The R Word

Walking onto the bus after a loss in high school (very very common I might add) always went one of two ways: we knew we were going to lose and laughed and had a good time or we played the blame game. The ref. The other players. Our coach. Expletive, expletive, expletive. Junior year my soccer team lost to a bitter hated rival in a playoff game, under the bright lights on the road. We lost. We graduated a team filled with dominant personalities and close-knit seniors. Emotions were high. I sat in the second to last seat on the bus with our goalie, watching malicious punching into the dark green leather, filled with small tears and foam poking through the frayed holes.

“That ref was a retard, man.”

“I hope Pearson (our coach) gets fired, I hate him.”

“I can’t believe that retard scored.”

 Harsh, deep-cutting words laced with cursing soiled the sweaty air of the dark yellow school bus cruising down the highway.

At that time of my life these destructive words had no meaning to me. Wouldn’t blink twice at the sound of them. My soccer team was my “clique,” that’s how our school went. Whether it was sports, band, clubs, people hung out with people similar to them. Think of the typical popular group of friends. Cocky, arrogant, even walking with the strut that made them feel like they were on top of the world. That was all of us multiplied by five. Words had no repercussions, no effect on me.

Back in grade school every February, we’d briefly learn about Black history in some aspect. Probably from 4th grade to 8th grade, my classmates and I would walk into a room on the first day of the month half decorated with hearts, be mine, and cupids, and then basic Martin Luther King Jr. quotes like “I have a dream.” The teacher would start off in some form by raising the question in a social studies class, “Does anyone know what month it is?” Heads would gingerly turn around, to the side, peeking past the person in front of them, to look for the only black kid in the entire school. Short, an afro about three inches high, that could fit eight pencils comfortably in its prime; I put my hand up every time on routine, “Black History Month.”

“Very good!” the teachers always added with an almost over the top, forced enthusiasm. And then we proceeded to watch a cartoon movie, “Our friend, Martin” about a young Dr. King that had white friends and didn’t understand racism. Like young Martin, all my friends were white, so I always physically stood out in the crowd of friends whether it be a party or even just meeting a group of friends’ parents for the first time.

Being the only person of color in most rooms for thirteen years of Catholic schooling definitely wasn’t the only thing that brought turns of head or attention. My “inside” voice was as if a normal person screamed across a valley and the words echoed over and over again. My English teacher’s head was down glancing over an article as we read an individually assigned Shakespeare poem, and I leaned over in the far back corner of the room, whispering some joke to my buddy and heard, “Brooks be quiet.”

“What! Wasn’t me, you can’t even see me.”

“Did you ever learn how to whisper?” she asked, which immediately shut me up and got a couple muffled chuckles from my classmates. As extraverted as they came, I embraced this role of an entertainer, constant crowd pleaser. But not in the delightful “nice guy” mentality that should’ve been able to describe me.

I vividly remember in 6th grade my teacher pulling my best friend and I aside after class one day after recess telling us, “Some of your other classmates, they look up to you guys. If you start making fun of someone, they start making fun of someone. You have to start acting leaders and not how you were this afternoon.” It was the recess after I was making fun of a kid I didn’t get along with. It should’ve been a wakeup call to get my act together, but in all honesty it was just a boost to my already sky-high confidence. I can’t even remember what for, I just can remember that I was pretty much a bully. I wasn’t a bully in the traditional sense of the word, like stealing lunch money or tripping someone then kicking dirt in their face, it was always with my words. I could ruin someone’s day by making one little comment that I thought was hilarious and I consistently did just that. I was always “popular” and always had people follow my example. In grade school I knew I ruled the world, and in high school, I still tried my best to be on top even as a short freshman that had no power.

In simpler words, I was the dictionary definition of a “douchebag.” High school was more of a social event and my biggest concerns were what party was going on the coming weekend, what new gossip was leaking, and getting a job so I could pay for the most memorable time of my life: senior week. Beer, girls, no rules in the beaches of Wildwood, New Jersey with run-down, dirty houses that we were more than ready to pay way too much money to live in for two weeks after graduation.

I didn’t care where I got a job. I needed some money and wanted to get off my parent’s dime. I was about to accept a job at the local grocery store restocking shelves, which I had no interest in, when my older sister’s best friend offered me to work as a camp counselor at a special needs home. Katie was the type of friend that every little brother had a crush on when she’d walk in the door. A hair over 5 foot, short brown hair, bronzed skin, and an inviting, bubbly personality. Immediately I accepted the job, based more off a little-boy crush and the thought that, at most, it was kids with autism or down syndrome. The power of good looks trumped my nervousness of helping these kids.

