

Joshua

by Arlene Nisson Lassin

This is Teacher Appreciation week, and in honor of that, I pulled out a true story I wrote several years back when I worked as a reading specialist. There are teachers out in the trenches every day having victories such as the one I had with Joshua. So hug or thank a teacher today!

Joshua – Copyrighted by Arlene Nisson Lassin

When Joshua first came to me he wore a snarl on his face, and he shrugged his shoulders to all of my questions; his persona telling me that he had long ago given up on school. It was the beginning of a new school year in an impoverished neighborhood and I was his new remedial reading teacher. As a reading specialist funded by a federal grant, I met with one to four students at a time who were having difficulty learning to read. I was trained in an expensive program that if taught patiently and properly, practically guaranteed any child could learn to read.

Before meeting with Joshua, I reviewed his file. It was easy to see why he had a poor attitude about his education; he was 11 years old and still in the second grade. He had failed every grade twice, including kindergarten. A note from his most recent summer school teacher cried out for help for him.

“Joshua is eleven years old and doesn’t know his letter sounds and cannot read at all,” the note pleaded. “Someone needs to do something to help this child.”

That first day with me, I sat Joshua at a small table to assess his reading level. I pushed a kindergarten primer towards him containing simple words like cat and mat. Joshua looked at it for a few moments, and then faced me and said with resignation, “I can’t read.” Trying to appear like he didn’t care with a disdainful attitude and demeanor, his eyes betrayed him as they reflected his sadness and shame.

At 11 years old, Joshua had never been given the key to unlock the world of words and reading simply because he did not learn as others could in a regular classroom setting. Although he was a math whiz and seemed of normal intelligence, no one had the opportunity before me to find out why Joshua couldn’t read.

During our very next meeting, I learned Joshua could not name the letters of the alphabet; he did not know a “v” was called a “v,” and so on. When asked the sounds that each letter makes, he made an attempt with a grunting type sound with some of the letters, but he just shook his head at most. It was clear that we were starting at the very beginning.

One of the greatest difficulties for me was to not come on too strong with this defeated child, and more importantly not to make him promises we did not know would come true. He had failed for so long over the puzzle of letter sounds and stringing them together to make words; I knew there was no easy fix. There was also tremendous anger within him, as I found out soon enough when he lashed out in frustration. For that reason he could not be pushed too hard, especially during those first tenuous days.

Aside from his inability to read, Joshua also had a severe speech impediment and he slurred most of his words and sounds. After repeating letter sounds incorrectly for several days, I began to suspect he was not hearing me properly, because he could not duplicate my sounds.

I met with the school nurse, who tested Joshua's hearing. In his medical file, she noticed that he had a severe ear infection that was not treated. Sure enough, after testing we found he had a minor hearing impairment. Although it was sad news, I finally had enough information on Joshua to try to help him appropriately.

Fortunately, I was trained in using a simple piece of PVC pipe that when held like a phone, curves from the mouth to the ear and acts as a sound amplifier. Called a "phonics phone," it became Joshua's lifesaver. In the phone, I made sounds that went directly to his ear. Then when he copied, he could hear his own sounds in his ear.

With that simple device, Joshua was able to learn his letter sounds.

However, no amount of learning could be taken for granted, because he would quickly forget things since he would not practice. I had asked Joshua to practice his alphabet cards that I gave him to take home. It was quite obvious that he did not do that, because for every step forward he would take, he would come back to me the next day two steps back.

Each time he did this and I showed signs of frustration or disappointment, the anger in Joshua came out, and he tried to play the role of a stubborn tough guy. When I pushed him too hard, he cursed me and I felt unappreciated. There were many days when we engaged in a battle of wills. Never in my life had I been given this kind of challenge with so much at stake. My own self esteem was now at risk now and due in large part to my sheer stubbornness; I refused to accept failure as an option.

Even though Joshua wanted others to perceive him as a tough guy who didn't care about learning, there were hints that he was just as determined in our efforts as I was. There were lessons where Joshua worked so hard with me; he would break out into a sweat. And there were days where he really seemed to enjoy his newfound learning.

Finally, almost two months into our lessons, Joshua retained enough knowledge of letter sounds to begin reading. My next hurdle was getting him to attach letter sounds together to make words.

I began with the shortest word I knew he could sound out and I showed him an "a" and a "t." I instructed him to hold the first letter sound and then make the second sound. I told him if he did that, he would hear a word as he said it and he would then be able to read that word.

Gently prodding, I asked him, "What word are we reading, Joshua?"

Gripping the phonics phone, suddenly after struggling stringing the sounds together for a few minutes, his eyes opened wide as he heard the word he was sounding out. He looked at me quizzically and then asked hopefully, "at?"

"Yes, Joshua, AT," I said.

A smile crept across his face and illuminated the entire room.

The impossible mystery of reading had become unlocked for Joshua in that powerful moment, and probably for the first time in his life he experienced enough of a victory to believe he was capable of reading.

He looked at the word again, and said "at," seeing for the very first time the connection of sounds blending together into a word. I next gave him the word "mat." More determined now, he sounded MMMAATTT, and then again, a hopeful voice emerged with, "Mat?"

"Yes Joshua, Mat."

Soon he read his first sentence, and then other sentences. I sent him a copy of the primers to take home and practice, but I found out from his classroom teacher that he was

leaving them at school each day, unopened. Perhaps he was embarrassed to take these babyish books home because I knew he loved reading them while with me. Still, his lack of practice made his progress very slow.

After a while he was bored with the baby books and sentences. As he read three, four, and five letter words and gained a small sight vocabulary, he was able to read new books. When he did, he grinned eagerly and his chest puffed up with confidence.

Finally one day he read an entirely new primer book to me, haltingly, sometimes tripping up on the sight words that he had forgotten, but he was able to read it successfully. This was quite an accomplishment, reading a whole book he had never seen before.

Proudly, I looked at him and said, "Joshua, do you know that you have become a reader?"

My angry, defiant, and yes, occasionally lazy student felt like an academic champion that day.

Despite those victories, I was still engaged in an uphill battle because outside of our little time together, Joshua would not practice reading. Our progress was always barely plodding along to my great frustration.

In Joshua's world, I was NOT a hero, just another person in a system he did not trust, who wanted more from him than he was willing to give.

On one particularly rough day, I sent him to the principal's office for cursing at me during a lesson. Off he marched, still clutching his primer in his hand. The principal knew very well about this pupil and his lack of progress in school.

After leaving them together, I peeked back in a short time later. Instead of the disciplinary scene I had expected, Joshua was smiling with a shiny metallic pencil in his hand, given as a gift by the principal. The assistant principal and principal were sitting there with wet eyes because Joshua had just read his entire ten page book to them.

Later, the principal reminded me how important it was that Joshua was reading. She did not have the heart to discipline him after hearing him read. She told me that I could only control Joshua's world for the short time I had him, and that any small accomplishment was better than none.

The school year ended quickly, and Joshua, almost 12 years old, could read at middle first grade level by year's end. I told him how proud I was that he was now a reader. His grin, in response, seemed a mile wide and I could see he was proud too. I told him I couldn't wait to work with him again the next year, because he was really going to soar in his reading ability.

As I worked in a school with a transient population, it shouldn't have seemed surprising that Joshua did not return to our school after summer vacation. As I reflected on my disappointment, I felt sure he retained his letter-sound-word connection that was so hard won. Giving up on the notion that I would bring him further along that next school year, I was comforted in the knowledge that no matter where he was, he could never again look a teacher in the eye and truthfully utter those terrible words that brought him such shame the year before, "I can't read."

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