole lot more successful using the strategies that I had. And I ended up graduating from University of Saskatchewan not only with my Bachelors of Education, but with my qualifications in Special Education. And I think I got three majors and three minors, because you just went forever, right, so you got all these classes that you took. So when I came out of university, I'm, like, oh my God, what am I going to do now? Now I've got to get a job. Now I'm back to that, I hate school, and I'm going to be stuck in one for the rest of my life, right? So what am I going to do? So I started to apply. And at the time, it was quite difficult to get a teaching job when I came out. There was a lot of teachers at the time, University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan both had education programs, and they were pumping a couple hundred teachers every year into the province. So it was quite difficult to get a job at the time. So I applied all over the place, Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, little towns, back by Rocanville where I grew up. I wasn't getting -- you know, you'd get a bunch of letters, "We're not hiring, go on our sub-list," or, "We're hiring temporary contracts," or things like that. But I did get one contract and an interview from Maryfield, which is, I would say, about 26 kilometres away from Rocanville, where I grew up. And my mom said, "Well, it's a job. And you'd be out of the house. You could live with your grandma and drive to work, and it would be nice. Your grandpa is dead, and you could live with your grandma and look after her." And I said, "Yeah, it's a long way but, you know, don't really want to go back to Rocanville, but okay, I'll go down for the interview and see how it goes."

So I drove, I drove five hours down to Rocanville, stayed with my grandma overnight, went to Moose Jaw, had the interview. I think it went pretty well. I was pretty happy, and I go back to my grandma, she asked how did it go? I said, "I think it went really well." Went back home, and I get a phone call from the school division saying, "We really liked your interview, you've got the qualifications and credentials we're looking for. If you're interested, we have a job for you in Maryfield, and we'll send you a contract." So they mailed me off a contract, and I was sitting there, and kept getting letters back, "Join our sub-list," and so on and so on. And I was actually sitting at the kitchen table again. And it's funny how things happen at the kitchen table, hey? I'm sure it happens for lots of you. But I had the contract out, and I was all by myself, everybody was gone, I was just sitting at my house by myself, and I was just about to sign the thing, I started filling it out, looking at it, and do I really want to do this? Well, what the hell. Here's the ADD kicking in, hey, just go for it, right? So I started filling it out, and I haven't quite signed it yet, I was filling it out, and the phone rings. And it's Dave Slosky on the phone. And he's the principal of Martinsville High School, which is just outside of Saskatoon, maybe a 20 minute drive outside of Saskatoon. And he says, "We're doing interviews for a part-time Special Education teacher. And we'd like you to come in for an interview." And I said, "Well, I've got a contract sitting right here in front of me, I was just about to sign it." He said, "Well, that's fine, if you want to sign it, go ahead. But it's always good, you're fresh out of university, come for the interview anyway, right? Come for the interview, and anyway, it's good practice." So I said, "what the hell, we'll go check it out."

So I put on my suit and away I went. Got out there and waited in the lobby and they called me in. And I remember, this is the funniest thing because I remember it very clearly, this Dave Slosky and Bruce Brooks and Linda Tooney and one of the board members sitting there, and they introduced themselves, and they said, "Do you need a minute to, you know, collect your thoughts or anything?" "No, no, let's go, you know, let's get this underway, and let's give her a shot and see how we do." And she said, well -- Linda Tooney said, "Well, please just start us off by telling us a bit about yourself." So I said, "well, I'm Michael Karras, and I have a learning disability and ADHD, and I'd like to be your Special Ed teacher and teach people how to read." [LAUGHTER] So anyway, from there, I'm thinking, oh God, I just blew that, right? So the rest of the interview went on, and I think I did pretty good after that, you know. So I was there for a while, and finished the interview, and Dave Slosky, he says, "Well, we have a couple of interviews after you, but we contact everybody that we interview whether they get it or not, and we'll let you know." And I said, "Okay." So anyway, I parked out in front of the school, and I was just getting in my car, and all of a sudden, Bruce Brooks runs out and he knocks on the passenger's side window, and he says, "Are you going to be home today?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm just going home right now." And he said, "Okay, good." And I was, like, that's weird. Why would -- they just told me they'll call me and stuff, right? So anyway, I get home. And literally, I was not home for five minutes. I was not home for five minutes. So either they cancelled the rest of the interviews, or they made them five minutes long, because I'm literally 25 minutes from my house, and they offered me the job. They said, "We'd love to have you. It's part-time, we want -- you're exactly the type of person we want in this position." Well, perfect. I can live in my parents' basement. [LAUGHTER] Right? I don't have to -- I can drive to work every day, it's part-time, right? Living the dream. Living the dream, right?

