

## How We Got Started Homeschooling (4/10/09)

I read so many stories on why parents started their kids in homeschooling and each one of them has given us the courage to pursue this road less taken. I hope that our own story below can resonate with those of you who are at the verge of embarking on this incredible journey...

### A Medical Emergency

Serina, my wife, had twins who were born at 28 weeks – that's 3 months premature compared to the usual 9 month gestation period. Babies born this early are known to be confronted with enormous developmental challenges, including potential for bleeding in the brain, eye-sight issues, gross and fine motor skills debilitation, and potential for permanent and serious digestive system issues. The twins were in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) of our local hospital for 3 months. Born at 2 pounds each, our twins were one of the most fragile out of the entire NICU patients.

At the lowest point of our stay at NICU, the twins both contracted fungal infections, and our daughter was given a 50/50 chance of survival.

### Two Miracles

There was a lot of hoping and praying that things would get better, but these acts seemed useless to the one-sided fight brewing between a fully aggressive germ against the undeveloped immune system of our babies. Ironically, it was when we wholly and spiritually accepted the reality that we may lose our children that things started to turn around. The doctors could not explain why, but for some reason, the infection levels were decreasing and soon disappeared – what was even weirder was the fact that the infection levels decreased and disappeared *at the same rate and at the same time* in both Lauren and Ryan. And with that battle won, both were soon released from NICU. Fortunately, there were no brain-bleeds, digestive issues or other physically debilitating problems when they were discharged.

### We're Not Unscathed

But as Lauren and Ryan were both going in for their regular checkups for ROP (retinopathy of prematurity – this is a condition in premature babies that can potentially lead to blindness), both were found to be in need of surgery to prevent loss of eye sight. And although it seemed that the operation was successful in Lauren, we were not as fortunate with Ryan. Specifically, Ryan had lost full sight of his right eye and had significant sight damage in his left eye (currently, Ryan can read at 18 sized font with his glasses).

Therefore, growing up, Ryan faced challenges that Lauren didn't face. Although he grew up with the full passion and vigor of a baby boy (including that gene that seemingly turns off any sense of immediate danger), Ryan literally ran into objects (staircases, table tops, and most dangerous - corners of chairs) while playing and so we had to make sure he was supervised more than a fully-sighted toddler.

### Our Great Mistake

However, despite his sight issues, Ryan (and Lauren) quickly picked up phonics and basic reading skills at a neighborhood academic center for pre-schoolers. And we thought that the major hurdle of succeeding in Kindergarten was largely behind us – if the kids could already read when they started Kindergarten, the rest should be a breeze...we could not have been more wrong, and the following illustrates our mistake.

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Lauren and Ryan were enrolled in our local elementary school. We notified Ryan's teacher of his sight issue and he was immediately referred to other support programs within the school system that could help with his sight problem. Serina signed the release on letting the school conduct assessments, and we both honestly thought these assessments were to assess his vision only. Things seemed to go well since the kids were telling us how they enjoyed school. However, about a month into Kindergarten, we got a call from the school to pick up Lauren for some reason we can't remember. When Serina got to school, she saw Ryan at the school administration office, looking the most depressed as ever - he was hunched over on a chair, just not really moving at all. She went up to Ryan, thinking we would be happy to see her.

"Ryan, it's mommy", she called cheerfully, hoping he would cheer up.

He didn't respond. He just sat there head down and hunched over. Serina asked the administrative staff what was going on with Ryan and they referred her to the school counselor. She had a meeting that went something like this (the discussion below represents paraphrasing):

School Counselor: We conducted assessments on Ryan and although he tested well above his peers in verbal skills, we think he may have some form of autism and recommend that you consult your doctor to get a professional diagnosis.

Serina: (Restraining herself from outburst but giving the counselor some benefit of doubt) What is it that makes you think that?

School Counselor: He's unusually quiet in class and doesn't like to interact with anyone - it's already been a month and he still seems uncomfortable with his peers. Also, he always looks down, doesn't like to look directly at you, which is a tell-tale sign. Also, according to our assessment, he seems a bit too focused on certain themes when he's talking...for example, he mentions that the thing he likes the most is the Haunted Mansion ride and the thing he dislikes the most is Pirates of the Caribbean ride because there is a part of the ride that the boat goes down.

Serina: Well, I thought you were assessing Ryan for his visual problems...why are you assessing him for autism; I didn't think this was a factor...

School Counselor: When you signed the release, you permitted the school district to assess Ryan for his visual AND psychological state.

Serina: (Getting visibly perturbed) Well, I didn't realize that when signing the release because the context that was discussed between me and the school was only referring to his visual issues. But beside the point, how long have you been assessing Ryan?

School Counselor: For the last two wee-

Serina: Two weeks?! And when have you been testing him, during class?

School Counselor: Yes, we pull him out for around ½ hr – 1 hr, depending on the assessment needed.