She picked me up on a Monday morning, midway through June, and started describing what I was walking into saying, “You’ll love this kid, he’s so funny” and so on and so on. I walked up a steep hill into automatic opening double doors into a surprisingly cold, blasted air conditioning, with a mat, “St. Edmond’s Home for Children” underneath my feet. I heard screams not knowing if they were happy or sad or agitated. The palms of my hands grew sweaty and the confidence I always had evaporated. Half my coworkers were black, the noises the kids made echoed much louder than my voice, and I didn’t stick out at all.

Thoughts raced through my brain, “What did I get into? I need to quit; I can’t do this.” Katie gave me a brief tour and I vividly recall seeing a feeding tube for the first time attached to almost half of those kid’s wheelchairs, a plastic pouch marked with milligrams and a tube flowing to the children’s stomachs. A color and consistency similar to a snack-pack of vanilla pudding flowing through the tube at a constant rate and at the top of the pouch, drip, drip, drip, like clockwork. I saw DCP’s (Direct Care Personnel) attending to the children in the morning, getting them out of bed and ready for camp. Almost all of the workers were black, Jamaican women with thick accents. They talked at the speed of light and were talking in my direction and I had no clue what they were saying. The other black counselors had a perfect understanding of what they were saying and they’d laugh and carry on. I was confused. They were speaking English, for sure, but I couldn’t understand them for the life of me. I’m not shy. Never in my entire life have I had trouble making friends, but I couldn’t seem to relate or chime into any of the conversations with jokes that always made everyone laugh.

The morning and beginning of afternoon was filled with trainings. “How to lift,” which meant how to transfer the kids from the wheel chairs to a mat or piece of equipment. “Always wash your hands,” which included a rather vile story of a cook at a hospital not washing his hands after a number two, and tossing lettuce for a salad, which resulted in the vomiting and sickness of over a hundred employees. And at noon, “how to feed,” which was intimidating trying to put food into another human beings mouth when they couldn’t say “too much,” “I don’t like this.” Nothing. Immensely overwhelmed, it was time to head back to our group rooms for the last hour of the day, where seconds felt like hours. This was sure to be the easiest part. No learning, just playing with the kids, how hard could it be.

There were five group rooms. Group 5 was all the older boys, the heaviest kids, and higher functioning kids. The group had boys that could talk very well, play with soccer balls and footballs, could imitate a couple words or noises. Group 4 was the all-girl group. It had two girls that could walk and a couple girls that could speak and even a girl that could imitate music lyrics. Group 3 was referred to as the “movers and shakers.” It was the group with the smallest, youngest, and certainly most active children. Not many of them spoke, but they could crawl around and you could cradle them like a little baby. To someone new, like I was, they were fan favorites. Groups 1 and 2 were similar because they had a lot of the lower functioning children. They didn’t have many children that spoke, could be held, or play games that made it easier for a counselor to relate to. I was in group one. To get to my assigned group room, I walked through the main room which was filled with mats, stuffed animals, decorated poster boards splattered with paint, and a Smart Board blaring Disney music. Once I got to the end of the room I turned left, and walked through a narrow hallway. It was half covered with standers and equipment used to put the kids in to get them out of their wheelchairs. And then finally, I turned the knob to open the door to my room. It was filled with the ten kids that were going to be in my group all summer. Blue and red mats lined the floor and the kids were out of their chairs either lying down, sitting up, or on their hands and knees.

I’ll never forget the first time I met Adam. He was probably around thirteen at the time and my god was he loud. He would scream at the top of his lungs and rock back and forth. He always bit his arm, which that first day, scared me half to death. There was a red and brown abrasion that rose up from the constant swelling from repeated agitation. I gravitated away from him that first day out of sheer awkwardness and not knowing how to deal with him. I moved over to sit next to Shiv, on a red mat, like the ones you’d see in an elementary gym class, in the back corner of the room. He was an 11-year-old Indian boy, with dark black hair, a small peach fuzz mustache, and a blue soft helmet on. I had no clue the reason he wore it.

Only twenty more minutes to go. Everything was going smooth, I was loosened up and being more of my confident self and enjoying it, thinking maybe I’d be alright. He didn’t do much. He was lying down and then he’d slowly sit up and lean against me as I talked to him.  It was easy. I was leaning against the wall and every couple of minutes I’d check my phone to see the minutes tick away. His head was leaning up against my right shoulder when both of his arms shot abruptly in the air. I sat up instantly and tried to almost catch him as he moved off my body. His eyes stared forward but with no purpose. He wasn’t looking at anything just a blank, ghostly gaze. I had no idea what happened and yelled to my lead counselor, “I don’t really know what happened his arms shot up and then he just fell backwards on his back.”