So anyway, I sign this, go down, and I'm going to work at Martinsville High School, perfect. So sure enough, get the job, within about five days, I'm 80 percent. Within the month I'm 100 percent. And I'm, like, well, this dream sucks now, you know? But no, it was awesome. And I spent 10 years as a Special Ed teacher at Martinsville High School. And it was the best 10 years of my life. It was so awesome! Now, not because it was really easy work, it wasn't. It was very difficult work. Just imagine -- is there lots of Special Ed teachers in here? Yeah, okay, so you guys got a lot of paperwork? [LAUGHTER] A lot of interviews, a lot of angry parents, a lot of crazy teachers, right? A lot of crazy kids -- it's a difficult job. I feel for you. But it's very rewarding, and I love that position more than anything in the world. And I miss it to this day. I miss it to



this day. So being dyslexic, having difficulty reading and writing, I got all this paperwork, right? And I'm, like, holy crap! So I'm working away, and I'm working away, working away, and doing all this stuff.

Now, the school kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger, so they ended up hiring another Special Ed teacher. And her name was Judy Kolach. And she worked at the elementary school in town as well, so she moved over to the high school. And what I mean the school got bigger, it basically doubled in size in about the first five years, five or six years, something like that. So they ended up hiring another Special Ed teacher. So we had a classroom which we kind of ran Special Ed kind of out of, and then there was the two of us in this little tiny office with two computers, and all of our resources and stuff like that. And she was hilarious. She recently passed away of cancer, but she'd be more than happy for me to share this story with you. So it was kind of funny, she was going through the change of life at the time, and I'm ADD and nuts over here. So I'm blowing on her wrists, and she's giving me massages, right, to calm down. The whole school thought we were nuts, right? But, you know, we had such a good working relationship that people would come. People would come.

We changed the way that Special Ed worked in that school. Before, it was very, very segregated. You know, you're a Special Ed kid, or you weren't. And with her and I, everybody was a Special Ed kid. We worked out a system where we worked and met with every single student in that school. We met with every single student that was coming into that school. We would go over to the elementary schools and meet with every single grade eight student as a class and as individuals, before June, so that they knew what was happening when they came over. And I had -- you know, I'd meet with their teachers, I'd meet with their parents. We'd have information nights. And some of the most difficult teachers I've run into in my career were men, and they were Math and Science teachers. On the other hand, the men and the Math and Science teachers that were the most difficult ended up being some of my biggest supporters, and would change. And they were, like, "I wish someone would have shown me this before." They're, like, "Not only am I spending less time teaching, I'm not having to reteach. Give me those adaptation sheets. I want to know what these kids' issues are, so I can prepare for next year."

And one of the biggest guys that kind of balked me was Rory. And he's a wonderful friend to this day, we see each other all the time. And he's very tall, he's about six foot four, and he teaches Calculus and Physics, and the upper Maths and stuff. And he's constantly asking me, "I've got this kid, what do I do?" And I'm, like, "Well, don't you have a Special Ed teacher in your school now?" And he's, like, "No. Well yes, but they're not like you. They don't know how to do stuff." And I'm, like -- but he does things all the time. And he's always trying new things, whereas before, this is the way I teach, and if you don't learn, it's your fault. And that's not a way to go about teaching. Not just kids with learning disabilities, but everybody. And the comment that Rory, I think, makes that affects me the most would be around the accommodations, or the things that I suggest to him to do might be specific to a student. But he said, "When I do it to the whole class, everybody seems to benefit." And I'm, like, "Yeah, that's the key," right, that's the key. And you don't just have to teach one way. You can teach multiple ways, right, especially in Physics and Science. The possibility -- here's the Math, here's the visual, here's the hands-on different way of doing it. And here's about two other ways that you can do the Math. And he's, like, "Then you guys choose." Let the kids choose. And they do. And he said, "They do wonderful." Right? So these are the things that I was doing at the school at the time.

And it came to the point where it was funny, because I started finding out that I was running out of work to do. And I was, like, what am I going to do? This doesn't look good, they're going to fire one of us if we don't have work to do, right? So I started looking, I started looking for situations that might end up being a problem for somebody. So I would go in classes, and I'd role model. I'd pretend, you know, you'd look at kids' faces and see, they're not understanding. So I'm going to raise my hand and ask a question. And I



would intervene. I started intervening before things would happen. I would start talking to kids and having conversations with parents and teachers and community members, and finding out what's going on. And I could intervene before something happened.

And when I left that school to become a vice principal, within about six, seven months of doing that, I had, you know, bombardment of emails, bombardment of phone calls, get back here, everything's falling apart. You know, the kids are crazy, they're looking for you all the time. They don't trust the new Special Ed teacher, we don't have our adaptation sheets. And it's a lot of work, and that's why I'm saying to the Special Ed teachers out here, it's a lot of work. But kudos on you. Without you guys, there's so many kids that won't get what they need. But it's a lot of work, and I miss it. I really do miss it dearly. It's something that even though I'm a vice principal and it has its different rewards, it's a profession part that I really do miss.

