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Physical Challenges in Forensics: An Autoethnography Advocating for Accommodations on Behalf of Speakers with Physical Challenges in Competitive Speech Environments

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Physical Challenges in Forensics:
An Autoethnography Advocating for Accommodations on Behalf of Speakers with
Physical Challenges in Competitive Speech Environments

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee.

Dr. Leah White, Chair

Dr. Daniel Cronn-Mills

Dr. Jacqueline Arnold

Dedication

This project is dedicated to those who need advocacy. We are all responsible to stand up to injustice and speak out on behalf of others and ourselves. Stand up. Speak up. Be heard.

Acknowledgements

Many people joined me on my journey as I pursued my degree and wrote my thesis. The following deserve specific gratitude.

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Emmy: You are a gift. All along I said you turned my world upside down when you were born. I never knew my world was always upside down, and you turned it right side up. You are a glimpse into my past and my future. You exude grace, radiate beauty and emanate hope.

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Jesus: The Reason for all I am and the Hope for all I will be.

Abstract

The realm of competitive forensics is filled with challenges including written and unwritten rules and norms, multiple categories with different guidelines for each, a distinct culture only people intimately connected with the activity can navigate without conscious effort, and a basic knowledge of the ever-changing world of communication. For competitors who struggle with physical disabilities, the challenges are beyond daunting. Using the method of autoethnography, this paper investigates how students with physical challenges can successfully participate through accommodation and how speech coaches can advocate for their physically-disabled speakers and request and implement the best accommodations.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I glanced over my shoulder when I heard the familiar voice of our speech team's middle-school coach as she addressed the tournament manager.

"We need a key for the elevator."

"Why?" the manager asked.

"We have a speaker who can't climb the stairs. I'll make sure I accompany him each time he is on the elevator."

I quickly busied myself with last-minute adjustments to the speakers' schedules for the day. I was volunteering in the tabulation room and was very interested in the conversation, but I kept my eyes on my papers as if I was not listening. After a long pause, the manager asked his assistant to get the elevator key. He handed it to my middle-school coach with instructions to not allow anyone else on the elevator and then waited until the coach was out of hearing range.

"Who is she talking about?" the manager asked his staff.

"Oh, the kid in storytelling. He has something with his legs, I guess," the assistant replied.

"He's not in a wheelchair, but he can't *walk up stairs*?" the manager continued.

"Keep an eye on them. We better get that key back, and we better not have problems with kids using the elevator for fun. Isn't storytelling an odd choice for someone who says he can't even walk up stairs?"

I bit my tongue. I was new enough in my coaching position the manager had not connected me to the coach making the request. I wondered if the boy's backstory would make a difference to him. What if he knew the boy had severe physical deficiencies and was a master at concealing them? What if I described how, under fatigue and stress, his legs would give out with no warning and leave him crumpled and humiliated on the floor? What if I told him how hard the speaker's family had worked to keep him ambulatory, so the fact he *wasn't* in a wheelchair was a victory? What if I explained he chose storytelling so he could move frequently and, if he fell, somehow incorporate the mishap into the storyline?

I didn't. "The kid in storytelling" who had "something with his legs" is my son. I was afraid I would come across as a pushy coach who expected special treatment for her kid. I was more afraid they would recognize the boy's last name and view me not just as his pushy coach but as his defensive, overprotective mother.

Nat, Elise (Mom) and Elise (Coach)

My son, Nathaniel (Nat), has deficiencies in his skeletal, neurological and muscular systems and the connectivity tissue between his bones. The bones in his legs grow in different directions making activities we all take for granted, such as getting up and walking, major obstacles. While most children move automatically, every move Nat makes is a cognitive effort. After working with doctors and specialists for a dozen years and going through diagnoses from cerebral palsy to muscular dystrophy, he now has an umbrella diagnosis of dyspraxia which is a core-processing deficiency. One example of how dyspraxia affects Nat is through his automatic responses. As a toddler, when Nat fell

he would fall flat on the ground. His brain did not send messages to his arms to catch him. He taught his body how to extend his arms by being stretched on his belly over a large ball and slowly rolling back and forth and touching his hands to the carpet as he neared the floor. Another issue with which he still struggles is math. Nat can understand a concept and know a process, but by the time he has thought through the problem, come to an answer, told his fingers how to position the pencil in his hand, instructed his hand how to write the lines and curves to make the numbers and letters, and successfully placed everything he needs on the page, his brain has likely forgotten not only the answer but the entire process as well. He is often mentally exhausted by physical effort.

Nat's condition will be degenerative for the next decade, after which we do not know. Doctors do not understand how Nat can run, but he does. The summer he was seven, he worked with a team of physical and occupational therapists three afternoons a week to learn how to ride a bike. The accomplishment baffled doctors. We will know by his mid-20s if he will need wheelchair assistance. Watching him grow up has been a bittersweet experience for me. I am often filled with joy and pride at his accomplishments and heartbroken knowing his accomplishments are nothing more than daily moments for other children. I still marvel at this 16-year-old as he tears down the street on his bike. I watch his limbs move in tandem and see the independence this two-wheeled contraption offers him, and my heart swells. In the same instant I can flicker to wondering how long he will be able to ride a bike. Nat loses skills every year as his muscles and processing abilities betray him by atrophying or confusing messages. A day could come when he takes out his bike one spring and cannot coax his legs into pushing the pedals.

I've witnessed the demise of his abilities to play piano and trumpet, draw, participate in soccer and wrestling, and construct Lego creations and science experiments. We carefully shop for clothes with as few buttons and zippers as possible and leave shirts and neckties fastened so he can easily pull the garments over his head. The urge to protect him and step in to do things for him in order to make his life easier is overwhelming. Some days I cry for him but have no specific reason. I grieve for the dreams I had to give up for him and for the dreams he will never have for himself.

Nat is not athletic in build or by nature which is fortunate. If his goal was to be a football player, common sense and medical advice would discourage the choice. Nat is, however, an articulate young man with an expressive personality. He came with me to observe a speech meet when he was in the fifth grade and was hooked. On that day, I judged rounds of drama, poetry, and storytelling. Nat came alive during the storytelling round. As each competitor left the room, he would jump up and show me how he thought the person could have reenacted the story better, and he was spot on! I finally assigned a story to him ("The Three Little Pigs"), sent him to the hallway to practice, and had him present to me at the end of the round. One precise moment shines in my memory. The wolf in the story had just blown down a little pig's house. After he struck a sinister pose, my noodle-y, enthusiastic, expressive fifth grader turned his nose in the air, sniffed in surprise and said, "Hm, smells like bacon." I almost fell over laughing, and he has been passionate about the activity ever since.

Nat has the potential to excel in speech, and participating in competitive forensics is perfect for him. Nat fatigues easily and his body does not handle stress well. He has

been known to suddenly collapse, fall out of chairs, experience pain when standing or walking and have great difficulty changing physical positions. As his mother, I know he needs frequent rest, hydration, high-protein snacks, low anxiety levels and a feeling of security and well-being. As his speech coach, I can accommodate those needs at speech meets by requesting elevator keys, keeping his water bottle full, making sure he has a bag of mixed nuts on hand and assigning a captain to help Nat find his rooms.

The first time Nat observed a state competition he was in the sixth grade. He attended with our district's novice team so he was not under my direct supervision. He walked more in one day than he ever had before. He climbed staircases multiple times, literally ran from room to room between rounds, had to step over people in crowded rooms and find awkward places to sit still. I saw him after second round, and he was in a hallway pacing back and forth. I knew his agitation was not a good sign. I urged him to sit and catch his breath and to drink water. He refused, and I understood immediately: his body was in deficit, and if he sat down he would lose the little control he had left over his movement. He had to keep moving to keep up his momentum. Sitting for third round depleted his body's inertia. After third round, he was unable to move. He could no longer control his legs, and they refused to support him much less carry him as he walked. He was in severe pain and was afraid people would view him as "different" if he asked for help.

I helped him to a bench in the hallway and found the novice coach, and I popped some pain medications in Nat's mouth as we waited for her to arrive. I explained the situation, and she had her husband bring Nat back to the hotel for the night. One part of

the experience I will forever appreciate was how her husband intentionally sat and talked with Nat on the bench until final round was underway. When the halls were empty, he scooped up Nat and carried him to their vehicle. No one else saw, and Nat's dignity was preserved. That night Nat soaked in a hot tub and went to sleep while I made a mental plan to prevent another episode of debilitating physical exhaustion. He now regularly takes elevators, rests and hydrates between rounds, and comes to find me if he is in pain or shaky.

Since Nat is not in a wheelchair and his condition does not manifest itself visibly all of the time if properly attended, some believe he just does not feel like taking the stairs and uses his mom to get a "free ride." On the occasions when he does over-exert himself or fall, opponents and coaches alike have been known to make derogatory remarks. On more than one occasion Nat has said, "I wish I were in a wheelchair. Then people would see right away I am disabled and they would expect less of me physically." One day when Nat was about 9, we were sitting in the waiting room of his allergist. Nat has to find a way to brace his body so he does not fall out of chairs, so he either sits on his knees or brings his legs up to his torso. This day, he had his feet on the chair as he rested his chin on his knees and hugged his legs to his body. Another patient, a middle-aged woman, came in, walked over to Nat and towered over him as she said, "It is bad manners to put your feet on furniture. You are in public. Use good manners." She caught us both by surprise. Nat looked at me, and I quietly nodded to him. I was speechless. All I could think was I wanted him to be in the practice of obeying adults. We sat silently until the doctor called him in. When he left, I leveled the woman with a glare and said icily,

“He has a condition that mimics muscular dystrophy, and we are happy he can sit in a regular chair at all. He has special permission to sit in any way he likes to keep his balance and alleviate pain.” I was furious at her, but I was more furious at myself for not saying this to her in front of him. When we finally made it to the car, Nat cried and I told him what I said to her. At that point it was little consolation. He expressed how she would have left him alone had he been in a wheelchair. Since that day, I know Nat has been self-conscious about how he sits and moves differently than other people. A wheelchair would give him permission to be physically different and no one would question his need for an elevator key.

