

November 1, 2009



I attended my first ***Friends- the National Association of Young People Who Stutter*** Convention in Tampa this past July with my son, Ray. I went reluctantly because I was not “one of those parents” and Ray was not “one of those kids. While everyone around Ray, friends and family, knew he stuttered, we rarely acknowledged it to anyone, including ourselves. Little did I know, this exact attitude was perpetuating and intensifying Ray’s stuttering. The inability for me to identify that Ray was, in fact, a stutterer was what was holding Ray back from speaking.

Ray is seven and is now in second grade. First grade was a blur of sadness, for Ray, me, his dad and his sister - mostly for Ray. Every day he went to school with fear in his eyes and heart. He saw people around him look the other way with discomfort when he spoke. Ray knew something was wrong, yet no one, not even his parents, would confirm it for him. I blamed myself for everything and yet I refused to simply utter the words

“Ray stutters and is struggling with it”. Had I done that, first grade might have been different for Ray. I wanted to believe it was something more, something deeper and something I was missing. It wasn’t. Ray stutters.

All the literature suggested not using the word “stutter” with Ray. Don’t acknowledge it. Give him time. It might go away. We didn’t and it wasn’t. We tried acupuncture, took him to doctors, blaming his allergies, creating even more anxiety. We were running out of scapegoats and the stuttering was getting worse. I finally chose to speak of Ray’s stuttering to a friend who was brave enough to tell me that his son stuttered and was working with a speech therapist on Long Island. My path of denial led me to Lee Caggiano and ***Friends- the National Association of Young People Who Stutter***. I still don’t feel worthy.

I am not sure how to continue. How to explain the evolution my family has journeyed through these past six months. I look back and the Ray I described above no longer exists. Does he stutter? Sure, but differently and far less. Everything has evolved – his stuttering, his understanding of himself, but more importantly, the way my family copes with Ray’s stuttering has evolved. We are accepting, calm and far more patient with the process. We no longer worry about Ray’s stuttering, which means that Ray no longer worries about his stuttering.

We began working with Lee in May and attended the ***Friends*** convention in July. Not a lot of time in the process before being submerged into the Friends pool of acceptance. Acceptance of yourself is a lesson that takes most of us a lifetime to learn. The ***Friends*** convention was a crash course. ***Friends*** has taught my family that Ray stutters and it’s ok. Sounds so obvious, right?

I will never forget the day that my husband and I sat Ray down and actually said to him, “we know that you have been struggling with your stuttering and we are sorry. We don’t care if you stutter, but we never want you to struggle. We promise to help you with it.” The look of relief in Ray’s beautiful blue eyes will never leave my memory. It’s as if a cloud lifted from over all of us. You can feel the difference in our home. The dirty secret, that everyone knew, was out. This is just one example of the many tools ***Friends*** has given all of us. There are so many.

**I received this note from my mom, who accompanied us to the FRIENDS convention:**

*I can't contain the tears that are still flowing after reading the letter you wrote about your experience at the **FRIENDS** Convention. But my tears are very different than the ones I use to shed before the convention. I use to cry whenever I would hear Ray struggling to get out the words he wanted so desperately to say and the look of pain on your face. When I went to Tampa to meet you and Ray I was so afraid to look you and Ray in the eyes because I didn't want to see your pain and Ray's struggle to express himself. Instead, while there I slowly became aware of the acceptance in the two of you, that YES, RAY STUTTERS. I was so moved by the courage of the individuals who stutter, children, teens as well as adults. How they got up and spoke proudly to everyone, from a podium, with humor and intelligence and some yes, with more difficulty than others. They made me feel comfortable with this issue, for the first time. I feel blessed by everyone present. I also took advantage of the professionals present by asking some questions that had been bothering me for a while but was too afraid to ask.*

*So while I cried after reading your letter the reasons were of relief, joy and gratitude. The convention has replaced the hole that was there with the gift of wholeness. I am so proud of you all and thank you for letting me be part of the growing process. Mom*

I can continue to convey examples of how **Friends** have changed our lives – not just Ray's life, but the bottom line? **Friends** teaches the entire family about how to love and support a person who stutters. The Winter family is eternally grateful and indebted to our **Friends**.

I ask you to join me in support for **Friends**, **so that they may continue to help families like mine.**

*Jackie Winter*

There are still many young people whom we have not yet reached. Your generosity enables us to continue providing support for young people who stutter and their families, Please help us reach them. Our 2010 goals include increasing the number of regional workshops and educational grants we provide.

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We have touched the lives of so many young people and their families, and could not have done so without your generosity and support. **FRIENDS** is established as a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization under section 501 (C) (3); all donations are spent only on our programs.

**Please send the form to :** Lee Caggiano,  
38 South Oyster Bay Rd. Syosset, NY 11791

**13th Annual Convention - Chicago**  
**Thursday, July 22 - Saturday, July 24, 2010**  
Embassy Suites Chicago - O'Hare/Rosemont  
5500 North River Road, Rosemont, Illinois  
(847-678-4000)

For information: Online:  
[www.friendswhostutter.org](http://www.friendswhostutter.org)  
Toll-free: 866-866-8335