         “How long has it been?” she calmly, casually responded.

         “I don’t know only like 5 seconds.”

         “Six. Seven. Eight. Nine.” Counting continued, mouthing it with no noise. “Fourteen. Fift--.” “Ah, welcome back Shivvy!” she said with a small kiss to his forehead.

         “What happened? Why were you counting?” I asked with a permanent confusion glued to my face.

         “Oh my God! I’m sorry! You don’t have to worry. I should’ve explained. He has seizures almost every day but it was only 15 seconds I’ll call the nurse but that’s nothing for him. They’ll only give him meds if it's closer to like 3-5 minutes, he’s perfectly fine,” she said, as she patted his back.

The day was as overwhelming as any day I had ever come across. But when I laid in my bed trying to put together what I had experienced that first day, I started to realize so much more. When we were with them, they were happy. Not like crack a smile at a bad joke happy, but winning a hundred dollars on a fifty cent scratch off happy. It was pure joy. Being comfortable took me a couple weeks just because of the logistics of learning what to do, but once I realized that, my life was already changed from 8 hours with these kids. Compared to them I had everything and I wasn’t a fraction of how happy or kind they were in my life outside of that red and tan building. Without saying a word of advice, without judging me, without reprimanding me, they told me that I urgently had to change that.

It didn’t take me long to adapt to the kids and the environment at all, which was always surprising to Katie and my other bosses. I remember Katie saying to me a couple weeks in,

“You really love this don’t you.” And I said,

“Honestly, yeah I do. Didn’t think I would at all, but I really do.” Every day after the first two weeks on, I walked through those automatic doors, into the brisk building, and was like a ten-year-old taking their first steps off the monorail into the dreamed of place of Disney World. No more sweaty hands or confidence fading, but the energy and enthusiasm I lived my life with, now in all the right ways. I walked through those doors and was oozing with passion to help these kids and have fun with my friends for going on four summers now this summer.

My first summer I was intimidated by some of my other co-workers. They were always dancing. Like dancing I never experienced. They were talented at it and had so much fun dancing with each other and I barely even had the rhythm to clap on beat. I honestly had never been around other people of the same skin color as me and it showed that first summer. My co-workers, my friends, even family referred to me as “the whitest-black kid they’d ever met.” After embracing everyone for who they were, none of that mattered anymore. Each summer, I started to understand the DCP’s and had my own inside jokes and fun times with them. I still couldn’t dance, but I was certainly going to make a fool out of myself and carry along with them. My confidence was back but it was a different kind of confidence. I wasn’t arrogant or making fun of people or making comments that would hurt someone’s feelings. I was genuinely enjoying being the entertainer in a different way. The closer I grew with my co-workers, the closer I got to the kids, and the more I loved that red and tan building.

When I walked back through a hallway lined with a painted mural of oceans filled of dolphins and small fish to our room, I would hear that same scream I heard on the first day and out of the 50 some kids that lived there, I knew exactly who it was. I knew if they were laughing, enjoying themselves, agitated from needing a diaper change, wanting to get out of their wheelchair onto a mat on the ground, or just needed some attention. I knew that one of the black kid, Isaiah, would bop his head back and forth with a grin from ear to ear at any sound of Michael Jackson from the dull sounds of my phone or roar of the Bluetooth speaker. I knew that if I did a quick search on YouTube of anything related to WWE wrestling, it would entertain one of my favorite kids, Greg, for hours and I’d hear “Oooohh! That’s gotta hurt,” in the background from him. I knew if I swiftly slammed one of the wooden drawers in the room shut, Shane, the largest kid out of all fifty of them with red hair, a pot belly slumping over his jeans, and a tilted a wheelchair, would scream laughing and clap his hands back and forth.

On the 4th of July, the kids wore red, white, and blue sparkling top hats, shirts, and shorts. American flags hung on the back of their chairs. Bubble wrap lined the pearly tile,

“3, 2, 1.”

Amusement ensued, as we pushed fifty wheelchairs over the stacks of bubble wrap, “Bang, pop, bang.”  All the makings of a beautiful firework display like the ones over Cinderella’s castle with children on their parent’s shoulders oohing and ahhing, on display indoors in the middle of the day in our “most magical place on Earth.”

