

## **Finding My Voice Was the First Accommodation**

I did not grow up knowing that the systems around me were allowed to bend. I learned early that survival meant adapting myself to environments that were not built for me, rather than expecting those environments to change.

I am a disabled person shaped by trauma, neurodivergence, poverty, and instability. For much of my life, my challenges were seen as personal failures rather than structural barriers. I learned to mask, overperform, and endure. Advocacy was not something I was taught. It was something I had to discover out of necessity.

My first act of self-advocacy was not loud or public. It was internal. It was the moment I realized that needing accommodations did not make me weak, broken, or less capable. It made me human. From there, everything changed.

As I moved through higher education and into professional spaces, I began advocating not only for myself but for others who were being quietly excluded. I challenged rigid attendance policies that punished disabled students for medical realities. I questioned productivity standards that ignored executive functioning differences. I pushed for trauma-informed practices in systems that preferred efficiency over dignity.

Today, my work centers on supporting disabled and neurodivergent individuals as they learn to advocate for themselves, often for the first time. I work with teens, adults, and families who have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that they must fit the system as it is or fail. Together, we name barriers accurately. We document them. We challenge them.

The impact of this advocacy is tangible. Students remain enrolled instead of dropping out. Workers request accommodations instead of burning out. Families shift from shame to understanding. These are not small victories. They are life-altering.

What I have learned is this: disability advocacy is not about inspiration. It is about access. It is about power. It is about believing that disabled people deserve systems that work with us, not against us.

Ernie Reynolds' legacy reflects this truth. Advocacy is not charity. It is justice. It is persistence. It is the refusal to accept exclusion as inevitable.

I did not overcome barriers by becoming less disabled. I overcame them by demanding that the world meet me halfway, and by helping others learn that they can demand the same.

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