I request elevator keys for any child with special physical needs. I would not, probably, check in on any other child as often as I do Nat. I would rather be perceived as a pushy coach than an overbearing mom. As my son’s mother and coach, I find myself wavering on when to intercede on his behalf. As a mom, I want Nat to be able to advocate for himself and make clear what he needs. As a coach, I want my speaker to have every possible advantage. I am more comfortable advocating for a speaker generally than for my son specifically. I have no problem announcing to a room of coaches and judges when a student has a special need requiring brighter lights or lip reading or extra room for crutches, etc. If a student has an anxiety or panic attack disorder, for instance, I will let others know they may need to find me if the student gets overstimulated or explain how the student has a helper along. I am proud to “go to bat” for my kids and help their days go smoothly. I bite my tongue more often than not when it comes to Nat. I am afraid my voice will quaver as I talk. I would be embarrassed if I could not keep my

emotions in check or, heaven forbid, I began to tear up. The situation is so much more personal; the vulnerability is more than I can manage. If I am met with doubt or animosity, I am certain anger would creep in causing an emotional response which would damage my credibility and maybe cast a shadow on others' perceptions of Nat. If I accidentally share more than I should, I might humiliate Nat. I do not want to breach confidentiality.

I don't worry about this with other students. I discuss with parents what information is appropriate to share, and I bring concerns to tournament managers if necessary. If the speaker is embarrassed, I gently explain how we are educating others and increasing his/her chances of a fair round. I can't be objective in Nat's case. Honestly, about two years into my coaching career, I wish I had registered my own children under a pseudonym. I wonder if I could speak up for Nathan James better than for Nat Row.

I certainly do not hide my connection to Nat, but I do not flaunt it either. In most cases, when special arrangements need to be made, I ask another coach on our team to make the request lest I come across as a "helicopter parent" rather than a coach. I certainly admit to being overprotective, and that is a personal struggle I face. All three of my children are on my speech team, and I often stop myself from reminding them to eat a healthful lunch. If I do not remind my other speakers to opt for fruit, I should not remind my kids just because they are my offspring. Advocating for a disabled child is different than being an over-conscientious mom, though. In addition, advocating for a disabled child as a mother is even different than advocating for a disabled child as a coach.

Nat is not the only speaker on our team with a disability. Our school district is small, and the coaching staff has offered an open door to anyone wanting to join the team. Through the years we have had speakers with visual impairments ranging from poor sight to legally blind, hearing impairments requiring hearing aids and minimal lip reading, situational disabilities such as the occasional broken arm or leg or foot, speech impediments from lisps to stutters to sound formation difficulties, health concerns such as diabetes where an insulin pump or regular blood- level checks are necessary, and several students who are on different points of the Autism spectrum including Asperger's.

Each struggle is as unique as the child. Even two children with the same disability may require different accommodations to allow each one to be successful or at least comfortable. A coach must know each child's individual needs and be able and willing to communicate his/her needs to fellow coaches, teammates, and tournament managers.

A substantial part of the problem is the culture of the "speech world" and the expected behaviors and unwritten rules of speakers (Epping & Labrie, 2005). Coaches say we want an atmosphere where every speaker has a chance to succeed and claim all of our actions are to promote children in general, but the culture is not set up to be accommodating. We can handle written rules. I know our state's high school league mandates all students be allowed the chance to participate no matter the disability as per federal legislation. The unwritten rules—the norms which set the standards of success—are what we battle since many of the expectations of correctness are in judges' minds rather than in the rules handbook. On critique sheets, it is not uncommon to see remarks urging a speaker with a speech impediment to "articulate more" or encouraging a

visually-impaired student to “have better eye contact.” Common sense would tell any judge to take the obvious obstacles into account, but the speech world has a set of boundaries where we feel required to hold all students to the same level whether they are physically capable or not. How the difficulties multiply exponentially for students with invisible disabilities is unimaginable.

Nat’s primary category for several seasons was storytelling. The Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) lists rules on their website, and storytelling’s main purpose is to teach students to retell stories extemporaneously and accurately. The rules do not give mandates or suggestions for characterization, stances, voices, etc., except to state nothing can be added to the story or go against the author’s intent. When Nat received comments about keeping his movement more limited, or sharper, or using more pops (snapping into a character’s stance), he was frustrated because he was doing what he could. He was articulate, his words were clear, he followed the story beautifully, he used vocal and facial expressions, and he had well-written introductions and conclusions. He went above and beyond the published rules, but his movement appeared floppy and sloppy and he was often marked down for his unusual range of motion.

The last two years as Nat has learned to better control his muscle groups, he has been in prose and advanced to our section tournament each year. He chooses emotional but not dark pieces and connects with the audience through his unexpected light movement which is anticipated in an interpretive category. He can move and smile enough to be engaging, and the blocking provides him enough of an outlet to move eliminating the fear of the possibility of falling. His main characters have inner struggles

including illness, parental discord, and being forced to make a moral decision. Since Nat deals with all of these issues in his daily life, his presentation is authentic, and his tone is personal.

Recently at a speech convention, I overheard a fellow coach describing a piece she heard last season and how the speaker made her cry. She was describing Nat's piece. I showed her a picture of him, and she squealed, "That's him! He made me cry!" Another unwritten rule we share with our students is the way judges should react. We tell our kids humorous cuttings should make judges laugh and poetry and prose cuttings should make judges cry. Nat received a high score in the round because he met the goal of making the judge cry. This unwritten rule worked in his favor that day. The judge chose not to base her final scores on use of space or crispness of movement; instead she ranked him first because of the emotional impact his presentation had on her.

Objectives and Problem Statement

Here my questions begin. How can we, as coaches and tournament managers and parents, effectively advocate and accommodate in the speech arena for speakers who live with physical challenges? Is it fair to forewarn judges of physical disabilities in advance to elicit sympathy or a different level of expectations? Yet speakers should not be thrown into a situation where they are sure to fail. How can the speech community be more accommodating for the physically disabled? I do not have a clear answer, and I do not believe in only one right answer. As this paper progresses and the research weighs in, we will have more ideas and suggestions to try, perhaps fail, and try again. My thesis will focus on my journey as a mother and coach of a speaker with a physical disability. The

main goal will be to determine how we, as coaches, can better advocate for our speakers, and, as tournament managers, can accommodate our meets for speakers who struggle with physical challenges. The layers of affect are numerous and deep.

In search of solutions, I want to explore what coaches and teams do when they receive initial information regarding a physically-disabled speaker. I will focus on my personal experience as I have observed our team's dynamics in an attempt to unearth answers and provide insight into individual situations. While one set of "correct" answers may not exist, the perspectives of this coach/mother and her physically-challenged son/speaker in various situations may provide a foundation for future research in this field. My overall goal is to provide my findings as a resource to area coaches and supply them with new ideas and practical applications of how they can effectively advocate for and accommodate special-need speakers. "For as much as forensics offers to the average kid who joins the team, the opportunities for students with disabilities are all the richer ... Academically, socially, and developmentally, forensics give students powerful tools to meet their challenges head-on" (Deliee, 2013, p. 30). We, their coaches and parents, can partner with our students to face their challenges by helping them recognize and use the tools forensics offers.

In Chapter 2, I will take a look at relevant research and how we can apply the findings to our speech teams. The chapter will cover how I navigated the field firsthand by participating in conversations and decisions regarding accommodating speakers' special needs. As I share my findings, I will suggest what areas are lacking. There are gaping holes in disability studies in the field of forensics, and I believe we can do more to

fill those holes by actively starting a discussion focused on our personal experiences and what worked for us.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the focus of my study is communication and forensics, the research for my project is drawn from various fields of communication. Specifically, I will look at disability studies, with a special focus on interability studies. Disability takes all disabilities (physical, cognitive, learning, etc.) and incorporates them into whatever study is being conducted. The majority are about communication skills and how certain communication opportunities differ for people with disabilities varying on the situation and the disability. Next I will explore work in the area of identity and stigma. Each person views him/herself differently. The definition of how one views oneself plays a significant role in what the person chooses to communicate to the world through school, peers, work, and romantic relationships. Then, I look at accommodations and how society as a whole is recognizing the need to adapt to the needs of the physically disabled. Finally, I review disability inclusion strategies being used in educational settings and how rules and norms in forensics are often counter to inclusion. The final section focuses mainly on how other activities (primarily athletics) implement inclusion strategies for student with disabilities and how the speech world can look to those activities as models.

What can we do to raise the level of comfort for the disabled person with whom or for whom we are communicating? How can we advocate so our physically challenged speakers can participate in events with dignity and as little discomfort as possible? The following sections provide resources and ideas to help us get started.

Disability Studies and Interability Communication

The term “disability” is not a concrete, global definition for a particular condition. “Disability” can refer to physical, mental, obvious, invisible, severe, mild, debilitating, inconvenient, or any ailment affecting an individual’s life. “Disabilities may affect one’s senses or one’s mobility; they may be static or progressive, congenital or acquired, formal ... or functional, visible or invisible” (Couser, 2005, p. 602). Though disabilities in general are extremely broad and affect communication in unlimited ways, I am concentrating on students with visible physical disabilities in competitive speech and how coaches communicate with and about them in the sense of advocating and accommodating their special needs.

Disability studies in communication focuses on how disability affects the communication process. Most disability studies have been conducted in the United States, but disabilities affect populations all over the world (Iwakuma & Nussbaum, 2000). In general, people with disabilities are viewed negatively, and the disability causes uneasiness for both the disabled and able-bodied individual when communicating with each other. Douglas (1966) claimed disabilities cause discomfort because they are ambiguous. A person, for instance, can have a visible physical disability causing the person to fall away from the “norm” of culture or society. The person is not completely well or healthy but not sick, either. When people cannot classify a person or condition, they choose avoidance. Sometimes a label puts others at ease.

Disability studies scholars argue the labels we use to frame our understandings are critical. Consider two questions: What is “disabled”? When can we appropriately use the

term “disabled”? Caras (1994) noted labels including “disabled” and specific names of diseases and conditions are subjective. Various labels invoke preconceived notions and stereotypes. For example, hearing the term “handicapped” may cause some to envision a person in a wheelchair though the handicap may not affect limbs at all. If someone is labeled “impaired,” listeners might assume a mental disability is associated with the term, but the impairment could be hearing-related. People may inaccurately believe any disability or handicap renders an individual physically and cognitively incapable. Since we use the terms “physically challenged” and “disabled” in my home, I will continue to use the terms in this project.

The majority of disability research has been conducted with able-bodied people in mind. “Historically, the cultural representation of disability has functioned at the expense of disabled people” (Couser, 2005, p. 603). As we will see in multiple instances, the communication models studied with physical disabilities in mind assess the situation from the non-disabled person’s point of view. Literature about disability studies from the disabled person’s standpoint (e.g., how the conversation can make the disabled person comfortable, how able-bodied people can accommodate) is rare. One would think the disability studies of the communication process would focus on the person with the disability, but that is seldom the case. Fortunately, researchers are discovering the discrepancy and bringing the issue to light. Thompson (2000) noted, “When [Braithwaite] began looking at literature, she was shocked to find that most of the research was from the perspective of the able-bodied person—their attitudes toward

people with disabilities, how disabled people should communicate to make able-bodied people more comfortable, and so forth” (p. 3).

