Transcript

They didn't know how to help: How my LDs made me a better educator

[*Footsteps, we hear someone pull up a chair and sit down*]

[Michael] 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.

[*Crickets Chirp*]

[Interview Panel] Huh?

[*Upbeat music*]

[Narrator Michael] That's me in the interview for my first job. When I was at school, the last place I ever thought I would end up working in, is a school. I grew up in a small rural community in Saskatchewan. I have an older brother and younger sister, and as a family, we all tried to help each other.

[Narrator Michael] My dad and my dad's dad both had difficulty reading. So when I started struggling with picking up language, letters, decoding, you know, things like that, my parents were not really surprised. It was around Grade One that my parents, looking for answers, sent me to a summer program at a local university.

[Narrator Michael] I went through a battery of tests, all different types, psychological tests, speech and language tests, occupational therapy tests. And after it was over, we sat down with the professionals, and they said, "You know, you are quite bright. "You're intelligent, "but you have a learning disability "called dyslexia and ADHD."

[Narrator Michael] So my parents took this information, and they went back to the schools. At that time, there was special ed, but it wasn't quite the same way it is today.

There wasn't a lot of information about learning disabilities or about ADHD. So even though my parents had this diagnosis, the teachers just didn't know what to do with it. They didn't know how to help. I went through a lot of schools. Some were better than others.

[Narrator Michael] One school refused to enroll me. They said, "We don't take kids with disabilities "because we can't help them." Another only allowed me to attend the special education class in a segregated part of the building in a segregated classroom. Some teachers I had were great. They really wanted to help me. And I would get accommodations to help my learning. And I started to improve. But when I started to improve, they would always take them away again. It baffled my parents and me. Why would you take something away that's working? Would you take glasses from a kid who is shortsighted?

[*Classroom ambience, children and adults laughing loudly]*

[Reflective music]

[Narrator Michael] The thing that I do remember very clearly about all the schools, 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. I was in Grade Four and Five at the time, and you've got teachers singling you out to the rest of the class. It's really hard on a kid. By the time I got to high school, my reading level was around Grade One or Grade Two. I didn't have any accommodations, so I made my own.

[Narrator Michael] I would make friends with the smartest kids in class, ask them about their notes. I'd dictate essays to my sister, and she would write them down for me. Mom would type them up for me because she could type fast. Then we would go through it, checking the punctuation and grammar. They were my words, I just didn't physically write them. One time, I wrote, well, dictated, to my sister an essay on Macbeth, and got 65%, which for me was amazing. My teacher pulled me aside after class, and told me it

couldn't be mine. It was too good. I told her how I was doing my homework with my mom and my sister. "That's cheating," they said, and changed my marks. I was devastated. I stopped caring about my academic work, and focused on the things I was great at, like football and sport. But soon, my academic failure started to affect everything. I was depressed.

[*A knock at the door*]

[Narrator Michael] My mom was surprised when my football coach arrived at our front door one day.

- [Mom] Oh!

[Narrator Michael] "What's going on with Michael?" He was worried about me. My mom told him everything. And all of a sudden, my marks started to go back up. My coach had talked to the teachers at a staff meeting. "Look, this guy's got a learning disability. "You're calling him stupid. "And he's not doing anything that any writer wouldn't do. "Right? You write a book, "you take it to somebody and they edit it for you. "How is that cheating?"

[Narrator Michael] Because of my coach advocating for me, the teachers started to change their kind of outlook on how they would mark me. And because of that, I was able to get into university.

- [Children] Yay!

[Michael] I made it through my first year. I did have some support, just not enough. My grades were not high enough to continue, and I was forced to drop out. My depression returned. I didn't look after myself. I started doing impulsive and reckless things. I hit rock bottom.

[Narrator Michael] "You can't keep this up. "You're going to kill yourself," my mom said one day. "In the paper here, there's a pilot project. "It's run through the Learning Disabilities Association. "Just give it a try."

[*Happy, upbeat music*]

[Narrator Michael] In just six months attending this program, I learned to read, something that every teacher that I had from Kindergarten to Grade 12 couldn't help me with. Why? Because they knew what to do. These people were specialists in the area of learning disabilities and ADHD. They were specialists in helping people like me.

[Narrator Michael] They taught me strategies that would be helpful, not just for academic life, but for life in general. And I was like, this is fricken' awesome, right? They taught me to use my strengths to work around my weaknesses. And then they 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.

[Narrator Michael] One of the strategies that they gave me, was: don't take the full load. So I didn't. I went back to university. I worked at my own pace, and eventually I graduated with a Bachelor's of Education, and qualifications in special education. And that brings me back to the start of the story.

[Michael] 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.

[Children] Yay!

[Narrator Michael] I got the job. And in fact, after many years, teaching special ed, I'm now a vice principal. I hated school. I struggled through school, and I knew there was a better way to support students with LDs, because I had experienced it firsthand.

[Narrator Michael] We changed the way that special ed worked in that school. My colleague and I 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.

[Narrator Michael] I'd meet with their teachers. I'd meet with their parents. We'd have information nights. And, I talked to the teachers. I told them my experience, and taught them how to use accommodations in their classrooms. I showed them how using accommodations can help everyone. And I shifted the teacher's attitudes. The teachers at that school learned that making small changes to the way they teach can make a huge difference in your class, and to the success of your students.

[Narrator Michael] Now, my question to you is how is my story going to change the things you do in your classroom? Which version of Michael is in your classroom?

[*Applause*]

[*Upbeat Music*]