

Through His Eyes and Through His Mother's Eyes

Author Joseph Hughes and Holly Hughes **Citation** From The SENG Newsletter. November 2009

They always said he was one of the brightest kids in the class.
Right before they sent him to the principal's office.

"I didn't grow up gifted, at least not by name. I grew up being asked what was wrong with me."

Joseph Hughes, age 19

Joseph Hughes once read more than 1,000 books to win a first grade contest.

A high achiever, they all said.

In elementary school, he'd complete class assignments – perfectly – before the other kids.

But he'd quickly find himself in trouble for having done it before the teacher even reviewed the instructions. Impulsive, they all said.

A math whiz, Joe could quickly solve the toughest problems. But he got F after F, simply because he wouldn't show his work properly. A non-conformist, they all said.

And that's when the wheels on Joe's life began to wobble.

His intellect far exceeded most of those around him, including some of his teachers. Unfortunately, it also far exceeded his emotional development.

Joe became an outcast among his peers, and a struggle for his teachers. He got down on himself, wondering why *he* was always wrong, just because he saw things differently. His pain was deep and profound, eroding both his confidence and his motivation. Which made school, and learning, a horrible torture.

It was only in high school that Joe was "diagnosed" as gifted, a label neither he nor his parents were initially eager to embrace. While others assumed that "gifted" meant compliant and high-achieving, Joe came to understand that not only did he have a *desire* to do things very differently, he had a burning *need*.

At about 16, Joe's parents discovered SENG – *Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted*.

Joseph Hughes

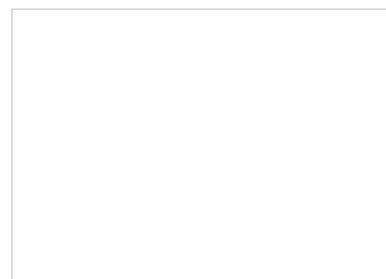
“It was like walking through a portal into an amazing new world,” Joe’s mom, Holly, said. For the Hughes family, SENG became “the best repository of information on the topic, especially the *human* side,” Holly remembers. From books and articles, to networking opportunities, to supportive conferences, SENG helped the Hughes family make sense of the inexplicable.

Speaking of portals into strange new lands, Joe completed his GED, entered college, and is publishing a 520-page fantasy fiction novel he first outlined in the sixth grade. *Armorica* is the story of a land “on the brink of destruction, held at the throat by daemons and their cohorts.” Sounds like a place with which Joseph Hughes might have some familiarity.

Here is Joe’s story, in his own words:

Through His Eyes...

Hello. My name is Joseph Hughes, and I am 19 years old. You are probably asking, “Who are you, and why am I bothering to read this article?” Well, to begin with, the fact that you are reading this publication probably means you care about or are interested in the gifted.



I didn’t grow up gifted, at least not by name. I grew up being asked what was wrong with me. People treated me like I was an idiot, at least that’s how it felt to me. I had the “privilege” of going to private schools where “everyone is gifted.” And I was the misfit because I would not do *what* they wanted *the*

Joseph Hughes

way they wanted. The world I grew up in had no idea what giftedness looks like—unless it is compliant and achievement focused. In me, all they saw was a problem kid who needed to be properly disciplined or given pills for ADHD. This did not work so well.

In the beginning my grades were really good. I worked hard and wanted to impress my parents and make people proud of me. In first grade, we had a competition to read the most books in the year. I read 1046 books, and the runner up read 700-800. But then something started to go wrong. I became an angry kid who hated life and everyone in it because nothing I did ever felt good enough. All I felt anyone wanted from me was results, and that had nothing to do with who I was.

As middle school rolled around, things only became worse, and I was tagged the class problem. My classmates would laugh at me, and whenever something went wrong, fingers pointed my way. Teachers wouldn’t even bother checking facts before kicking me out. It was an academically rigorous prep school with rigid standards; while everyone said I “should be able to do the work,” I wouldn’t do the mountains of homework I found meaningless.

Then came high school. I actually enjoyed a lot about the school and got along with most of my

teachers. But after one math teacher gave me F after F simply because I couldn't properly show my work, I stood up, left and never went back into that class again. Supposedly, I'm "gifted" in math.

I left high school and got a GED, convinced that college would be better. It seemed like the other students saw me as weird—I was so much younger—and that made me uncomfortable. I didn't feel I belonged there, either.

My life then suffered a serious, traumatic blow that changed me forever. But it's also how my mother finally discovered what was "wrong" with me. She always tried hard to help me but only now stumbled on the answer. I was gifted – not gifted like sit-straight-in-your-chair-getting-all-As gifted but gifted like really different in the way I look at everything and feel about everything. I first learned about this strange new "gifted world" through SENG, and it was at a SENG conference that I first met people who felt like me, people who seemed to understand me and with whom I connected in a whole, new way.

That led to an introduction to a wonderful lady. Sue Jackson, founder of the Daimon Institute for the Highly and Profoundly Gifted, saved my life, and I am beyond grateful for what she has done for me. Sue has helped me make sense of it all.

Now, I hope my story might help others. I want to say there is nothing *wrong* with us—it's just who we are, and it may not fit with where *you* are and what you want us to be doing. Like when I should have been doing schoolwork from middle school upward, do you know what I did instead? I wrote, rewrote and edited a 600-page manuscript. My fantasy fiction novel, *Armorica*, will be published by Christmas. What my teachers and peers criticized as a petty distraction is easily my greatest accomplishment, and I didn't do any of it in school.