Instead of seeing how people with disabilities can fit into nondisabled norms of communication, focus should be on how nondisabled can adapt themselves. Discomfort may be inevitable, but sharing and discussing what makes us uncomfortable might be the vulnerability we need to establish common ground. Our ability to look at our discomfort in an objective and educational way and record it so others can learn from it is one way to begin changing the climate. The literature changes gears slightly as more and more researchers are shifting focus to more disability-centered techniques in communication.

Although most research takes an ablest perspective, some scholars have offered suggestions for accommodating communication styles to meet the needs of those who have specific disabilities such as making eye contact (Sheehan, 1970), not interrupting someone who stutters (Whaley & Golden, 2000), not talking loudly (Smith & Kandath, 2000). For people with multiple and/or complex disabilities, Spencer and Gallois (2003) recommend trying unconventional methods of communication including multi-sensory opportunities to draw in those who may suffer from disabilities that cause communication to be limited. All of the methods recognize the importance of bringing a specific need of another into the forefront of communication. A disability cannot and should not be ignored; learning what a person needs to be a successful communicator and adapting our own communication style to accommodate the need shows empathy and a genuine interest in not only the process of communication, but the personal outcome. As stated before, the majority of disability studies have been conducted from the view of and with

the comfort of the ablebodied person in mind. A newer area of study has emerged highlighting the communicating process between mixed-ability participants.

Interability, a more specific communication theory within disability studies, refers to communication between people who have disabilities with people who do not (Fox, Giles, Orbe, & Bourhis, 2000). A situation in which an ablebodied person communicates with a person in a wheelchair, for instance, can result in different insecurities and complications for each depending upon their relationship, the situation, the tone of the conversation, and the comfort level each has concerning the disability. Fox, Giles, Orbe and Bourhis (2000) explained, “Medical, technical, and political advances are continuing to increase the physical abilities of people who are disabled ... the abilities of interability interactants [should] be investigated so that people with and without disabilities can interact effectively” (p. 217). Society has recognized the need for physical accommodations to be made for those with physical disabilities. The thought someone could be told not to work or attend school or social functions because of a physical limitation is ludicrous (and illegal). The same must hold true in the world of communication. Casting a person aside because of a disability is wrong no matter what the setting. In the communication realm especially, inclusion is essential for research to continue to look into effective communication methods and discover new and better ways to accommodate all participants in the process. The fear of the unknown should be eliminated as communication scholars and researchers become trailblazers and become willing to put ourselves in uncomfortable situations to ultimately provide a sense of comfort for others by sharing our experiences. Studies show the uneasiness of

communication with people struggling with disabilities is apparent even in children of a young age.

Raghavendra, Olsson, Sampson, Mcinerney, and Connell (2012) conducted a study within a school setting among children with varying degrees of disabilities who were integrated with nondisabled students and observed how school participation influenced social networking. Raghavendra et al. (2012) discovered the disability itself was not always indicative with how willingly students interacted. Raghavendra et al. (2012) concluded school involvement directly affected the students' social networking. Raghavendra et al. (2012) saw a need for schools to fund opportunities for students to be able to participate in school activities in order to improve communication abilities. Some of the findings directly related funding to social outcomes.

When students with disabilities are mainstreamed, or consciously placed in a learning environment with largely able-bodied peers, the presence of those with a disability can be unsettling for all. Preexisting notions and stereotypes held by able-bodied individuals of those with disabilities have a great effect on communicative behavior (Fox et al., 2000).

Combining disability studies and the communication of disabled with nondisabled gives everyone a chance to look at the disability—and the person—as a social challenge rather than just a physical one (Fox et al., 2000). Recognizing all sides of the communication situation (participants, setting, disability, attitudes, comfort levels, etc.) would be ideal, but it does not happen because all involved are fallible humans. In the speech world, interability communication is vital for disabled competitors and their

coaches, teammates, tournament managers, fellow competitors, and judges. Clear expectations for accommodations should be expressed among all parties.

Disability studies is designed to “... weave disabled people back into the fabric of society ... to expose the ways that disability has been made exceptional and to work to naturalize disabled people” (Linton, 2005, p. 518). More research is needed with the disabled person at the forefront. More attempts need to be made to integrate students of all abilities into meaningful communication prospects.

Identity and Stigma

Moving in closer to the communication process requires us to look at ourselves in addition the situational circumstances. Instead of trying to objectively ascertain the best communication methods between abled and disabled people, how can we subjectively insert ourselves into the process? By turning our focus inward, we can begin to explore who we are, how we view ourselves, and how others view us.

Identity refers to a person’s self-perception. How we view ourselves makes up our identity. For a person with a disability, the disability can be a huge part of his/her identity; the disability may even define the person. For instance, when someone is born with a disability, s/he is more likely to identify him/herself as disabled and even be proud of the differences in his/her body than someone who is disabled as a result of an accident or sudden illness (Couser, 2005).

Identities can be formed within groups and organizations through communication (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). As members of a particular group (such as a team) draw closer together, individuals begin to identify themselves according to the

attributers of the group. An identity can be formed within a group's culture and carried outside of the group. For instance, former speakers share how the immersion in their forensics team helped boost their confidence during the activity and later in life in a career setting (Billings, 2011). Identifying with and within a group can have a positive result, but a negative one as well. Stigma, for example, can affect an individual and a group with which the individual is associated.

Goffman (1963) explored how stigma influences people and their identities, who people view themselves to be in the context of their own lives. A stigma is a negative perception; something deemed abnormal or socially unacceptable. A stigma is definitely attached to children with visible physical disabilities, but the visibility (a wheelchair, a walker, missing limbs) gives the child an "excuse" for special accommodations and to perform in a certain manner. When a speaker in a wheelchair enters a room, no one expects him to stand or walk the way non-wheelchair-bound speakers do, for instance. When a disability is not visible, people tend to jump to conclusions and make assumptions about manners and behavior in general and be more negatively judgmental (Gray, 2002). Intolerance for invisible disabilities is another example of how stigma can be created and perpetuated.

However, the stigma around disability extends beyond just the disabled person. Goffman's (1963) concept of "courtesy stigma" refers to the stigma, the negative attitudes and beliefs connected with an actual or perceived abnormality, applied to people in relationships or somehow attached to individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities or variations. Entire families are affected by the disability. Whether the disability is

cognitive or physical, visible or invisible, family structures are shaken. The families can be isolated (Cavallo, Feldman, Swaine & Meshefedjian, 2009), have intergenerational stress (Berns, 1980), be at greater risk for poor health (Dyson, 2010), receive less support from extended family and schools (Dyson, 2010), and function differently due to the high amount of stress (Dyson, 1996).

Gray (2002) touched on the topic of families and how disabilities are perceived in public settings. Gray stated mothers take on more of a courtesy stigma than fathers, and, if negative comments are made in public about a disabled child, they are more likely to be aimed at the mother than the father. Antle, Mills, Steele, Kalnim, and Rossen (2007) found disabled children experience more parental overprotection than other children. In an attempt to protect their children, most parents are, consciously or not, protecting themselves. Landsman (1998) found many mothers construct their children's stories as a narrative of hope and progress, telling how much the child has overcome and the positive outlook.

Courtesy stigma can be applied to parents of disabled children and can become a part of the parents' identities, especially mothers' (Dyson, 2010; Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Landsman, 1998). In a spring 2011 paper, I expounded:

Motherhood affects identity and how much a woman is changed by the act of having a baby (Heisler & Ellis, 2008). Women all over the world experience life-changing physical and mental alterations from the moment they learn they are expecting a child. Motherhood is an all-encompassing life. Once a woman knows a child is growing inside of her, her life changes forever whether maternity was

planned or not. In most cases, a pregnant woman's thoughts travel to her womb countless times a day; her dreams and plans are shaped and re-shaped. This little one inside of her quickly becomes her world, and the ferocity with which she will protect it is astounding. Generally, the two are inextricably connected, drawing on each other for life and identity. (Row, p. 2)

Mothers are deeply affected by the struggles of their children and are more affected by courtesy stigma. While some studies show the effects of having a disabled child to cause an equal amount of stress on both parents, recent studies have shown mothers are more likely to have the stress interfere with their mental and physical health (Dyson, 2010).

I am firmly grounded in my identity as a mother. I accept the stigma may be placed on me because I am the mother of a physically challenged boy. Until Nat was a member of my own speech team, I had not considered how combining those identities would rattle me and send me into bouts of uncertainty. Thus when discussing disability, identity and stigma collide creating unique struggles with self-concept.

Self-concept is a deeper, more personal understanding of identity. Self-concept is how a person views his/her worth and can affect how a person thinks and behaves (Phemister & Crewe, 2004). One can identify as a member of a winning team, for instance, but still feel as if, alone, s/he is not worthy of accolades or positive attention. Deliee (2013) stated people naturally question their existing self-concept in high school, and often the process begins to include negativity. High school can be especially difficult for people with disabilities as they compare themselves to those around them whom they perceive to be "normal." In a competitive speech setting, a tool as simple as the ballots,

the page where judges give feedback to the speakers, can help organize a speaker's self-concept (Deliee, 2013). If concrete suggestions are made, one can see the difference from week to week as s/he tackles the suggestions and polished with practice. The successive ballots can show improvement and progress due to the student's efforts.

Theoretically, courtesy stigma can be applied to coaches and teammates of disabled speakers. The story in the introduction of my project showed the tournament manager being upset at the situation. If a tournament manager responds in a hesitant or critical manner toward accommodation requests, making requests at subsequent tournaments might be more emotionally challenging for the speaker or coach; no one wants to be viewed as an inconvenience.

Again, let's go back to my thesis' introduction. In addition to being suspicious of the boy who claimed not to be able to walk up stairs, the suspicion extended to the coach who requested the key and the teammates who could have taken advantage of the access to the elevators. If the student with the disability is looked down upon or mocked by peers, his/her may struggle to include him/her in regular socialization at the meets. Soon, an identity in the speech world has been formed for the speaker and the team based on outsiders' perceptions. If the individual or the team or the coach believe and internalize the identity projected by others, the labels or negative connotations become a part of how they view themselves. Ultimately, if a speaker, coach, or team has a negative identity either perceived by others or self-imposed, the effort to advocate for and accommodate special needs students is diminished.