Serina: So, you expect a kid to be comfortable with his peers when he's being pulled out during class for half of the time he's been enrolled in Kindergarten?! Why would you expect him to feel comfortable around his peers if he's not being treated like them?" Also, (furious at the verge of tears at this point) don't you know that Ryan's sight issue results in the fact that he cannot look up directly in the eyes at somebody...he can see the best out of the *left side* of his left eye, causing him to tilt his head to the right whenever he wants to look at you – but it physically is uncomfortable for him to do that, the doctors can confirm this with you if you want.

School Counselor: Well, I was just told that he had visual issues and didn't know anything about-

Serina: And the reason why he talks about Haunted House so much is because he *likes it*. We have annual passes to Disneyland and we go there on a weekly basis and he loves it. Same reason for Pirates, he doesn't like dips...so what's wrong with that?!

School Counselor: Well, boys his age like to talk about baseball, not-

Serina: (Furious) HIS VISION ISSUE DOESN'T MAKE BASEBALL A REALISTIC THING FOR HIM TO PURSUE SINCE HE CAN'T SEE AS WELL! DOESN'T THAT JUST MAKE COMMON SENSE?!?

School Counselor: Well, based on our assessment, we recommend that for Ryan's sake, that he's best fitted for our Special Program, where we only have 4 students at the moment and plenty of attention. In fact, we have 5 teachers ready in the program so Ryan should get one-on-one support. You have to understand Mrs. Bae, that his current teacher has over 20 students to teach at once and it makes it especially difficult if-

Serina: (Forming tears) If Ryan is dragging the whole class down?!

School Counselor: Please don't take this the wrong way Mrs. Bae, we're all here to do what's best for Ryan and-

Serina: (Whispering and exasperated) I...will...not...have my son in a Special Program. So what are the next steps here?

School Counselor: Well, the Principal along with the assessors would like to have a conference with you....

Serina didn't hear the rest, because she was just picturing how that meeting would go, with her sitting in the center and all the assessors and the Principal on their side trying to persuade her to get Ryan into the Special Program. Now, let's make it clear here that we don't have anything against the Special Program, but both of us knew in our hearts that placing him there would just be another administrative mistake – he would in effect be another headcount that's great for the school since it would ensure more funds for their budget and therefore, justify the teachers teaching in the program – but prospects for Ryan to realize his full potential in this program was dismal at best – this was how we were exposed to the public school system.

### **Pulling Out**

The rest is history – Serina spoke to everyone she needed to in the school district and pulled Ryan out completely.

At this point, we were just relieved to have Ryan back and every time we think about what we made him go through, well it just pains me immensely that we allowed that. But after a while, it seemed apparent that his education, in whatever form, would need to occur soon. And so we started to look at alternatives.

### **Searching for Answers**

During some research, I came across homeschooling. I have to admit that homeschooling was something that we just recently heard of, and that kids of homeschooling acted “differently” than traditional academic kids (don't ask us what “differently” meant, because that word was suggested to us by some friends who knew homeschooled children and thus, we had no clue as to what they were talking about). It was a pure coincidence that I came to Serina with the idea of homeschooling as a possible alternative for Ryan and that a local church was giving a lecture on homeschooling. Therefore, not knowing what to expect, we went to the meeting and discovered that homeschooled kids were indeed “different”.

You see, part of the lecture at the church involved about 3-4 homeschooled kids giving a quick presentation on a business idea that each had. The presentation was no longer than 2-3 minutes each, but what really intrigued us was that these group of kids were the most articulate, confident, and self-managed (read: minimal “sssh's” or other form of parental coaching while on stage) set of kids we ever met. It was as if giving presentations to a group of 20 strangers + their parents was something they had done all their young lives (we're talking ages 7-9 here).

And after we heard the customized curriculum that the children were exposed to (each were different to meet the needs of the child) and the flexible schedules AND locations that homeschooling could occur (anyone up for homeschooling in Italy while on vacation?), we were wondering, “why hadn't we considered this for Ryan earlier?”

### **Epilogue**

Shortly thereafter, we moved to Texas (not for homeschool reasons, but Texas does appear to be one of the states with the least restrictions on homeschooling) where we have started to homeschool Ryan and we're taking it one step at a time – and just taking informal checks against the public school progress we notice that he is above level in reading, which gives us assurance that we are not under-teaching.

Right now, we are currently teaching Ryan with materials we created on our site as well as those found at teaching materials stores such as Lakeshore Learning and stuff on the Internet. At the same time, we are carefully reviewing formal curriculum that we will use going forward (more on that one later!) to give Ryan a more consistent learning experience. And yes, we have days when Ryan just doesn't want to study or sometimes things come up where we don't have the time to teach him within our expected schedule, but I believe these are all things that can be smoothed out as we become more knowledgeable about not only what, but *how* Ryan wants to learn.

So at this point, some of you may be wondering what happened to Lauren. Did we decide to keep her in public school or pull her out as well (especially given that she's Ryan's twin)? Well, that's going to be answered in a future article titled, "Is Homeschool Right for Your Child?" Stay tuned!

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