

Susan's Story

Susan's personal journey was never conventional. As an infant, she never crawled, insisting instead on pushing herself around on her rump. She did not speak until she was almost three. And when she finally began to speak, she spoke in full sentences.

Susan learned to read before starting school. By the time she was seven, her reading comprehension was so high that she was selected to give a book report on a "grown up" book on public television.

Nonetheless, her teachers reported that she was a sloppy reader. When she read aloud, she would mistake one word for another and she tended to drop the endings of words. Her teachers described her as "messy." Her penmanship was terrible and she did poorly in arithmetic. Hours and hours with flashcards did not help. She withstood constant criticism for being sloppy and "lazy," but the criticism produced no change. She was labeled an "underachiever." By the third grade, she had developed a fairly strong dislike of school.

Susan was a shy and insecure child. But, at the same time, she was quite self-sufficient and mature. Her ability to "read" people made many adults uncomfortable. She was not a child people warmed up to easily. Somehow she could not manage to make people like her.

By seventh grade, Susan began to skip school on a regular basis. She also began to abuse drugs. After attending an outpatient rehabilitation program at Phoenix House, Susan stopped abusing drugs. She was 15. She graduated from high school at the age of 16 with high test scores on New York's Regents exams. Nonetheless, her teachers gave her low grades, troubled by her bad attendance record and disruptive behavior in class. Susan was admitted to NYU despite undistinguished scores on the SAT exam. Her scores were probably the result of her trying too hard

to “figure out” the answers instead of using her intuition - her usual test strategy.

At NYU, where no one checked class attendance and where she could avoid courses that required papers, Susan excelled, graduating magna cum laude. Susan applied to law school. Unlike her SAT scores, Susan’s LSAT scores were extremely high. She was admitted to Yale.

At Yale Law School, Susan continued her past routine of skipping classes and learning on her own. She was a poor note taker and was hopeless at constructing outlines. But at Yale her problems with grammar and spelling were harder to conceal. A very patient and caring classmate who was a brilliant writer worked with her all three years of law school, and slowly her writing improved. Her simple speaking style and ability to “read” people served her well in the Yale trial competition, where she was a finalist: the first woman to make the finals in Yale’s history.

After law school, Susan took a series of jobs seemingly “beneath” her talents’ jobs that one would not expect a Yale Law graduate to hold, including running a continuing legal education program. During that almost 10-year period, however, Susan’s confidence grew. In 1987, she entered law teaching.

All her adult life, Susan had struggled with some simple tasks: arithmetic, finding her way from point A to B (she avoided learning to drive until well into her 30s), grammar, spelling, note-taking, outlining, vocabulary, understanding certain linguistic categories, and managing not to fall down.

She hated traveling, stayed home alone a good deal, got disoriented and uncomfortable in public settings, such as movie theaters, outdoor events, and large social gatherings. People considered her quirky and inflexible.

Although she had never been diagnosed with any kind of learning disability, she knew (and always had known) that her

brain just would not do many things that other people found simple. At the same time, she knew that her brain found many things much easier than they were for others. She seemed to perceive things others did not; and she failed to perceive much that others perceived. She began to tell people she was dyslexic, largely to get people off her back.

Beginning in 2001, Susan began staying home more and more. She found it increasingly hard to travel and, more alarming, increasingly difficult to teach her classes "blind," as she always had, i.e., without notes or a sure sense of where she was in space. It all felt like a "nervous breakdown" of sorts.

In October 2004, Susan took a rare trip away from home. She traveled to Chicago to visit a friend. While she was there, she went to a store, three blocks in a straight line from her friend's house. Leaving the store, she got "turned around" and, without realizing it, set off in the wrong direction. Finding herself lost, she got back to the store and tried again with the same result - lost. Disoriented, she fell, got up and once again went back to the store. On the third try to reach her friend's home, she saw her friend across the street looking for her. Before crossing to meet him, she tried to tidy up any evidence of the fall. Looking down to brush off her skirt, she noticed that her right leg was covered in blood. She had been bleeding profusely for some time with no awareness of it. This set in motion the events that led to Sarah's Place.