Since each accommodation is individual, each speaker who needs one is likely to feel singled out. If there is a hint of uncertainty or hesitation on the part of the coach or tournament manager or even an off-handed remark made by a teammate, the disabled speaker could wrestle with feelings of inadequacy, believe s/he is causing trouble, or even believe s/he is not worth the added effort. The other possibility is the speaker would see his/her value as a part of a cohesive team and know others will do what it takes to see him/her be successful. The scenario allows the student an opportunity to boost his self-concept and see the benefit s/he brings to the team. A positive self-esteem in areas beyond speech participation is a likely outcome.

Accommodations

In past decades, people with disabilities were kept away from public places (at home, in institutions, etc.) due to the assumption they were unable to manage the barrier of “normal” life (Lee, 2014). As years pass, society is now recognizing the need to alter the world to break down some barriers from public spaces to vehicles to summer camp programs for children with physical disabilities.

Adapting any activity to the needs of a disabled competitor is law. Several pieces of legislation in the past 50 years have shown the progression of acknowledgement of the need for accommodations for people with disabilities. Some include the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education of the Handicapped Act (1975) and the Education for Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The laws were modified as needed became the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA, 1990), which is recognized as one of the greatest developments in civil rights for individuals with disabilities, and the Individuals

With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990). In 2004, the law was altered again and currently we have the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) which requires each state to have guidelines and supports in place to assure extracurricular activities are available to students with special needs. The most recent conversation starter to date is a “Dear Colleague Letter” of January 2013 sent by the United States Office for Civil Rights which clarified the need for schools to comply with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 when offering extracurricular activities to include all students.

The students and programs need advocates to speak up for what they require, what they deserve, and what they legally should have (Dieringer & Judge, 2015). Even when the advocating is successful, finding wide acceptance of the adaptation is not easy. Twenty-five years into the implementation of the ADA, the ablebodied world can still be a daunting and often inhospitable environment (Lee, 2014).

Lee (2014) pointed out how non-disabled people take their environment for granted and are sometimes surprised to realize how inaccessible many areas of every-day life can be for others. In order to make accommodations, we must first know what exactly needs to be done. Necessary modifications vary depending on the individual, the disability, and the environment.

When the student’s needs have been assessed, the accommodations can be written in an individualized education plan (IEP) for the student. An IEP is a legal school document created by the parents and the student’s educational team (teachers, administrators, coaches, etc.) stating the modifications the student needs in order to be

supported and successful in his/her educational career. The requirements are in writing and the document binds the school by law to offer appropriate accommodations.

Extracurricular activity modifications can be included in an IEP as well if the activity is deemed an essential part of the student's education (Fetter-Harrott, Steketee & Dare, 2008). Yet, few IEPs include speech.

Though federal regulations require federally-funded organizations including schools to accommodate and offer support for students with disabilities to engage in all activities, the implementation is difficult for various reasons. In fact, the choice not to offer opportunities at all is easier for many organizations. Accommodations can include transportation, wheelchair access, support staff such as school aides, and necessitate resources (financial and otherwise) a school may not have readily available. Schools are not allowed to use lack of funds as a reason for not providing equal access, so sometimes teachers and administration may find other ways of deeming the student ineligible for an activity such as grades or participation (Dieringer & Judges, 2015). Dieringer and Judges (2015) bring up the possibility of the unfairness of ineligibilities in the cases of students with learning disabilities and those who struggle with physical conditions which may directly influence current educational standards.

In the world of speech, implementation of accommodations may not be readily embraced by coaches and tournament managers. One of the reasons may be the conventional rules and norms of the activity.

Inclusion Strategies in a Context of Rules and Norms

As disability studies and legislation bring the struggle people with disabilities face into the light, society is experiencing a broader awareness of stigma and self-concept. Many are working to try to close the gap and offer more opportunities to those with disabilities. Unfortunately, little research has been done specifically on speech competitors with disabilities. Shelton and Matthews (2001) discussed invisible disabilities in the area of forensics. Shelton and Matthews argued although forensics is beginning to address issues of diversity, the focus is on gender and race, invisible disability (a physical or mental disability not obvious enough to be noticed immediately) needs to be addressed.

In recent years, empirical evidence at speech tournaments in northern Minnesota shows sexual identity coming to the forefront of diversity issues as well. Definite steps must be taken to accommodate for those with physical disabilities as well. Given the lack of discussion of disability within the context of forensics turning to other activities as a reference is helpful. Legislation requiring opportunities for inclusion in extracurricular athletics has been the topic of much discussion in recent years. Investigating how athletic activities incorporate accommodations for their special-needs students can give the speech world a work-in-progress model.

Shelton and Matthews (2001) stated our culture views health as normal and disability as unhealthy, therefore, abnormal. Matthews (1994) conducted a study reinforcing previous research where people with invisible disabilities experienced unwanted sympathy and isolation when they chose to disclose the disability. Even if a

disability is invisible, people who suffer from them are prone to defining their lives by them and living with daily stigma and shame (Shelton & Matthews, 2001). How can we change people's perceptions?

Shelton and Matthews (2001) suggest continued training. Teaching more on-on-one communication skills to provide experiences not same-inducing can help the speakers who struggle with such disabilities learn to recreate expectations for themselves not based in negativity. My personal suggestion is to bring the issue to the forefront so we as coaches and tournament managers can pay attention to what we are doing as individuals and teams. Shelton and Matthews (2001) provide us with some of the most significant research into the topic of disabilities in forensics, yet their research is more than 15 years old. The current generation of forensics leaders need to pick up the responsibility and carry it forward.

As stated, in 2013, the Office for Civil Right, housed in the US Department of Education, issued a Dear Colleague letter to schools reinforcing the mandate to provide athletic opportunities for students with disabilities. The letter speaks specifically to athletic programs, but many of the principles can extend to other extracurricular activities as well. "The benefits of athletic programs are equally important for student with disabilities as they are for students without disabilities" (Lakowski, 2013, pp. 7-8). The statement can be applied to all activities. Dieringer and Judge's (2015) quotation even includes leisure, "Recreation and leisure activities are necessary for high quality of life for all people, including those with disabilities" (p. 87).

Providing opportunities for inclusion is law, yet many teachers, administrators, parents and coaches do not embrace the directive and actively encourage students with disabilities to participate. Reasons include lack of funds (though Dieringer & Judge, 2015, say citing a lack of funds is not permissible when discussing this law) and other resources such as staff and equipment.

If we were to look at disabilities as a component of diversity, integration would be a non-issue. Most schools and programs strive to be diverse, but not everyone recognizes diversity to include more than age, race, religion, and sexual identity. Truly, anything making people different is a diversity (Dieringer & Porretta, 2013).

While some claim forensic competitors who cannot meet the higher standards should not be in the activity in the first place, some researchers suggest changes in the rules and curriculum may be in order (Sandahl, 2005). Sandahl (2005) discussed the performing arts by stating, “Many training techniques attempt to ‘cure’ the individuals of idiosyncratic postures and movement ... Changes ... are necessary to accommodate disabled students” (p. 623). One of the most challenging aspects of providing accommodations in the speech culture is knowing where to make the adjustments. As with many activities, speech has a set of rules that must be followed. More common, and sometimes more important, is the set of unwritten rules the speech community expects. The unwritten rules are called norms. Schools are required to provide opportunities for students with physical disabilities to engage in extracurricular activities. Rules can be followed and modified where needed, but what about the norms?

Speech is a constantly changing activity (Jensen & Jensen, 2007). “Forensics is an activity with few written rules, but ... many norms” (Epping & Labrie, 2005, p. 18). Paine (2005) clarified norms as, “ ... habits and patterns which may become so entrenched that that operate as if they were ‘rules’- when in fact they are generally accepted conventions that we as members of the community are potentially able to modify in major and minor ways whenever we wish to ... ” (p. 80). Norms reach into every aspect of the activity and affect the way competitors speak, dress, walk into a room, relate to the judges and perform as an audience. Other examples include memorization of a speech which is not required but often used as a determinate of rank, relevancy of topic which is guided by the judge’s opinion, and use of visual aids and rhetorical models which are not required but almost unthinkable to exclude in certain categories (Epping & Labrie, 2005). The above illustrations are not written rules, but affect how a speaker may be ranked in a round and the overall tournament.

While norms can provide stability within an activity and/or a group, norms are activity specific and difficult to understand other than through trial and error and can make assimilating into the culture difficult for an individual new to the activity (Epping & Labrie, 2005). Epping and Labrie (2005) use “You Did What?!?” as the first portion of the title of an article. The punctuation is a wonderful visual of how shocking going against the grain can be. The article is not a discussion of participants who break rules in competition, but participants who do not follow the norms in competition. Explaining why some behaviors receive better ranks and positive comments than others listed directly in the rules is problematic. Once norms are established, pushing the envelope or

trying new things is limited due to fear of disapproval of judges and lower ranks (Paine, 2005). Each year, participants try new ideas or techniques and coaches adopt new methods to train and hone speakers' skills. As the new ideas and methods evolve, so does the way the activity is viewed and judged (Epping & Labrie, 2005; Jensen & Jensen, 2007).

Unfortunately, the fear of anything new or different can negatively affect participants with physical disabilities and the necessary accommodations. If, for instance, a speaker needs to sit instead of stand due to a wheelchair confinement, movement (or lack of) may be taken into consideration when ranking. Fighting norms is a difficult prospect (Paine, 2005) even for a good cause. Paine (2005) suggested every change made to the norms be a deliberate one and for a good reason rather than just a challenge. Adapting for physically-challenged forensic competitors is adjusting a norm by a deliberate action and for a good reason. Adjusting a norm for accommodation purposes is not "pushing the envelope" in a way such as someone who is trying to shake up the system.

Offering accommodations is a necessity legally supported by the ADA. The literature in disability studies offers many theories and suggestions, but still a gap exists in the area of practical application. The acceptability of adaptation is up to us as coaches, parents, and tournament managers to set the example. The first step is to know what needs are "out there" in the forensics world. Rather than waiting for the need to be brought to our attention, we should concentrate on and anticipate what we need to do to be part of the solution. I chose to educate myself by purposely watching what my own

son experienced. I paid attention to what requirements were necessary to make his days manageable, to whom I needed to express the requirements, and what the responses and actions were.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

My entire thesis began with a bit of curiosity and a lot of indignation. Since I am Nat's mother and coach, I use autoethnography, a qualitative research method, to examine how to better advocate and accommodate for him and for all speakers with physical challenges. I use a narrative style which is more of a storytelling technique. While still an emerging practice, narrative is becoming a more commonly accepted method of communicating culturally-related ideas. A well-known researched field is medicine, but more areas of study, including communication and disability studies (Couser, 2005), are embracing the practice of narrative as a way to connect with readers, listeners and oneself. Discussing narrative in disability studies and looking at the benefits of the storytelling approach of autoethnography gives credence to the qualitative methods the project utilizes. The upcoming sections look at the value of employing a narrative method and the benefits of conducting research of this nature in an autoethnographic style

Value of Narrative in Disability Studies

Charon (2006) explored the use of narrative medicine which is the practice of inviting a patient to tell the story of his/her infliction rather than only supply a list of current symptoms; the story is important because the medical provider is able to look at and pull in information from other areas of the patient's life rather than focusing on merely the limited symptomatic information at hand. Through the narrative process, the

patient reveals more details, stronger relationships are built between the caregiver and the patient, and medical care improves (Langellier, 2009; Rawlins, 2009; Zaner, 2009).

