

# The One, The Only A. J. Wharton

By Jeane Wharton  
Pierre SD 57501

My husband thinks we should buy a dishwasher. I don't think we need one; We have teenagers!

At the end of a family meal, I find solace in my cozy kitchen. The evening sun warms the pale yellow walls and shiny wood floor. The sunflowers-and-blue gingham dishes make me smile. As Barney Fife would say, "It's ther-a-ped-ic" to smell the lemony dish soap as the fluffy, white suds rise elbow-high.

Unlike classic-television-dad, Ward Cleaver, my husband does not dry dishes as I wash them. Our son does! A.J. is thirteen, and there are other things he would rather be doing. He protests. I remind him of the Chinese proverb "many hands make light work." He rolls his eyes as I say the proverb for the umpteenth time. He grabs a clean dishtowel and takes his place beside me at the sink. As we stand there, something wonderful happens - we TALK. Alone in the quiet kitchen we talk about the day's ups and downs, current events, and religion. He tells me about his silly lunchroom buddies, a great science experiment or a difficult Language Arts test. The piles of dirty dishes disappear as we chatter away.

It hasn't always been easy to talk with A.J. For the first three days of life, he slept. For the first three years, he cried and did not sleep. He didn't talk until he was almost three. He would gesture and cry or whine. His older sister served as interpreter. "He wants a drink. He wants his blanket." We chalked it up to his being the youngest.

When he finally did talk, he spoke in lengthy, grownup sentences. His comprehension was amazing. He was the only three-year-old in the neighborhood who knew Eastern Time from Central, Mountain and Pacific Time. He understood complex concepts like "to be continued." He could quote extensive passages of movie or television dialog or expound upon the latest episode of a television show. Give him a few minutes, and he would tell you more about a certain collectible figure than you would ever need to know. But, he would not "converse." He felt no empathy, expressed no interest in someone else's point of view.

A.J. would answer questions with a yes or no. He might elaborate, if pressed, but generally he was a "man of few words." Friends would comment on his serious facial expression and his monotone voice. He took figures of speech literally. His longtime babysitter tells the story of how she told another little guy to "get your tail out of the refrigerator." Four-year old A.J. looked at her and said, "Janet, he doesn't have a tail."

Later that same year, while walking through the Winnipeg Zoo, A.J. sat upon his daddy's shoulders. My husband held him by his sandaled feet. A.J. fussed. Finally, in exasperation, my husband asked what was wrong. A.J. said "Raphael can't see." A.J.'s sandals featured plastic heads of Raphael, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. Indeed, my husband's hands covered the Turtle's eyes.

A kindergarten screening almost kept A.J. from entering school. His September birthday had disqualified him the year before. He knew the days of the week, the months of the year, the alphabet; He could count. He could tell you that the "Power Rangers come on at 3 o'clock Eastern time, 2 o'clock Central." But, he couldn't use scissors. We assured the screener that he was ready to start school, and that we would work with him to master the scissors skill.

The kindergarten classroom was full of brightly-painted cubbyholes, primary-colored area rugs, and the loud, cheerful voices of children. Murals and pictures hung on the walls. Mobiles dangled from the ceiling. It was adorable. It was A.J.'s worst nightmare.

Nine years later, I understand A.J. was experiencing sensory overload. He didn't appreciate the teacher's hugs. He hated being pushed and pulled by rowdy classmates in line. The busy classroom was too much for him.

I wish I had known then what I know now. I wish someone had told me then about "Sensory Integration Dysfunction" and graphomotor function. I wish we could have detected the "low motor input" when he was that sweet little

kindergartner. We didn't. For years we had well-meaning teachers tell us he is lazy; do you give him chores to do at home? oh, he's the youngest, isn't he? Let's sign you up for parenting classes; Sixth grade won't be so bad a second time...

A.J.'s doctor has called me a bulldog. She tells me A.J. is fortunate to have me for an advocate. Ha. I think the school secretaries, teachers, school counselors and administrators sometimes wish I would go away.

But, I didn't go away. When he was a fifth-grader, I pushed for testing; I looked for answers. School personnel would say "you don't want him labeled..." I would reply that I didn't care what he was labeled, as long as he was helped. I read books by Dr. Mel Levine, Tony Atwood, Carol Kranowitz and Echo Fling. I learned new words like Pervasive Development Disorder, accommodation, motor sequences and spatial perception.

A.J. was learning, too. The Occupational Therapists worked on his poorly-developed gross and fine motor skills. He learned to ride his bike at age 12. He is now buttoning buttons and can easily open the combination lock on his locker.

Lockers and other challenges have made Middle School as great a challenge as kindergarten was. Only in Middle School he has pimples, peer pressure and puberty. Puberty hit this summer. He grew six inches in less than six months. A few nights ago I watched him place the largest Pyrex bowl on a high shelf. I marveled at this tall, thin young man. Just yesterday he would place the dishes for shelves he couldn't reach on the kitchen table. I would put them away when the others were done. Now when he finds the Hershey's Chocolate Kisses I've hidden above the coffee mugs, he looks DOWN at me, grins and asks "Mom, what have we here?!"

He kisses us goodnight each night. His hug is firm, his smile is wide. He is fresh from the shower, and he smells of "Bodywash for Men." I think of how I used to tuck him in after his bath. How he smelled of baby powder and Johnson's shampoo. Then I chuckle as I recall how much he hated baths, soap and shampoo!

He tells us goodnight. His deep, rich voice startles me. I notice dark facial hairs, and his dad and I talk about him shaving. Our baby will shave and start high school in a matter of months. He is talking about driving. I can't imagine him in control of a car. He runs into people and things with a grocery store cart – we're going to let him drive a car?!

I have to be honest. For many years, I focused on what A.J. could not do. He couldn't sweep a floor or run or catch a ball. He made poor grades. He was uncommunicative. His strict adherence to ritual ruined family outings. (Remember Dustin Hoffman's character in the movie Rainman? A.J. didn't watch Jeopardy, but heaven help us if he wasn't home to see the Power Rangers or Ninja Turtles.)

I try now to focus on what he can do. He has a sharp wit and loves puns. He has read everything JRR Tolkien has ever written. He has performed in children's theater. At eleven, he performed in a local professional production. He can snow ski and ice skate. He is a kind, affectionate person. He has plans to attend college and work with computers.

When A.J. was little, he had pale blonde hair and brown eyes. My mother-in-law would say "He looks like cousin Paul." My mother would say "His facial expressions are like your dad." A family friend would smile and say "He looks like A.J." Years later, I hear her voice. I think she was so right - he is not cousin Paul. He is not my dad. He is A.J., a unique individual, a blessing in our lives!