

## 'I need and I cannot find'

With the launch of Living Out Loud Online Education my beloved marketing team recommended I take the leap and explore the art of Blog creation. Clearly expressing my thoughts on paper is a such a stretch outside my comfort zone that I spent three weeks trying to think of how to start. After all that time the answer appeared reeking of irony; start at the beginning.

I am a mother, a wife, a farmer, an Optimist Club member, the Community Coordinator of Special Olympics in Port Colborne Ontario, and the sole proprietor of Living Out Loud. Living Out Loud is a small business I founded in 2013. I create customized programs and services for those with unconventional learning styles. Each of my service and program exist because someone approached me with a specific need that they could not have met anywhere else. I take pride in empowering my clients, and their families, to experience their own version of success.

My husband and I have two children Logan and Avery. Logan has Down syndrome. It is reasonable then that most who hear our story assume my passion to support those who learn 'out side the box' was born out of our personal journey raising a child with special needs. But the truth is that I knew aiding individuals initiate ripples of positivity by helping them embrace their personal gifts was going to be my career field long before Logan entered our lives.

In high school I was the textbook A type student who sat quietly at the end of a long hallway with my small group of friends completing assignments. We attended a very large high school. It resembled a small town in many ways with all the niche groups interrelating as everyone went through their daily and weekly routines. 'Our table' was outside the special needs classroom where a number of hallways intersected. This lunch period post provided us the ideal advantage point to observe the students from the special needs group as they interacted in with other groups within the school community.

As I sat and watched day after day an unmistakable and reliable thing happened with interactions that included one of the students from the special needs classroom; whoever it was that the student with special needs engaged with left the exchange lighter.

The busy teacher always had a moment to listen to Mike talk about the Maple Leaf's latest game. The tough 'jocks' softened. The 'bullies' furrow their brows. Even the severely shy students could not resist returning a quick wave and cautious half smile when a joyful and uncensored "good morning" rang off in their direction.

These students with 'special needs' effortlessly generated ripples of positivity throughout the school. They did not set out to have this effect on their community, it was their natural gift. I knew then that this was the group that I wanted to be involved with. I wanted to be apart of what they were offering the world. These were 'my people'.

Skip forward 10 years. I lived in Windsor with my new husband, I had just finished a degree in kinesiology, and jobs were scarce. And what do we do when September arrives and we don't know what to do with ourselves? We enroll for more education. And that's what I did. I enrolled at the University of Windsor and earned a Bachelor of Education and became an Ontario Certified Teacher. Becoming a teacher was an appropriate next step for me. I LOVED the school atmosphere, I loved educating and I especially loved impacting the lives of others.

I liked my courses; I was at home in a lecture hall at this point. But especially enjoyed my time practical teaching experience and life in the classroom. I bounced annoyingly down the hallway every morning with my perfectly laid out Teaching Plan for the day. I must have really struck a nerve with several seasoned teachers because I was repeatedly issued the same warning, '5 years, I give you 5 years before the demands of administration snuffs out your passion for educating'. Cynical to say the least. But when I paid attention, I could appreciate their point. There is only so much time, energy and emotion you can devote to swimming up stream.

As it happened, I did not have the chance to dive into the traditional teaching career. Shortly after graduation Collin and I moved to Port Colborne and we had our son Logan. Who, as fate would have it, was born with Down syndrome. I spent the next 6 years caring and advocating for Logan and getting a front row seat to the unique challenges that come with parenting a child with extra needs.

Logan being our first child, and his having extra needs, meant that all our friends who had children also had at least one child with extra needs. Over time I noticed that most of our conversations revolved around the same theme, "I need, and I can't find".

Being that maddening, 'fix it' person I said, 'okay, we are just going in circles listing what programs and services we need but that are not available. I am going to start a company. You guys are going to tell me the programs and services you need, and I will find them or generate them'. And born was Living Out Loud.

That was 2013, it is now 2019. With two young children and a farm to run Living Out Loud has fought hard for my time and energy. But now with both children in school, Logan's health stabilizing, a fantastic husband and with the appearance of The Uncommon Ground marketing team my little company is about to take off.