Simple blessings taken for granted, they didn’t have. They didn’t have the power of mobility or movement. Some didn’t have the power to chew and swallow. They didn’t have the power of speech. They didn’t get to utter detrimental words that had such an impact on other people without thinking of anyone but themselves.

 Being a guy in a group of friends were cursing was common vocabulary, the word “retard” or “retarded” got tossed around casually and often. The first year after working at St. Ed’s, my senior year, I’d hear it and anger would stew inside of me. I’d be quiet and visibly angered, but I wouldn’t say anything. I didn’t really know how but every time I felt eternally guilty for not saying something. I completely eliminated it from my language but I felt like I was letting my kids down every time I didn’t advocate for them. My friends knew where I worked that summer but I still had the fear of them somehow making fun of me or rejecting me because I corrected them.

Freshman year of college I was standing at the bus stop, one of the first weeks of school, after a night of drinking, waiting to go back to the dorms. A bus drove by that wasn’t the “White Loop” (the bus that went to the dorms) and a frat guy in khakis and a short sleeve button down shirt said, “Where’s the loop? Why is that bus even coming here? That’s retarded.” A short girl with red curly hair started reprimanding this kid, but in a calm way like she’s done it a million times before. She said along the lines of, “It’s just a bus. I can’t believe you’d say something like that. Why can’t you just say it’s stupid, dumb, something like that.” He smirked and looked at me like I was going to laugh with him and said, “Can you believe this girl?” He completely ignored her. I exploded with anger. I was aggressive and cursing and said, “Why don’t you listen to her for a change instead of being wrapped up in how much of a god damn douchebag you are. I guarantee you’ve never met anyone like that, don’t give me that smirk like she’s crazy or something, listen to her.” My roommate and two friends had to pull me away and we ended up walking home instead of taking the bus to avoid an altercation. On the walk home I vented to my friends about how it angered me when people used that word and they’d understand if they spent one day at my job. They stopped saying it and I realized that I could stand up and say something to other people without being ridiculed. I wasn’t going to ever get in someone’s face again and yell like I was going to hit someone. But I could calmly say something like that short, red-headed girl said that night. To this day, when that word comes up I say “You know, I really hate that word,” usually followed by an immediate silence until they say something.

It always elicits an awkward pause and that elephant in the room like “Why is he even saying that, it’s not a big deal,” And then they’ll reply with something like “Okay my bad.” or “Everyone says it who cares.” Then I’d start a conversation about my work. Girl or guy, I’d start explaining what I do. My hope was that it would have enough of an impact that, maybe, just maybe, that person would think twice before using the r word again.

After losing a kid I spent two summers with and seeing multiple kids get progressively worse in their conditions, the reality of death, continued to change my outlook on life. I was going through a breakup, nothing major but was definitely upset about it, so I decided to leave my friends at school and go chill at home for the weekend. The first thing I did was wake up Saturday morning and go see my boys. In the middle of October on a chilly fall day, I showed up on what was “St. Edmond’s Family Fun Day.” The first person I saw was Daniel. Daniel was one of the few kids that walked and talked but he was fully blind and autistic. A unicorn, one of my bosses once referred to him as. He was a teenager with a strong, sassy attitude. He was at the stage of boyhood when every boy was arguing with his mom on something so simple as to putting a coat on when it was obviously warranted, but still way too stubborn and cool to put it on. He stood taller than me probably 5 feet 9 inches, with dark hair slicked back on the sides and a man bun resting probably 4 inches on top of his head. After two summers together every day, he never could really remember my name. To say it I would have to say, “What’s my name Daniel? Br-, Broo-”

         “Brooks.” He would subtly whisper.

I arrived and the first thing I did was hold both of his hands to guide him to walk on the hay ride and I bellowed, “Danny boy I missed you big guy!”

“Brooks! Brooks! Brooks! Brooks!”

Four times he screamed, clapping his hands and excitedly shaking his head back and forth smiling as wide a smile I had ever seen. Until my smile a second later. I genuinely couldn’t believe it. I hugged him tight and was laughing, carrying along with him as he kept yelling my name when I hadn’t seen him in two months.  Every sadness or thought about that breakup, evaporated into the breeze of the fall air. With one word, my name I’ve heard every day of my life, he healed me.

The kids had this special, almost super-hero power of being able to turn any worker’s worst day into the best day. Summer was always my favorite season. It used to be because of no school. More sleep. More parties. After that first summer, summer became St. Edmond’s. It became *my* kids. It became the co-workers, who became some of my closest friends.