While Charon's (2006) narrative medicine theory is primarily used in medical fields (Lambert, Glacken & McCaron, 2011; Zaner, 2009), the concept overlaps into the field of communication (Rawlins, 2009). Communication scholars can learn from narrative medicine. By using a narrative, a scholar tells a story allowing listeners to enter and feel part of the story and includes details and intimate emotions and examines the meaning of human experience (Ellis, 1999). People need the chance to retell their lives. We get a better understanding of individuals and the events affecting their lives if we allow people to tell their stories because of the comprehensive nature of the information. To hear, for example, a knee hurts, gives basic information; to hear a patient is training for a marathon and a parent of a three-year-old supplies a new perspective possibly causing the healthcare provider to look at the patient's training regime or question how the patient carries the child, etc.

One specific narrative medical realm benefitting from narrative style of research is the study of disabilities (Rinaldi, 1996). Do and Geist (2000) wrote:

One step ... is to listen to the voices of people who were born with a physical disability. Their narratives provide an opportunity to learn a great deal about the everyday processes ... and we can begin to understand the significant role communication plays in either intensifying or trans-forming the debilitating self-consciousness that restricts compassion. (pp. 53-54)

The world of medicine is beginning to recognize the value of narrative. Listening to individuals with disabilities tell their own stories gives insight and a broader understanding of the person's life and world, not just a glimpse into a particular situation. Of course, the overall concept can be applied to situations other than the medical field.

Berube (2005) pointed out our society has been watching the lives of characters with disabilities unfold as stories for decades through the medium of movies. *Dumbo*, *Finding Nemo*, *Gattaca*, and the *X-Men* franchise include main characters whose lives are riddled with disabilities from freakishly-large ears to a deformed fin to subpar genetics to an entire universe filled with mutant DNA causing superhuman powers. The characters are protagonists, antagonists, main and supporting. We as a society are aware of characters with remarkable disabilities being triumphant and successful and strong. Each character has a story; through following their personal stories, we feel a part of their lives and grow fond of them because of who they are and grow less aware of the disability. Berube (2005) showed "real" life reflects art, "Disability is not a static condition ... it has such complex relations to the conditions of narrative, because it compels us to understand ... Whether the disability in question is perceptible or imperceptible ... disability, too, demands a story" (p. 570).

In the context of disability studies, Couser (2005) connected the rise in personal narratives with the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act which supposedly gives equal right to those struggling with disabilities. The passing of the legislation initiated a human rights movement focusing on disabilities. Couser (2005) stated, "Properly conceived and

carried out ... narrative can provide the public with controlled access to lives that might otherwise remain opaque or exotic to them” (p. 605).

Couser (2005) postulated disability studies have largely not benefitted disabled people because they have not been able to control their own images (p. 603). Individuals with disabilities can gain control by utilizing narratives to tell their stories either through other writers or autobiographically. Communicating with others across the board through an autobiographical narrative is one way people with disabilities can communicate with others who may fall anywhere on the disability spectrum. Claiming disabilities in literature are always metaphorical denoting a deficiency or a sin, for example, does not have to be (Berube, 2015). A blind woman, for instance, can simply be blind. She does not have to represent all blind people, nor does she need to be blind to figuratively illustrate how characters do not or choose not to see outside of themselves. A personal narrative can place the person with the disability in control of the story (Couser, 2005). S/He does not need to make him/herself a hero or villain only because of the disability. The narrative can depict one’s overall quality of life (Couser, 2005).

Sandahl (2005) mentioned some people with disabilities, such as herself, feel as if their entire lives are a series of performances. People are always watching and staring, and they are the audience wanting to see how the life is played out. Sandahl (2005) explained performance and disability, “I made a choice to use my disability for my own meanings, not someone else’s” (p. 621). Sandahl (2005) shared her interest in women’s studies, and how she was able to glean meaning for her own life from what she was learning by relying on her personal experiences and incorporating research from her

studies. Narrative in the field of disability studies will not only tell the story of the persona and the disability, but the process will help the individual take charge and make meaning out of the situation.

Autoethnography

Research is easier when one can explore, read, conduct research, and take in the facts him/herself. Studying a topic as personal as this requires a narrative to adequately convey my experiences and the information. Autoethnography is the best method to achieve the personal chronicling the research deserves. To research from a personal-passion perspective and use one's own life and experiences rather than study random participants to supply statistics is wrenching. I would much rather have sciences dictate how physically-challenged students are accommodated at speech meets. If I knew, for instance, each state section was expected to have a specific percentage of disabled participants, the objective information would be interesting and helpful. To be the mother of a physically-challenged child—and be his coach—is another matter altogether. As I research, I look not for numbers but for answers for myself, my son, my team, my colleagues and my activity. What can I do to help Nat? What can other coaches do to help Nat? What can we do to help physically-challenged speakers on our teams?

Since I have questions, I want answers. I do not have a ready-formed hypothesis to test or a method to prove (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I am not interviewing people to get data to show what I believe to be true; instead I am using my personal data to begin to formulate suggestions of what speech coaches could do to strengthen the environment of forensics.

When investigators get narratives of personal experiences, the results are a deeper experience for the researcher, the subjects, and any future audience or observers regarding a time of breakthrough (Ellis, 1999; Zaner, 2009). Autoethnography employs a narrative style focuses on a specific aspect of an environment (Ellis, 1999; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Goodall, 2004; Grant & Zeeman, 2012; Herndl, 1991; Hess, 2011; Shuler, 2007; Tillmann, 2009). Autoethnography takes the exploration a step further into the personal reflection since the researcher makes him/herself a part of the narrative. Raab (2013) wrote, “The autoethnographic study paints a vivid picture of the researcher (self) and those he or she is studying (the participants) ... the reader connects with the narrator and identifies with what he or she encounters” (p. 3). A crucial data collection method in ethnography/autoethnography is field notes. Field notes can be professionally presented or be a journal of personal thoughts and observations (Raab, 2013). When the material is collected, the best result, according to Raab (2013) is an autoethnographic piece which is “ ... truthful, vulnerable, evocative, and therapeutic” (p. 11).

As a qualitative method of research, autoethnography allows the researcher to become a part of the culture s/he studies. I utilize autoethnography because I am working through my own questions and discoveries as I tap into other resources. The plan is to include my own story of mothering and coaching my physically-challenged son and coaching my speech team. I will actively search for suggestions and ideas I can use in my personal situation.

More than storytelling, more than engaging an audience, autoethnography is the chance to incorporate ourselves in a dramatic, dynamic narrative meant to clarify life's

situations. Autoethnography draws "... on multiple personal and group experiences" (Denzin, 2003, p. 38). I, as a mother and coach, need a personal connection with others who are in similar situations. I, as a scholar, need answers and supporting evidence. I, as researcher, need to wade through and examine and share my findings so others don't have to re-search.

Since I am the mother of a child on my team who struggles with physical challenges and needs special accommodations at most tournaments, I am more than just a member of the speech community. I am actively involved in advocating for all of my competitors who need accommodations, but I am intimately invested in the well-being of my son. Because my dual-role brings tension, I find myself concerned about how others will view my advocating and if my son will feel smothered by my over involvement or slighted by any under involvement. I find myself assessing each new scenario through the lens of my own familiarity, as do most autoethnographers (Goodall, 2004).

Research of such a personal nature is subject to bias (Ellis, 1999). Autoethnography allows the researcher to clearly express bias and make known personal stake in the findings. While a researcher could remove him/herself from the equation, an autoethnographer does not want to. The researcher is motivated to dig into examination and actively seek out members of his/her community who will add to his/her knowledge (Reinard, 2008). Then, the researcher can take what s/he learned and weave the information into a cultural story.

Grant and Zeeman (2012) connected autoethnography as a way to create identity. Telling a story is therapeutic, and the self-reflection can help reveal identity even to one's

self. To be able to step out of one's situation in order to put the experiences on a page offers a person the ability to see the story from a new angle. Self-reflection is possible and new insights are discovered by the researcher. Though the scholar is a participant in the story, seeing the story as a third person is enlightening. Denzin (2006) explained, "In bringing the past into the autobiographical present, I insert myself to the past and create the conditions for rewriting and hence re-experiencing it" (p. 334).

I am an autoethnographer. I am able to observe and participate in the speech community in both roles. I can place myself at the heart of the research I conduct and bring in additional stories and perspectives and circumstances. I can speak up and participate because I am more than just an accepted observer, I am a contributing member of the speech community and have a voice to raise issues and initiate discussions. Autoethnography is painful (Wall, 2008). I know my journey has been painful. Perhaps I can help by diminishing the pain for others by leading the way and providing insight.

Autoethnography allows for the sharing of narratives. As discussed earlier, narratives allow the people involved to express their identity through a unique form of communication: telling the story of their circumstances. Each encounter is a story. I am exploring my own story through the experiences—stories—of others. Even within one situation, numerous stories can emerge. In my life, the stories include my own, my son's, his brother's, those of his teammates, countless judges, tournament managers, and others who have been affected one way or another by Nat's special needs and accommodations.

I strive to offer understanding into a circumstance filled with emotion and personal investment. I am creating a public story through my personal narrative (Denzin,

2003). When parents and coaches are working with individual children who face wide-ranging trials every day, they—we—need more than statistics. We need to associate with others who understand our fears and have made the journey before us. The autoethnographic research is not intrusive as I am already a “native” in the speech world and the parenting-a-child-with-special-needs world. I have the advantage of taking my firsthand experiences and presenting my findings to others as a means to educate and connect and reinforce validity. Sharing my personal journey is more helpful to coaches and speakers and parents than supplying quantitative research results with percentages and numbers.

The topic is a personal one and, in autoethnography, the researcher should wish to share what s/he learns through personal examination. The information I as the researcher receive and transmit through this project will be conducted through the standpoint of a mother and varsity speech coach dealing with my own son as a member of my speech team and as an investigator.

