

Teaching in an inner city high school is a demanding job—one that might seem impossible for someone with ADHD. But 24-year-old ADDer Brian Polk is now in his second year of teaching ninth and 11th grade mathematics at a Detroit magnet school—and loving it. It took coaching, medication, psychological counseling—and lots of his own hard work—to earn his college degree and put his gifts to work where they're so needed.

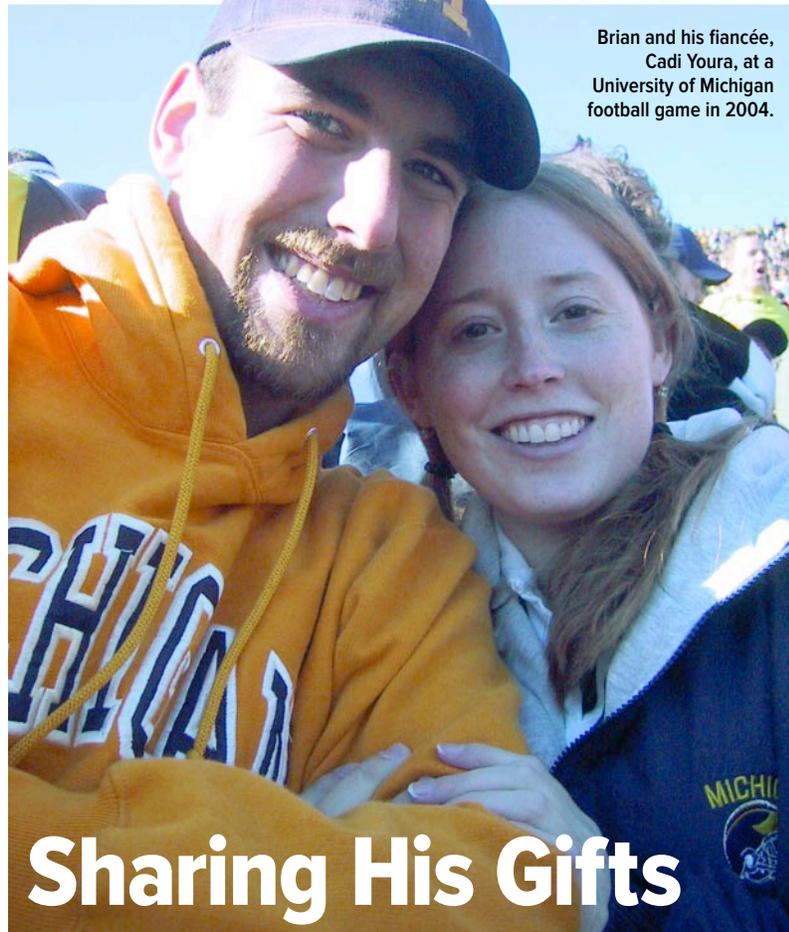
BRIAN: I did well in high school. Math and science came easily to me, and I was a good test-taker. I found it hard to write papers and hand in homework, but I told myself I'd be more organized in college. That didn't happen. My freshman year was one big writer's block. I was put on academic probation, and in May I got a letter telling me that I was dismissed. I hadn't written a single paper.

GERI MARKEL, Ph.D. [an educational psychologist and ADHD coach in Ann Arbor, Michigan]: Brian's experience is quite common. In high school, smart kids with ADHD can use their intelligence to compensate for their vulnerabilities. He had earned good grades and scored 1550 on his SAT. Then he hit a wall. He fell into a cycle of procrastination and perfectionism that made it impossible to complete his coursework.

EILEEN POLK [Brian's mother, a librarian in Detroit]: We didn't find out about Brian's problems until the dismissal letter came. My husband and I sat down with him for a long talk. That's when Brian said, "I think there's something the matter with me. I've thought so for a long time." It was very upsetting for all of us.

RICHARD POLK [Brian's father, a lawyer in suburban Detroit]: We're a close family. When the kids need help, they don't hesitate to come to us. But Brian didn't know how to tell us about his problem. I have a friend and client who is a psychotherapist specializing in educational problems. I told her about Brian. She said it sounded like ADHD and gave us the name of a psychologist to test Brian. She also referred us to Geri Markel.

BRIAN: I was diagnosed with moderate ADHD, inattentive type. When I got the diagnosis, it felt like a burden



Brian and his fiancée, Cadi Youra, at a University of Michigan football game in 2004.

Sharing His Gifts

Brian Polk knew he was smart, but it took more than intelligence to earn his college degree and become a teacher.

had been lifted off my shoulders. I was relieved to find that there was a name for what was going on. My doctor prescribed medication and suggested that I work with a coach. The drug I took helped a bit, but it was Geri who helped me develop good study habits.

GERI: ADHD is complicated. It affects one's motivation and willingness to try things. Brian had to make the transition from being "gifted" to being "gifted with a glitch." He had to move from effortless use of his brain to accepting that competent people also use study tools in order to succeed. He had to learn to do things step by step.

