

## School Awards

Each year, these awards ceremonies meant less and less to me. I saw how easy my peers made it through the school day. I saw how their 30 minute homework assignment took 2 hours for me. My peers extra curricular activities included sports and art and volunteering while my extra curricular included sensory overloads and doctor visits and tutors and councilors.

I lived in a world that continued to seem harder and harder compared to those of my peers. Yet, those who had it easy received all the awards. I'm not saying they didn't work hard to be top of their class in their subject, but for someone like me who lived day to day- hour to hour, earning an award for receiving a decent grade seemed beyond silly. And who gets to choose which student with the above 4.0 GPA gets the award, it seemed so arbitrary. But when the same student won the same award every year, I knew it wasn't. There was more than chance behind who won the award. And so I sat in the audience trying not to roll my eyes as the winners walked on stage and shook the principal's hand.

By senior year, I didn't expect to ever win an award. I had concluded that the diploma would be enough. I cried when I realized I was graduating. There was this moment where I realized it was happening and I hadn't realized how much I had doubted that I would make it thus far. But that's another story.

I ended up winning an award. They send these letters home that tell the parents of the winners to attend the ceremony because their child will probably receive an award. The award was for "learning center" which was the program for us special needs students. I took the letter to school the next day and asked my teacher what qualified me for the award. I never received an answer.

I decided to put my own meaning behind why I won this award. I won this award because I didn't quit school. I won this award because I walked into school on good days and bad, even when I would rather be curled up in a ball crying. I won this award I stayed at school for as long as I could, especially for those days I couldn't make it through and had to go home at lunch. I won this award for sitting in classes that didn't teach the way I learned and had to sit at home and teach myself. I won this award because I stood up for my rights when my teacher told me "I didn't need extra time on the test" or "I didn't need questions modified." I earned this award because I am a good student. I earned this award because I never gave up.

This award means so much more to me than I dreamed it would when I sat in kindergarten imagining myself as one of the winners of the first awards ceremony. I didn't know I had autism then. I didn't know how life would turn upside down so quickly and unfairly. I didn't know how dark things could be. Now in those dark moments when everything is so unfair, I look up at that award hanging on my wall. In that moment I remember that I earned this award not because I continued to push myself when it was easy, but also when it was hard. I continue to earn that same award today. Maybe I'll never earn another award again. For now, I'll continue to earn my senior year learning center award, everyday.

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