As I participate the culture in which I am an active member and share the story of my personal journey, a comprehensive observation will emerge with ideas and strategies for deeper understanding and, ultimately, for practical solutions.

CHAPTER FOUR

TRUTHS MY STORY REVEALS

I have discussed disability issues with other northern Minnesota coaches and learned coaches regularly accommodate speakers with challenges comprising of vision or hearing impairment, speech impediments, behavior disorders, Tourette syndrome, and physical challenges such as those who need assistance with mobility and use leg braces, crutches, walkers or canes, and some who navigate life from a wheelchair. Numerous other speakers struggle with disabilities not as visible but real and debilitating nonetheless. We should ask several questions of ourselves as coaches and tournament managers to determine if we are offering the best accommodations to all of our students. How can we include those with physical challenges in our programs? How can we advocate for our speakers who struggle with physical challenges? How can we accommodate speakers with physical challenges? How can we be consciously aware of what to do? How do we know other questions to ask?

Including: How Can We Include Students with Physical Challenges in Our Programs?

Nat was rarely invited for playdates or to friends' houses or to birthday parties or outings when he was little. This led to a life of isolation and loneliness. He wondered what was wrong with him and why people didn't like him. I was heartbroken for my little boy. One day, two mothers with sons the same age as Nat were talking about their boys getting together. One turned to me and said, "We'd invite Nat, but we don't know what to do with him. We're not sure what kind of help he needs, and we don't want the other kids

running all over him.” I didn’t have an articulate response. I think I said the non-invitation was fine and Nat didn’t really need anything special, but neither of those responses were true. The exclusion wasn’t fine, and he did need more than other children his age. I would have offered to come along, but that would have set him apart even more among his peers and their parents. Instead I told myself his isolation from peers was all for the best, and I could keep an eye on him easier at home and save people the discomfort of having to worry about Nat as a guest. Looking back, my attitude was not the best idea for anyone. Other families lost out on the opportunity to relate to Nat and face the fear of not knowing how to manage an uncomfortable situation; I needed to learn to speak up, and Nat would have benefited greatly from being included.

While inclusion at the school level is different than a play date or birthday party, adults still have the dilemma of figuring out how to include children with physical disabilities in stereotypically able-bodied activities. One way to foster inclusion in extracurricular activities is to encourage children of all capabilities to participate in speech. As coaches and parents, we are the ones who can provide that opportunity; we cannot wait for advocates or spokespeople for the disabled to search us out to ask for a chance to join. We should be the ones to seek out, reach out and offer an invitation. Yet, as coaches, many of us wonder how to effectively include differently-abled students. As I observe potential speakers of varying abilities, I look at their personalities first. I mentally go through the list of speech categories and ponder where I see them fitting best. I know we may have to make some adjustments, but the thought is secondary to getting them involved. Despite my open approach, a lot of my efforts include uncertainty and

fear. I doubt I am qualified to coach students with special needs and am not sure if I can truly help them advance. Truth be told, sometimes I question my ability to coach fully-abled students; how can I add another layer of responsibility, especially one where I feel inadequate? If I, a mother of a disabled child and a coach of six years, feel inadequate, I know my sense of personal inadequacy must be magnified for others.

On our team, I am most comfortable coaching the public address (PA) categories where students write their own speeches and include analysis or techniques of persuasion. Nat's natural bent is in the interpretive categories such as humor and prose. The tension of my dual mother/coach role plays out most obviously when I run one of his practices. He has a hard time separating mother comments from coach ones, and I lose credibility in his eyes because I do not normally coach interp. I too often say, "Go ask Coach Bert." I can shake off a poor practice session and know my co-coach will pick up the slack. When I'm brought in as his mother, however, the pressure changes. My coaching staff will wonder what movements are realistic for Nat, and how he can best utilize his space without fatiguing. Sometimes I shrug and tell them I don't know; he'll have to figure it out for himself. Sometimes I don't push practicing at home the way I hope other parents do with their speakers, because I know the day has been too much for him. Unfortunately, I never know what is best for him until I look back and assess the path I chose; the not knowing brings me back to my core of uncertainty for future decisions.

Nat definitely does not come away from our meets with the highest honors. Depending on how much effort he put into practicing the previous week, he may get a ribbon or, at a smaller meet, a medal. I admit, I get a little embarrassed when my son—a

child of the head coach of the varsity team—is not the star of the team. I honestly do not know if the deficiencies in his body, his talent or his practice ethics are to blame.

Nevertheless, he loves speech and feels a sense of success at his own level. I'm grateful he has the opportunity to a part of and has a sense of belonging on the team.

I have found the best way to start learning how to help students is by asking students and their families outright. I have an easier time than most because I can automatically relate with mothers. I can share Nat's condition and ask about their child's. I can start a discussion at a level that may take other people more time and small-talk, but the goal is the same: to find out what we can do to make the child a successful team member. I bluntly ask about skills and abilities, and I ask for recommendations regarding practices and tournaments. I may offer a suggestion or a game plan to see if I am on track, and I adjust expectations from there.

Three years ago, my family was invited over to dinner by some neighbors. They were new in or area, and they had a daughter the same age as my son, Joshua. As I had gotten to know the girl, I saw a sparkle of energy and personality, and I thought she would be great in humor. Over dinner, I brought up the topic of speech with her parents. They told me she had been in speech in her last district because she had hearing aids and needed extra help articulating her words. I told them I was not speaking of speech pathology, rather public speaking. Immediately they dismissed the notion, and I saw the mother shrink back in her chair a little. Surely someone who needed so much help in the area of hearing and speaking would not be a candidate for the speech team. I assured them they were mistaken. As the conversation progressed, the mother leaned forward and

began asking questions, and the dad said he had been on his high school's speech team and might want to come judge for us. We discussed categories and rules and practices, and by the end of the evening the girl was excited to be invited to be added to the team, and her parents were cautiously optimistic about letting her.

The girl is now a member of my varsity team, and not once has her family thought her participation in the activity was not a good decision. Her hearing aids are not noticeable, her articulation is perfect, she fits in with the team well socially, she tries new categories every season, and her confidence level increases every year. As I speak with other coaches I am surprised to learn how few have physically-challenged speakers on their teams and what a foreign concept recruiting differently-abled students is. The coaches are not cruel-intentioned or hard-hearted, the thought has merely never occurred to them. Where does the blame lie? Really, nowhere. If we are not used to including students of all abilities, we need to have the issue drawn to our attention. Once we are aware, we can begin to make changes in ourselves and on our teams. We can then become advocates. By giving all students an opportunity to be parts of our teams, we will all learn how to better integrate and help them within our team. The peer coaching, the friendships, the every-day accommodations necessary to adjust practices and travel will all culminate in an enriching, educational experience for every member of the team, not just the members who require modifications.

Advocating: How Can We Advocate for Speakers Who Struggle with Physical Challenges?

Dieringer and Judge (2015) wrote, “There is a need to advocate for equal opportunities for students with disabilities in extracurricular athletics” (p. 94). I wholeheartedly agree. In fact, I would substitute “activities” for “athletics” in the quotation. Who should be and who can be advocates? Everyone who is aware of the situation. “The situation” refers to any circumstance with inequality; I’m not limiting advocacy to coaches in a speech setting. An advocate is someone who speaks up in support of another. Advocating does not entail yelling or going to court to testify or making enemies. Standing up for one’s speaker is often considered a brave thing to do, but speaking up does not necessitate an unusual amount of courage. In our schools, we need to make sure we lend our voices to support kids who may not have voices loud enough to hear or who feel they have nothing worthwhile to say. Incidentally, these are the kids who needs advocacy the most.

Students who do not want attention called to themselves will often be quiet and not speak up about their disabilities or needs. In the silence is when coaches need to step in. We cannot be embarrassed or meek when we request special adjustments for our speakers who really need them. I know many coaches who show up in a tab room or a manger’s presence when they feel a speaker of theirs has been slighted or unjustly treated in a round by a low score or off-hand comment by a judge. We should be just as swift to contact a coach or an administrator to give each student an equal opportunity to speak in the first place.

For me, appropriate advocating is exactly my struggle. Separating the dual role I play as coach and mother is almost impossible for me, and I know it is tough for colleagues who know me. Many of us point out with pride which members of our teams are also members of our families. When our own child advances, we have a personal thrill and as a professional one.

Two years into his speech career, Nat switched from Storytelling to Serious Prose. He had a piece I did not think would go very far. The piece was a story-like version of the Holocaust using woodland creatures as an analogy. Because of Nat's natural storytelling abilities, he was able to add an aspect to the story—an odd mixture of uncomplicated naiveté coupled with maturity--by somehow giving the piece the seriousness it deserved through a child-like setting. He did well in competition with the cutting so the coaching staff decided to send it to our section meet.

The speakers presented their first two rounds, and the team awaited the semifinal postings to see who would advance. I needed to be a coach and find a balance between supporting my speakers who advanced while consoling the ones who did not. Nat sat at a table waiting for Prose. He and I both knew his competition, and neither of us expected him to be participating in the semifinal round. I positioned myself at the front of the room so I could see everyone's postings, but mostly Nat's. I wanted to prepare myself before he saw the sheet of paper. After what seemed like way too long, the tournament manager finally hung the long sheet of yellow butcher paper to the wall, and Nat's name was on the list. Nat's name was on the list! I searched for his face in the throng, and I saw him

come to life. He didn't smile; instead he put his hand over his mouth and looked for me with wide eyes.

"Go, go, go!" I yelled to him. He nodded, started to run away, and then ran to me and gave me a hug. I squeezed him and said over and over how proud I was. He left, and I went a different direction. As the PA coach, I had three students cut to semifinals in Informative, so I followed them. My gut clenched a little, because I really wanted to see my own son. I knew that would make both of us more nervous, so I didn't hesitate for long, but my heart was with him.

We sat after the round waiting for the posting for the final round, the winners of which would advance to the state competition. Nat was beaming. He did not break to the final round, but he wasn't disappointed. To this day he tells about the time he made it to semifinals as an eighth grader. Only a third of our team saw their names posted on the wall, and he was one of them. He felt validated, and I was proud. I was also a little ashamed. I had no expectation of him going far with the piece because of the content and because of his disability. I did not think Nat could be recognized in a serious category because of his floppiness. I was wrong. I spent the day as a coach, and I was able to celebrate the success of every student on my team regardless of how far s/he went. In my memory, I spent the day as a mom who was so proud of her boy. I was able to excitedly chatter with the other parents who came to watch their children present on both the level of their children's coach and Nat's mom.