So, believe in your kids and what they do. Try to accept our differentness, that being gifted can sometimes look like a lot of other things, some of which aren't so good. And trust us. We know more than you might think.

Joseph Hughes's first novel, *Armorica*, (www.ARMORICAWORLD.com) is being released this month. Join Joe's international Facebook Fan Club, started by friends at the SENG Teen Program, at <http://tinyurl.com/ycqlaff>.

Armorica

***"It's like the square-peg-in-the-round-hole, only worse. I'm a triangle.
And the only way I'm going to fit into that round hole
is to shave off all my edges—or shrink a lot."***

Joseph Hughes to his mother, on the topic of his school experience.

Through His Mother's Eyes...

By Holly Hughes

“Perhaps by sharing our experiences, we can help you sidestep painful years filled with misdiagnosis and misdirection.”

Maybe you are a parent feeling desperate and alone because your smart kid is “lazy” and “underachieving,” and you’re looking for help. You may even feel silly reading an article about “giftedness” when your child is not making all As—maybe not even passing!

Though Joseph’s standardized scores were clearly in the gifted range, no one particularly commented beyond, “He is a very smart boy.” I already knew that, but because he wasn’t doing calculus in kindergarten or reading Solschenizyn in second grade, “giftedness,” as I understood it, didn’t seem relevant. All attention focused on learning differences (aka weaknesses)—no one ever suggested that perhaps the strengths (40-point discrepancy between respectable lowest and very impressive highest scores) might warrant as much or more consideration.

“Things started to go wrong”—almost from the day he started school. Looking back at pictures, I can see it—in his eyes, the strain of his smile.

The school work was literally a no-brainer, but behavior was a constant problem. Wouldn’t sit in chair (“ADHD”). Wouldn’t do work. Wouldn’t wait for instructions (“lack of cooperation”). But it was more than academic. He left pep rallies without permission (“not following rules”), held hands over his ears, crying, distraught (overly sensitive). Wouldn’t dress out for PE (“non-compliant;”) though subsequently we learned that all the arms going into a bucket tangled with uniforms was simply overwhelming [overexciteable). He fell asleep in class after class (induced by oversensitivity to fluorescent flicker we later learned). He got into fights; no, he got into other people’s fights, unable resist the need to step in and stop a perceived injustice.

Then, as he grew older, he didn’t “measure up” academically in the school’s viewpoint either. Written work seemed disjointed, almost incoherent—unless someone discussed it with him to discover the huge leaps of logic and reasoning that carried him from place to place. When creating art, the pencil was snatched from his hand to demonstrate how to do it “right.” To essay questions, he responded with three-word responses (though if you asked about the subject, he could tell you all about it!) He was the first student to be truly unable to do the freshman bug collection which required catching and “killing beautiful creatures of life for a grade.” Could that be the kind of thing that made classmates think him weird?

Dysgraphia or other LDs? Defiance? Laziness? Or could it be the difficulty of reducing into words—something big, beautiful and complex like Monet’s “Waterlilies” seen through the lens of thousands of individual, remarkable strokes and incredible blends of colors? Perhaps it is only evidence of being terribly misunderstood.

About this time, an acquaintance—who subsequently became a dear friend to whom I will be eternally grateful—observed Joseph very briefly and listened to my concerns and frustrations. She had the boldness to speak up, commenting unequivocally that he was gifted. Nonsense! What in this picture looked gifted—at least as I viewed it at the time. She opened for me the door to “gifted land.” I began digging and reading. James Webb’s *Misdiagnosis* was seminal. I scoured SENG articles, Hoagie’s links. Finally, the pieces began to come together in a way that made sense—in a way that fit what I saw and felt and lived. These kids literally see—and feel—the world through different eyes.

I felt enlightened but could not seem to make others accept this alternate side of giftedness. Schools, counselors—they didn’t get it, or they didn’t buy it. He’s bright enough, but mostly he’s lazy, unmotivated and non-compliant, they insisted. While my heart told me these were symptoms, not “the disease,” I waffled, doubt lurking at the corners of my mind, because I was unable to find human beings in my community who did anything more than nod at me pleasantly as if I was nuts.

Joseph’s “serious blow” came at the guidance, insistence even, of well-meaning professionals who assured me they “got” giftedness, but who absolutely did not. And it was going to get even worse, because Joseph did not bend to the expectation, to comply, to be broken in the way a wild horse is broken.

Finally, I found the courage to stand up to conventional wisdom. I set out to turn the experts in “gifted land” into people. We traveled to meet them. We participated in SENG conferences, Joseph and I together. We found an incredibly supportive community. The tragedy is that I didn’t find the answer—or even the right questions—before now. And how I looked! I read and searched. Consulted professionals. Yes, I’m probably guilty of having made Joseph feel like a lab rat. I had a need to understand how I could help make life less painful for him. I considered every route on the map—without ever knowing that I was on the wrong map! I can only imagine how many gifted children—and their parents—might be similarly suffering, feeling frighteningly alone, because of misunderstanding about what “giftedness” looks like—even with the guidance of “professionals.”

Did he ever really have learning differences? ADHD? I don’t know. And I no longer care. Because I choose to embrace Joseph’s brilliance. Not intellectual—that’s too limiting. I mean that rock-solid (stubborn) inner core that will define success on its own terms, remaining true to self no matter what. I mean teasing out what lies in the gaps. It means covering my eyes to all that seems “normal” and reopening them to all the other paths. It means dwelling in the world of possibilities, celebrating the quirky, frustrating, confusing, beautiful brilliance that shines from this son of mine.