At the conclusion of my third summer, it was Katie’s final summer. She was a speech pathology major and was finishing up grad school and getting a new job. The first summer she was a fellow counselor in group three. But now she was the Assistant Camp Director and it was her last year after ten summers at St. Ed’s.

On the last day of camp, the Friday before all the college kids went back to school, all the counselors gathered in the chapel for an end of the summer presentation. Every summer I grew close with different people but because of all the ages of counselors graduating college and what not, I always knew that people would be leaving me. Internships, real-life jobs, higher paying jobs, people always left. But when counselors were there for probably three or more years, they left a mark on the one constant: the director of the camp, Julia. Julia gave a little speech about every counselor and rewarded their summer of hard work with a gift bag with candy and a Wawa gift card. The turnover always affected Julia the most, emotionally. She saw counselors grow and mature through the years, so her crying was guaranteed at this point. Julia was a selfless, loving boss that cared about all the counselors as much as the kids. Her connection was so strong that she even adopted one of the children in my group, Jackson, and became his legal guardian. It was also Jackson, her baby boy’s last summer of living at St. Edmonds.

She started going on about me the same thing she said every year but this year was different because I was the lead counselor of the all-boys group. She started with the same story about how I came with no experience and no warning and jumped in quicker than anyone she had seen. But then her eyes started swelling, with tears dripping down her face, and she said, “My boys are everything to me, you all know that. I trusted you with my boy and all the boys and you did an incredible job.” Katie started tearing up and I got up to get my gift bag and she didn’t really say anything. She couldn’t really. I hugged Julia and sat back down. A couple hours after camp had ended for that summer, I received a text from Katie:

 “Baby brooks! I suck at words which is why Julia does the talking, so sorry I choked today. Without a doubt St Eds has been the best thing that has ever happened to me. It has molded me into the person I am today, and even shown me my path in life. All the memories and touching moments aside, I can honestly say that I am most proud of you. Being able to pass this down to you. I was thinking about how can I give back to St Eds after all it has given to me, but I am already giving back through you. You are my gift to them and my legacy that I am leaving them with. A kick ass leader who cares for the children like I have never seen. You have made me so proud over the years. I watched you transform from an immature unsure teenager to a confident leader of a young man. You are going to do amazing things. Keep the kindness, patience, and compassion this place has taught you and apply it in your future. I am honestly so proud of who you are becoming. Love you brooks.”

Very recently, I experienced the best day of my entire life. I’ve been the most devout, passionate Philadelphia Eagles fan my entire life. The walls of my childhood bedroom are painted green and white, posters and flags cover every inch of every wall, and a green Eagles bedspread and pillows lining my twin bed. The Eagles meant the world to me. The Birds played for the chance to win the Super Bowl on February 4, 2018. All my friends were in the city, wasted, waiting for their chance to cause absolute mayhem in the streets. I watched it at a close friend’s house, not drinking, with nervousness shooting through every vein of my body. At halftime the score was 22-12, good guys: The Underdogs vs. The Dynasty of the New England Patriots. My friends were feeling themselves. I saw snapchats of them in bars going wild, jumping and embracing, and being reckless as I paced around nervous about the half to come. At halftime I was awestruck by Justin Timberlake. We were watching in the dark and it was equivalent to a full blown concert setting. I heard his hit song, “I can't stop the feeling, so just dance, dance, dance, come on.” And immediately thought of my favorite kid from St. Ed’s, Greg. Greg could talk and operate his power chair and the past two summers we grew to be best friends and I knew he saw me as so, because he’d sob crying whenever it was my last day. Immediately the nervousness of my team wasn’t of utmost importance. It was reaching out to him to talk about the team that we both loved, and talk about a song that he would sing. He would sing with every breath his body could give him, and his foot would shake as he screamed as loud as he could. I wrote on his Facebook page,

“I know you’re loving this and I know you’re singing along to Can’t Stop The Feeling!! Keep cheering buddy, GO BIRDS !!!!”

He replied quickly before the halftime show even concluded.

“How did u Kno - I guess that's what happens when u become best pals with someone - you get to kno how each other thinks n feels Can't stop the feeling that Eagles are going to soar to the top -Keep flying Eagles - We got a great team - - It looks like Eagles want the title more - And that's how you win the game (mom help me type this message but I thought of the words) Way to go to our Eagles!! Love u buddy !!”

A couple hours later, the Philadelphia Eagles became world champions.