As coaches and parents in general, we feel validated on several levels, and it's easy to find others to talk to about the stereotypical problems coach/parents have with

their children in terms of attitude, practicing, and subpar participation. So far, though, I have not encountered another coach who has a child of his or her own on a team who has special needs. I cannot help but wonder what role heartstrings play in the mix. I know I am more passionate about advocating for students with physical disabilities, but am I compassionate for Nat or because of Nat? I admit, I would not have been as moved to embark on this project if I did not have a special-needs child in my home; I hope, however, I would feel as fervent about advocating for any child who needed it to be comfortable on my speech team. As I wrestle with my own insecurities, I wonder why, if Nat's problems have fueled me to advocate for this topic as a whole, I am embarrassed to ask for extra help for him. I am hesitant but only for him. Mother/Coach persona is a difficult duality. Nevertheless, on tournament days I am the coach. My job is to make sure every one of my speakers is given the best chance at being successful at every competition. I will speak up for him not only because I am his mother, not only because I am his coach, but because I am a believer in equality for all children, and I want to set an example of other coaches and for my team. When they see I am willing to advocate for every member whether a question is raised concerning a speech source or a wheelchair ramp, they will know I support them all unequivocally.

Accommodating: How Can We Accommodate for all Speakers with Physical Challenges?

Once a decision is made for the student to join the team and in which category to participate, then we start to assess how to navigate the practices and tournaments for the individual students. Since practices are a day-to-day event, we figure out the needs as we

go. Tournaments require more forethought, and, sometimes assistance from a tournament manager so we try to have a plan in place.

In Nat's case, we didn't feel the need to request all rooms be on the main floor of the building. When schools were multiple stories, we contacted the manager and asked if elevators were available. When we arrived at every location, we made sure Nat had a map and a good friend or captain who could walk with him from before the day started to find his rooms. Incidentally, allowing a student or even a captain to walk with him was a big deal for me.

I felt he was my responsibility. I felt I should take the time to walk with him and bolster his self-esteem. As I realized the team could take responsibility for that time of the day, I let them. I was the coach, not the mom. I did not walk anyone else, so why would I walk Nat? Allowing his teammates gave Nat the chance to be a "regular" teammate. He hung out with kids beforehand like every other competitor. Kids walk around the building all of the time. Most find their rooms beforehand to eliminate unnecessary anxiety between rounds. No one could tell Nat was doing the same thing as everyone else to eliminate unnecessary fatigue. Why should they? Having a coach, his *mother* nonetheless, walk with him brought more attention to his disability than anything else. I had to give up my desire to protect him and control his day.

Another advantage to handing over his care to his teammates was the relationships the time fostered. His fellow speakers accepted Nat for who he was, not because they were told to by Nat's mom or even their coach. They got to know him, became friends with him, and watched out for him. When there was a problem big

enough to necessitate adult intervention, they came to find a coach. When he was on the middle school team, the middle school coach made all of the decisions. When she needed to consult me it was strictly as a mother, not a coach. As Nat moved up to the varsity team, I was the one the students sought because I am the direct-student-contact coach at meets. The fact I was his mother was beneficial on only one occasion; otherwise, I dealt with issues as I would with any other speaker.

One of our meets is famous for being hosted at a difficult school. Yes, the competition is difficult, but the floorplan throws off our speakers the most. Even our students who competed in the school six years in a row still got lost at least once during the day. Nat was already uptight about the day, and he was so anxious he lost sleep the night before. I could see him becoming more and more agitated. I asked a team captain to be sure to keep an eye on the team members who may need extra help finding rooms. Of course, I meant Nat, but I did not name him specifically. One of Nat's coping mechanisms is overconfidence. He can smile and strike a pose, and no one knows he is struggling. Nat assured everyone he had been to the school before and had no concerns finding his rooms. I sat back and observed for a while. Once I saw him pass the coaches' lounge too many times, I went into the hallway and addressed him as a speaker. I asked if he needed help, and the look of relief to see his mom come to his aid was heartbreaking. We took long strides and walked confidently up and down the halls while he cried and told me he was lost and nervous. I knew exactly what to say to him because he was my boy. I had him take some breaths, look at a map, and tell him I would come find him after every round if he wanted.

While we were puzzling over the map, three other students approached me for help finding their rooms. I was glad Nat could see he was not the only one. We made a little search party and set out. I said we would find Nat's rooms first since he was with me first, and we did. A bond formed between that small group of speakers, and they all saw where everyone's room was and decided to help each other again between rounds. I did not see Nat again until the day was over. He made it to every round and had a good day. Acting as his mom rather than his coach helped him calm down since I knew what to say and do. Connecting with others and seeing them treat me as their coach was good for him, too, to show him he was not alone. As the years went by, his needs changed, and so did my role.

As I worked on rewrites for this project, Nat engaged in horseplay at our annual speech banquet and broke his ankle (as a side note, I now recruit by describing speech as a dangerous, full-contact activity where broken bones are possible!). We missed the banquet and spent the evening in the emergency room. Nat hobbled out of the hospital on crutches as he tried to balance himself on his new neon cast. The ankle as not his first broken bone, but is the first injury where his walking is affected. What an eye opener! I realized I have not even scratched the surface for many physical disabilities. I discovered I am terrible at pushing a wheelchair and cause more damage and pain than Nat's original discomfort. I thought I was overprotective when Nat walked with his unstable gait, but when he uses crutches I am a ball of anxiety all of the time.

As I watch Nat get around, I frequently imagine his environment in a speech tournament setting. No one questions his need for an elevator key. No one thinks twice

when someone accompanies Nat somewhere or holds things for him. I am not sure how he would present his speech on crutches; his balance is not good enough for him to stand on one foot, so he would need them to hold him up. What if he was in Storytelling? His actions would be compromised. I know judges understand and most do not take the obvious inability to use two legs into consideration; I know I won't read comments on critiques such as "Next time take the cast off before speaking" or "I don't understand the character you try to represent when you lean on the crutch." I suppose we could decide Nat should take a few weeks off or switch to categories requiring less movement until his cast was removed. We have options for a temporary physical impairment. When he is off the crutches, though, he will still bump into people, lose his balance and lean in awkward positions to keep upright, and he will get comments on critiques about finding a stable stance, watching his step and keeping every movement deliberate and conscientious.

The experience with Nat has made me pay attention to which buildings in our community have accessible entrances, seating, ramps, and parking. I have to plan my errands in advance to decide which places will take the most energy so I can tackle them first, and Nat can sit in the car for the last ones when he's too tired. I am uncharacteristically aware of how much space is in between aisles in the grocery store, how many people Nat bumps into when he swings on his crutches (they're portable jungle gyms after all), and how many sympathetic smiles he receives from strangers as they encourage him to "keep going!"

He got a new cast at the half-way mark of his recovery, and my heart was warmed when he said to me, "I am glad I'm not in a wheelchair." I knew he understood the

magnitude of a more visible physical disability than the one with which he currently struggles. He and I have both noticed how willing people are to step in and open a door or help him off the floor or carry things for him. The physicality of the cast gives his temporary disability social acceptance. In fact, his limited mobility has been relationship building as strangers feel free to approach him and ask what happened and share their own stories of broken limbs. He is treated better than when he needs the same help when he's not wearing a cast or using crutches. Those times he is viewed as clumsy, inattentive, needy, or strange.

Linton (2015) relayed the account of Casey Martin, a professional golfer, who requested permission to ride in a golf cart for tournaments as an accommodation. The professional Golfers' Association (PGA) denied his request, and he took the organization to court. The case worked its way up to the Supreme Court, and Martin was granted the right to use a golf cart. Some argued using a cart wasn't "real" golf. His response? "I'd like to know, then, what is golf and who has decided" (Linton, 2015 p. 519). A young man on another speech team who attended our school's tournament a few years ago used a walker. His coach requested all of his rounds be on the same floor and close to the draw room since he was a storyteller. We were happy to honor the request. The discussion in the lounge throughout the day among some coaches and judges focused on why a child who needed a walker would be in storytelling. If he cannot use his arms and legs to be animated and have big movement, why did he choose the category? Why would his coach "allow" him to do such a thing? The boy wasn't "really" a competitor in storytelling. Echoing Linton's (2015) response to Casey Martin's protestors, I'd like to

know, then, what storytelling is and who has decided. MSHSL's rules don't state how a competitor should move.

As with multiple issues, until people decide to take responsibility for their personal beliefs, progress will be slow. Once we consciously break away from traditional norms and unwritten expectations, forensics may possibly evolve into an inclusive, explosive, diversity-driven, blossoming outlet for self-expression and creativity.

Asking Questions: How Do We Know What Other Questions to Ask?

Sometimes, we don't know enough about a particular subject to even know what questions we should ask. The concept is confusing. I cringe when I think of the unintentionally insensitive comments people have made to me about Nat over the years. The best place to start may be asking what we *can* ask. The two mothers I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter weren't being mean, they just didn't know what to do and neither thought to ask. If one had posed a question similar to, "We'd like to have Nat over to play, but we're afraid he'll get hurt. Do you think that's a risk?" or "Can you tell me what he can do on his own and what he needs help with?" I would have gratefully offered suggestions and advice. I would have sent along activities for him to do with the other children. In fact, I would have come along if other mothers wanted to keep an eye on him and lend support and answer questions. No one asked.

A man in the hallway of a clinic once asked, referring to Nat, "What's wrong with him?" as Nat held his father's hand and walked. His father made a comment about cerebral palsy (the diagnosis we had been given at the time), and the man responded, "He doesn't have cerebral palsy." I was confused and offended. Who did he think he was to

offer such a judgement call? In hindsight, I wish I had been braver and asked why he thought so. Did his own child have cerebral palsy? Was he looking at signs and symptoms or acting on an assumption? We all could have learned more that day.

Several people have felt free to play armchair physician and tell me what nutrients I should push to enhance his stability. An essential oil representative told me which essences to put in a diffuser to help increase his immune system. I brushed it off as a sales technique, but I have since given her words some credence. A friend of my mother told her in passing one day which essential oils she used to boost immune systems and calm down her grandson who was often debilitated with anxiety. We tried them at home and found the effects soothing and beneficial. A cousin was certain if I included more fruits and vegetables in Nat's diet, his life would even out. She hinted at the idea I was too dramatic about Nat's condition, and all I needed to do was relax and change his nutrient intake. On a side note, the aforementioned woman was also offended I did not name my child what she suggested, so I knew better than to follow up with more questions if I didn't want an earful of hurtful comments.

