

Nathalie Tadena

Growing Up with Autism

Science was never my forte. In high school, I've been an avid debater, written for the school newspaper, and volunteered in local politics— I was interested in anything but science. Yet in spite of this, I signed up for the most rigorous science course offered at my high school—Science Research. Although my research has not found the cure to cancer or a solution to end world poverty, my research has instead helped me learn a tremendous amount about a member of my own family—my brother.

My younger brother Robert was diagnosed with autism when he was two and since then, I've always felt as if living with a sibling with autism distinguished my family from a "normal" family. When we go to places like church or a restaurant, my brother will sometimes throw a temper tantrum and cause a public commotion. When I was younger, I was always embarrassed to go out in public with my brother because whenever he acted up, people around us would stare. Little kids would point fingers and make comments because they didn't know any better. Once, when we were in a supermarket, my brother started bawling in the middle of an aisle right there next to the frozen peas. Frustrated and fed up, I started yelling at him in front of everyone at the supermarket, something I had never done in public before. I left the store in tears, dragging my brother along with me. Until that moment, I had always restrained myself to keep my frustration to myself; I was never one who enjoyed negative attention. I was embarrassed at my own behavior and realized I needed to overcome my ignorance.

In the ninth grade, I began to read more about autism in order to better understand why my brother acted as he did. This began a three year-long research project to study the social and behavioral development of relatives of children with autism. I was able to work with professional researchers at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine to extensively explore something in which I'm passionately interested. No cure for autism has been found, nor have its exact causes been pinpointed. However, I'm proud that my own work has helped broaden the available knowledge about autism, knowledge that I hope will help families living with an autistic child like my own. I was always offended when kids my age would throw around the word "retard." It's hurtful to know that many people are not informed about conditions like autism and don't respect others who are "different." That's precisely why this research study was so important to me—I wanted to educate and spread awareness. If the public isn't aware about an issue, a problem or even a developmental disorder, then effective change will never be made. Last year, I was one of the winners at the Westchester Science and Engineering Fair and I went on to present my research at the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair among 1500 other presenters from 47 different countries and I have my brother to thank for this.

My relationship with my brother tapped into a passion for research and social science that I otherwise would never have realized on my own. I hope to pursue my interest in autism and research by studying psychology and cognitive science more extensively next year in college. Many people my age don't have as strong a bond with their siblings as the one I have with mine and I'm fiercely proud of that.