From being a Special Ed teacher at Martinsville High School, I ended up a capacity-building Special Education -- but basically what that was, was -- do you guys call them "coordinators" out here? I guess "Special Ed coordinator," where the coordinator would go around and help Special Ed teachers, especially new ones? Does that make sense? Especially new ones, kind of get their feet wet, and try to learn about the kids and help them with their paperwork. So anyway, I did that kind of thing for a couple of years at the Division office. And that was really rewarding as well, but you didn't get the kind of kid connection. Does that make sense to you guys? You didn't get the kid connection, but you got to meet everybody around the school division. And the school division, Prairie Spirit School Division, outside of Saskatoon, kind of goes around the whole city, so there was days where I spent most of my time in the car. And this was starting to become a problem for me, and, you know, being ADD and sitting in a car all day wasn't really my thing. The work I was doing with the people was good and it was rewarding, and people were very appreciative and loved what I was doing. But I couldn't do it anymore. It was becoming very, very difficult.

So I actually went into the Division office and I was talking to one of the superintendents, and I said, "You know, I love this job," and so on and so on, "But I don't think I can keep it up. There's just too much time in the car, and I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't do that." And she said, "You know, there's a vice principal's position coming up at a fairly difficult school, and we don't anticipate a lot of people applying for it. Would you be interested?" I forgot to take my Ritalin that day, so I said yes, right away. So I filled it out. And then I was, like, geez, a really difficult school. I have things so easy right now, you know, I'm back to that, you know, geez, what am I going to do? So I said sure, I'll take a shot at that. So I went to the interview, and they all knew me by this time, so I didn't have to say, "I'm Michael Karras, I have a learning disability and ADHD," but they all knew. So I ended up getting that job as a vice principal. And I've been there at Lord Asquith School in the Town of Asquith for the past seven years, as a vice principal. And that's how I essentially became a vice principal. That student became a vice principal. And there's a million little stories within there that have affected me or affected others. But that's essentially how I became the vice principal of a school.

Now, over my career as a Special Ed teacher, as a student, you know, elementary, high school, university as a Special Ed teacher and vice principal, I have a lot of, I guess, stories. I would like to share a few of them with you. Again, these can be a little difficult at times, so I'll do my best to share them with you. I guess I'd like to start off by saying, don't ever underestimate the amount of power your words and actions have on the students and the parents and the families that you deal with.

The reason I say that is because I'm going to share two specific incidents with you, where the first one was as Special Ed teacher, where I was working with a young girl. She couldn't read, completely illiterate. She



knew her ABCs, but had difficulty even knowing which letter was which. So I worked quite extensively with her. She was in grade 10 at the time. She had some problems with depression, and I guess you could see that tendency towards suicidal thoughts, and things like that, right? Undiagnosed disability at the time, and kind of made her way through school, just getting bumped through. She was in grade 10 or 11 at the time. So I started working with her, we got her diagnosed. She had a learning disability. And she had some difficulty with substance abuse, alcohol and drugs. So I worked with her, and she started to pick stuff up, and she was, you know, learning to read. And eventually, after about four or five months, she actually wrote a whole paragraph about some poems that we had read. She was able to read it out loud to me. And I was, like, oh, this was the best! I took her to Judy and I said, "Look at what she can do," and she did it again, and so on and so on. And we went back my office, and I sat her down, and I said, "I'm so proud of you." And she just started bawling! Just started bawling. And I was, like, oh crap, what the hell did I do, right? I offended this girl, I'm trying to make her happy, right? What did I just do? So I said to her, I said, "Did I say something wrong? Did I offend you? What's going on, hun?" And she said, "Nobody has ever told me they were proud of me before." How horrible must that be, for someone to be in grade 10 or 11, and not have anyone tell them how proud they are of her? And again, the power of your words, the power of your actions. No one cared, right? No one cared. Not her parents, not her teachers, no one cared about her. She just needed someone to look out for her.

Now the other one was a young girl in grade seven. And her mother had brought her in. Now, I'll give you a bit of background on this girl. She was quite popular, very athletic. You wouldn't see any idea of any school struggles, she wasn't -- I wouldn't call her a high academic, but, you know, high 60s, maybe low, mid-70s, somewhere around there, on most of her subjects. And lots of friends, very popular. Anyway, her mother brought her in one day and said, "Can we speak to you, Mr. Karras?" And I said, "Well, absolutely. My door's always open. Come on in." And she sat down with her mom. And her mom said, "We have a problem. We're not sure what to do." And she said "she won't go and speak with the counsellor." And I said, "Well, I'm not a counsellor, so don't take anything I say for, you know, to heart, but I'll do whatever I can to help, my door is always open, you know that." And she said, "Well, she's really depressed. She has a learning disability." And right there, I said, "Well, what the hell" -- like I stopped her, and I said, "Well, why didn't you tell anybody? You've been going to this school for how long, and you haven't told anybody that she has a learning disability." She said, "Well, we were kind of embarrassed and, you know" and so on and so on. And I was, like, "Oh, geez, like, okay, let's move past that, and let's get going. What's the problem?" Well, her friends were making fun of her, you know, oh, she can't read, and making fun of her and stuff. And the parents had gotten divorced, a whole bunch of stuff had happened. So she had been cutting. It turns out she had been cutting.