My father and his wife visited several times in Nat's first years of life. He told me if I didn't carry Nat so much he would walk better. The final blow came at one of the Shriners Hospitals for Children. We doctored there twice when Nat was a toddler. On our first visit, doctors ran a series of tests on Nat to see what could be causing his hypertonic ("floppy") condition. All agreed something was not right, but no one had a clue what the underlying issue was. The clinic scheduled another appointment a few weeks later. We made the long journey back to meet with a neurologist who let us know she had come in

on her day off to see Nat. When she read in her chart he was exceptionally verbal, the neurologist asked two-year-old Nat a few questions. She then said to me, “He’s not exceptional. He didn’t use plurals correctly in the last sentence about the ball.” She asked him to do some physical activities, and he tried and failed each one with great gusto. Her final assessment was I was disappointed I wasn’t raising an athlete. She chastised me for being unhappy with my son because he may play in the pep band instead of on the football field, and I should get over it. I scooped up my son and we did not see another doctor for years.

What if we asked questions beyond what we see and assume and rather focus on how to make our environment inclusive and accommodating for any child who has needs? What if, as parents and teachers and doctors and coaches and friends and relatives, we trusted the family’s experiences and approached them with questions about what we can do to make their lives easier?

My personal experiences have made me more aware of the world around me, and I can see how we can do better. As a mom and coach, I look back and see how I wish others and I had handled situations differently. Today, I have the honor of being able to look forward and voice what I believe can be done to enhance the future of my son and our speakers. How can we answer the questions my life has raised?

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

We are in uncharted territory in our house, on our team and in much of the research right now. Regardless of how many coaches have blazed a trail before us, how many studies have been conducted, or how many articles are available for reference, the Rows do not always know what to do with our specific circumstance. Embarking on a journey in order to allow me to incorporate my life as a mother and varsity speech coach and connect us with others as we learn what to do to make forensics more accommodating to speakers with physical disabilities is my ultimate goal for this project.

Answering the Questions

What can we do to include, advocate and accommodate for our speakers with disabilities? I answer this with a question. What can we ask? We cannot be afraid to speak up and admit our own ignorance. We must put the student first, and ask as much as we can about the condition and how we can be a part of overcoming the obstacles s/he faces on our team, at our tournaments, in our families. Talk to a coach or parent or the student him/herself. We should never think, "I've worked with a student with a broken leg before; I know what to do." We don't. Each person needs a different plan for success. Let's break down the question piece by piece.

How can we include? First, let's make ourselves aware of what is required of us by law. Check with administration and special education departments in our school districts; go online to access state and federal laws; talk to other teachers and coaches and parents about individual needs; become familiar with where the schools house the

Individual Education Plans and discuss confidentiality laws with the case workers. Once we have the legal guidelines straight, how can we incorporate the student on our team? Is there a in which category the student present particularly well? If not, we have a chance to shine as coaches by figuring out where to place the student according to his/her talents and abilities. Where will s/he be the most successful? We can arrange our practices to include more team activities so the students all feel the sense of comradery and ownership.

Our team has 40 members and three coaches who oversee the entire group. One coach runs 2-hour team practices after school four nights a week, one coach offers individual practice sessions three evenings a week, and I, the third coach, balance my time bouncing back and forth from both. We require our students attend two group sessions and one individual session each week. The group sessions allow each student to present his/her speech twice during the course of two hours. The kids gather in category-specific groups and peer coach. We run mock draw rounds and discussions as well. Later in the practice, senior speakers pair up with novice speakers to work on overall delivery including diction, posture, meet etiquette, etc. A student's physical-ability level is not an issue. We are all present to focus on speeches. Period. The individual practices are when we can get into the meat of the script and deal with the students on individual levels. We assess the volume of our student who wears hearing aids, we come up with strategies for a girl with Asperger's who cannot follow directions well, we find under-stimulating environments for over-stimulated students, etc.

How can we advocate? The first step may be swallowing our pride. Asking for help is not a reflection of weakness or failure. Asking for help is our job when we are in charge of students. If our schools need different accommodations for practices, going to the administration and building services is the first step. If we have special requests for a tournament for a disabled speaker, contacting the tournament manager directly and in a timely fashion is the best choice. Blindsiding a manager on the day of a tournament to ask for accommodations is disrespectful to both the manager and the students. We will be met with impatience and a sense of inconvenience.

A wonderful idea I have seen implemented at several tournaments is addressing the special needs in a mandatory judges' meeting held before the tournament begins. Most judges are familiar with these meetings and make a point to attend since the manager covers rule changes, round adjustments, and speaker adds and drops. Adding a brief section to the meeting to provide judges with information regarding students who require special needs is a seamless way to ensure understanding. The manager takes a minute to let judges know a hearing-impaired student will need to see their lips when speaking; a visually impaired student will need verbal prompts rather than visual cues such as a head nod to begin or time cards; a student with an insulin pump may look as if she is carrying an electronic device in her pocket or on her skirt; a speaker with a behavioral condition may need an aid with him. All of these scenarios alert judges to possible accommodations and leave little room for surprises.

How can we accommodate? Accommodation takes place on two fronts: in the team setting and in the tournament setting. For a team, a great place to start is by

checking with administration and special education, if appropriate, and see what needs to be done for the individual. Is there an Individual Education Plan already drafted for the students? If so, what types of accommodations are used in a school setting? Is transportation in place for the student? Will we be required to use extra funds in order to successfully provide accommodations? When we receive answers to how to best accommodate, act on them and employ help if necessary. In a tournament setting, we know what our students need, but we do not know what other students need until we are notified.

As soon as we receive a request, even if we're irritated or inconvenienced, we should respond pleasantly and assure the coach and speaker we will do everything in our power to make the accommodations. We can reschedule rooms to be on the main floor for non-ambulatory speakers; we can make sure our sidewalks are clear of any little bit of ice posing as an obstacle; we can have students or volunteers on hand to assist with finding rooms or designated specifically to a student with special-access needs; we can reserve one quiet, dimly-lit room where coaches can bring students with anxiety or sensory disorders for them to be in a calm space for a while.

The best thing we can do is talk to others. The more we open communication, the more strategies we will learn, and the more we can share our own experiences with others. I had the opportunity to share my research and ideas with a group at my state's annual convention in 2014. As I went through my findings and asked for participation from audience members, we all came away with wonderful new insights and plans. A year later I spoke with a woman who was a part of the audience. She had shared the

information with her daughter who is a teacher. At the school's first pep assembly, the daughter saw a gymnasium filled with standing, cheering, able-bodied students, and wondered if there was a plan in place to evacuate the gym quickly and safely for students with mobility issues. There was not, so she and her administration began working on one immediately. If we all took time to connect and talk and participate in the discussion, we would have a trove of methods and, more importantly, recognize we are not alone. We are all part of the struggle and the solution.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study is not exhaustive and has limitations. I have focused many of my reflections on the actions and reactions of coaches and not the students themselves other than Nat. Coaches give first-hand accounts of their own experiences, but the students and parents and school administrators may have different ideas of whether advocacy and/or accommodations are helpful. My observations are limited to a small group of primarily Minnesota speech teams. I do not have the scope of an entire nation or even the entire state. I am honing in on visible physical disabilities and not covering invisible physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral disabilities. Even so, I am not, however, able to cover every physical disability in every form. I am restricted to the experiences of myself and other coaches. I am also neglecting the use of service animals in the activity.

While lack of exploration and research in the area of physical disabilities in the world of forensics was a little frustrating as I tried to gather information for the project, I am encouraged at how much more there is to learn. Multiple opportunities we can grasp are present at several levels including middle school, high school, college, state

programs, national programs, competitions throughout the US, small towns, large cities and more. Each experience is as unique as the individuals involved and affected. A non-coaching parent and a non-parenting coach would have further ideas and perspectives. Administration and special education teachers have more to offer than most coaches ever consider. Research through the eyes of the speaker is necessary, too. Hopefully the research in disability studies concerning communication and extra-curricular activities—particularly speech—will grow, and we will have more shared ideas of how we can help each student on our speech teams better regardless of limitations and challenges.

Revisiting Nat, Elise (Mom) and Elise (Coach)

Nat is now out of his cast and onto new challenges. Nat and I have lived the journey together and will not be finished when the project is complete. At some point, he will continue his journey on his own and I will be an observer rather than a participant. My role has changed considerably during the past year as both a parent and coach. Nat's unusual limitations and circumstances have required an uncomfortable shift for us both. He has moved to Missouri to complete his school year on a ranch designed for boys with barriers similar to Nat's. The year will be the making of my son.

As we researched placement, one component Nat looked for was a speech program. While the school doesn't have a forensics team, the headmaster was a speech and debate coach for years. Nat's passion for public speaking has inspired the school to look into public speaking opportunities and teach the boys Lincoln Douglas Debate. Nat feels a sense of pride and leadership in this area. In fact, the administrator of the school

said they are sometimes called upon to give presentations about the school, and he would like to incorporate Nat into the programs at some point.

My team has changed as well. I am not riddled with anxiety at practices or team meetings if I see Nat is having a bad day. I am able to experience parenting a member of my team who does not have a physical disability. Other than reminding him to eat well, I am hands-off. Joshua does not need (nor does he want) my help as his mom. He will only approach me as Coach Elise with a group of other students who have questions. I often hear him practicing his speech in his room, and he tries out new physical movements using his friends as an audience. My involvement as a coach is very different this year. I'm breathing on a new and calmer level. In our personal environment, our family has recently been subjected to a new accommodation.

Right before Nat left, he was issued a yellow lab named Xephyr as a service animal. He is not able to have Xephyr in Missouri, so the puppy lives with us. Even when Nat returns, I do not think we will try to bring Xephyr along on speech meets, but I am sure we will be seeing service animals in the forensic community which will undoubtedly bring up new concerns, rules, norms and opportunities for discussions regarding all different types of accommodations.

By the time Nat returns and joins the speech team for his senior year, he may not need me to advocate for him much anymore. I look forward to navigating those months. He will be 18, and he will have a better idea of what he needs to do for himself. I will always be his mother and I will have a few short months as his coach, but the two may be more exclusive rather than too tightly interwoven. As long as I am a teacher and a coach,

however, I will participate in advocating for students with special needs and accommodating as much as I can to alleviate unnecessary barriers for all students.

I cannot begin to explain how difficult life has been for Nat and me in terms of this project. To take a close look at the pain my son lives, and to have to experience his life's struggles through the eyes of a coach and of a mother provides me with knowledge I wish I did not have to know. I am not unhappy to possess the knowledge, however. I have been given exceptional opportunities. I have first-hand access to various levels of understanding physical disabilities and the responsibility and honor of sharing my knowledge. The chance to get to know my son better and improve the speech world we both love so much has been worth the effort. I hope I am beginning to blaze a trail so the path is not so treacherous for those who walk behind us.

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