

Timothy O'Brien

Everyone has adversity and obstacles in their lives. It's how we grow as people. I have had my share of bumps in the road, some small and some large.

When I was in third grade, my family lost our house and had to move to an apartment. I also had to change schools and went from Wilson to Franklin, so I had to try to make new friends. I had been diagnosed with an auditory processing disorder by third grade so it was hard to change but I did okay. We moved again when I was in fifth grade and I had to go to Edison Middle School, and I didn't know anyone there. When I was in sixth grade, I was walking to Edison one day in November and I got hit by a car in front of Lincoln School. I flew about 53 feet and landed in the Lincoln parking lot. I had a lot of scrapes and bruises and my liver was bruised but I was lucky enough not to break any bones. I did miss some school days. I also went through more testing and we found out I have Asperger's Syndrome.

We moved again at the end of eighth grade. There weren't many rentals on the market that would take dogs, but it wasn't far from the high school so I would be able to walk to school. The house we moved into was not healthy. The furnace broke down regularly and my parents had to fight to get it fixed. There were leaks in the ceiling right over the stove, the outside lights didn't work at all, and no matter how many times we called the landlord and the exterminators, the house was full of mice. My mom said we just had to push forward and do our best and hopefully we wouldn't be there long. We were there over three years.

In September 2019, just a couple of weeks after school started, my father suddenly passed away. The next few weeks were a blur. Right before Christmas 2019, we learned that my dad had emptied all our savings and retirement accounts and cashed in his life insurance policies. We also learned that my mom's jaw was broken in three places and she would need a few surgeries to fix it.

My mom started her surgeries in January 2020 and made it through the first one before the pandemic lockdown. Because she couldn't speak, she had to give up her job as a paraprofessional with the school district and she started her own event planning business. She had been working for someone else doing event planning for 30 years. We had a family meeting and she thought that having her own company would be the best way to provide a stable life for me and my brother. She hasn't been able to work because of the pandemic because people weren't allowed to have big events. Her other surgeries were put on hold until September. She has had a total of 13 surgeries with her last one being a few weeks ago.

I have tried my best to keep up with schoolwork during all of this. I am the primary caregiver for my mom when she has surgery, so I take care of everything like cooking, cleaning, and dog care while she recovers. I think that I am managing everything pretty well but there has been a lot of stress in the last year. I know that isn't an excuse for not doing as well as I should in school or being as active as I want to be in my clubs and activities, but I think that my family comes first.

When I was young, I would sit on the window seat in my house and watch the birds on the sunflowers and in the yard outside. I was fascinated by how many different kinds there were –

the colors, the shapes, the sizes. It seemed like each one had a personality. Some never went near the flowers but chose to hop around in the grass. Others would land on the flowers but never go near the grass.

When I was in elementary school, I learned that there were more birds, different from the ones in my yard. There were more colors, shapes, and sizes. I could also hear them much better and the songs were so different. One gray and black bird landed not far from me and began to meow. I was shocked! I learned that the bird was called a Gray Catbird and thought that it made sense, but I was still surprised that there was a bird that could sound like a cat.

After I joined Boy Scouts, I found that there was a Bird Study merit badge. I was excited and wanted to earn the badge as soon as I could. I thought it would be easy because I had been watching birds almost my whole life. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be and I put a lot of work into the badge. Through that process, I learned that I liked birds more than I realized. I joined birdwatching clubs, the Audubon Society, and began participating in citizen science projects through the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

The more I learned about birds, the more I was also learning about their habitats, wildlife conservation, environmental science, sustainability, and more. I learned about Leave No Trace principles, the laws to protect birds and other wildlife, and how climate change affects them. I studied how what affects the bird populations also affects other wildlife and humans. I bought books and took summer classes at camp and other places. At school, I took a biology class and I loved it.

At that point, I began thinking about my future and what I wanted to do with my life. I decided to become an ornithologist. I researched the field and learned about the education and experience needed to achieve a career in ornithology. I intend to secure a Bachelor of Science degree and continue my education with a Masters. I would like to complete some internships during that time. At that point, I would like to get a job perhaps at a research facility. After a few years of research, I would like to get my doctorate.

After I earn my Ph.D., I would like to work for the Smithsonian, National Aviary, or a state or federal Department of Fish and Wildlife. I would also like to volunteer at a rehabilitation facility like the Raptor Trust. I would eventually like to work with endangered bird species to try to prevent their extinction.