So right there, I said, "Okay, can I stop you? Because I need to hear this from her." And I said, "Can I ask you to leave, because she probably won't share this information with you here." And mom was, like, yeah, whatever you do, we just want the help. So I said, you know, "So what's going on here? Are you cutting?" And she's, like, "Yeah." And I said, "Well, show me." And she was. She was cutting under the armpits and the inside of the leg there, where no one could see, so I knew that was pretty bad. And I said, "Well, what are you cutting with?" And she said, "A pair of scissors." And I said, "Where are they? Because your mom's concerned. She said she searched your room and she can't find these scissors, or whatever you were cutting with." She had taken the bottom off of her lamp by her bed and put them up underneath the lamp. So anyway, we talked for a bit about what the actual root problem was, right, and it came down to struggling in school, and the divorce, and there was multiple, you know, things going on. So I called mom back in. I said, "Well, we got an idea." And I asked her, "Can I tell mom everything you told me?" And she's, like, "Yeah." And I know we can move forward, right, as soon as she said I can tell her mom, this girl wants help, we can move forward.

So I worked with this young girl probably about three or four months. You know, we worked on strategies around depression, and we worked on strategies around feeling self-esteem and self-advocating for yourself. And we talked about how to diffuse situations with your friends when they're teasing you, and having good frank discussions with them about, you know, how that makes you feel, and if they're good friends, they won't do that anymore, right? And we kept working. We worked on her learning disability. We got her tested and found out what she really did, and we got some good recommendations, and stuff like that. And we're making progress, and I was really happy. And then her and her mom came in after about three or four months and said, "Thank you so much, Mr. Karras, for all the work you've done and everything, but we think it's best that we move to a different school in the city. I have now moved to the city and she's going to come live with me, and we're going to try a different school." Now, personally, I was a little disappointed, because I just put all this work into this young girl. But if that's what she needs, that's what she needs, right? So I encouraged her, "You go. You do the best you can. If you ever need anything, my door is always open, you come back here and I'll help you." Right?

So a couple of years had gone by and I hadn't heard anything from this young lady. And I was standing outside my office, and I get this kind of tapping on my shoulder and I turn around, and this girl just throws herself on me, and I'm, like, oh, geez, what the hell's going on here? And I look, and it's her. And I'm, like, "Oh, hey, how are you doing?" And she said, "I was in town and I was hoping I could, you know, talk to you for a minute." And I'm, like, "Well, sure, what's up?" And she said, "No no no, can we talk privately?" And I said, "Okay." Something must be wrong, right? So she comes into my office and we sit down. And I said, "Well, what's up? What can I do for you today? What's going on?" And she just held her head low. And she didn't really say anything. So being a LD and ADHD and being a Special Ed teacher, I know you need at least 30 seconds of wait time for someone like me. So I'm waiting and I'm waiting and I'm waiting, and I'm, like, checking my watch, and I'm waiting and I'm waiting. And she lifts her head, and she says, "I just wanted to let you know that you were the best teacher I ever had." Now, I'm getting a bit teary-eyed. At the time I wasn't, I was just, like, what the hell are you talking about? I never taught you anything. I didn't teach you English or Social Studies, you know, I didn't teach you any class, right? And she hung her head down again. And I'm waiting, and I'm, like, oh now, I really offended her, right? Like I actually offended her. Maybe I should apologize, but we'll just let this -- I'll wait it out. And I said, "What did I ever do to make you think I was the best teacher you ever had?" And she slowly lifted her head, and she had tears running down her face. And she said, "You taught me not to be afraid. You taught me not to be afraid." Well, I tell you, I cried the whole way home. Ten years later, I'm still crying. The power you have with the words and actions that you have are unbelievable on young students, on people. You can make the change.

I'd like to leave you with a quote, and I hope I don't butcher it here. It's a Mark Twain quote. And Patty O'Rourke is the one that shared this with me in grade nine. And he said, "The two most important days in your life, Michael, are the day that you're born and the day you find out why." Now, I found out my why. And I hope you guys discover yours. Thank you.

Lawrence Barns: That brings us to the end of our message today. I trust, like I was, that Michael's story both challenged you and inspired you to do things differently. I've been Lawrence Barns. You've been listening to TalkLD and until the next time, goodbye.