I met with Brian once a week for about a year, and after that we kept in touch by phone. I observed how Brian approached problems. Lots of times, he would get a brilliant idea, start brainstorming, and then quickly get overwhelmed. I put a limit on how long he could brainstorm before moving on to the next step. continues on next page >>

By BRIAN, EILEEN, and RICHARD POLK and GERALDINE MARKEL, Ph.D., as told to CARL SHERMAN, Ph.D., a freelance health writer in New York City.

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—GERI MARKEL

BRIAN: Because I had a diagnosable disorder, the university was required to give me another shot. I went back to Ann Arbor in the fall of 2001 and spent a semester making up incompletes. In the spring, I re-enrolled in a full schedule of coursework.

The first time I’d enrolled at the university, my advisor had suggested scheduling classes back to back, so I wouldn’t waste time on breaks. That was a mistake. I’d get overloaded when switching subjects, and that made it hard to get anything done. When I re-enrolled, there was a one-hour break between two of my classes. That wasn’t enough time to go home, so I would sit outside my next classroom and do my homework from the previous class. It worked so well that I scheduled breaks between classes for the rest of my college career.

Another thing that made a big difference was finding the right medication. I switched during Christmas break the year I went back to college, and it was like night and day. Suddenly, I was a better reader. For the first time ever, I was able to recognize all those literary devices my teachers had always talked about—things like “recurrent themes.” I could see them, because I was paying better attention to the text. I actually started looking forward to writing papers. I had a lot to say.

Things were better even in math classes, where I had never had much trouble, because now I could actually do all my homework.

GERI: It’s common for people with ADHD to read slowly, and to have trouble visually tracking and scanning. Medication sets the stage for learning how to “survey” the text. But Brian was also helped by his own insights, and by the strategies he had learned. The physiological and psychological complemented each other.

BRIAN: With Geri’s practical guidance and support, I learned how to be productive again. That felt good. She had lots of ideas—like varying the scenery. I found that I was more productive when I went somewhere I didn’t usually work—the library or my living room. Geri also had me try writing by hand instead of typing, and had me read with a pencil in my hand, so I could take notes in the margins and underline. They were minor changes, but they made a big difference.

GERI: I gave Brian lots of specific strategies to try. If he was doing research in preparation for writing a paper, for example, I’d urge him to read the table of contents first and see where his topic was discussed. That way, he could find quotations supporting his thesis without having to spend time reading the entire book.

Brian would try out a strategy, and then come back and talk about it. Did it help? Did it make it worse? It’s one thing to be told, “You can do it.” It’s better to learn how to do it, and see your success.

BRIAN: My psychologist helped me become aware of when I was doing something counterproductive. Once I was telling him about the problems I was having working on my computer—how I felt tied down to my desk, and how I often got distracted by the Internet or with playing solitaire. He suggested I get a portable word processor. At first, I resisted the suggestion, telling him all sorts of reasons why that would never work. Then I gave in and bought one. It gave me the mobility I was looking for, and there was no Internet connection to distract me. I’d start working at the library or the student union, or outside the classroom while waiting for my next class. Later, I could hook it up and transfer what I wrote to the computer.

GERI: At one point after he went back to college, Brian sent me an e-mail: “Although I’m busy, I’m not much busier than I was before. I feel how much I’m learning. Most important, I’m enjoying being in class. It really feels good to be a productive student.”

EILEEN: In his senior year of college, Brian was having a hard time with a particular course. He had been in contact with the university’s disabilities office when he re-enrolled, but he had never needed much in the way of accommodations. But this class was just too unstructured.

We urged Brian to tell the professor that he had ADHD, but Brian said, “I need to do this by myself.” We convinced him to talk things over with his doctor, and the doctor said the same thing we’d told him: Talk to the professor. The professor turned out to be very understanding.

BRIAN: I wound up doing very well in college, earning all As and one B. In 2005, I graduated with a math degree, and then got my teaching certificate. Teaching is what I’ve wanted to do since the fifth grade. I always enjoyed discussing and exploring math, and I realized that I wanted to teach high school. The kids are old enough to talk to, and young enough for you to impact their lives.

Teaching is fun, though it takes work. Grading papers is monotonous, but the toughest thing is the planning aspect. I had trouble structuring my own life, and now I’m supposed to structure the curricula for 175 students. My own ADHD helps me recognize it in some of my students—and I think that makes me a better teacher. It’s made me more sensitive to other learning issues, too.

ADHD is still a constant battle. I still take medication, though less than I took last year. I procrastinate less now, but still not as little as I’d like. I think being intelligent is both a blessing and curse. It enabled me to cope, and that made me put off getting the help I needed.

EILEEN: When he took me on a tour of his school, Brian showed me his desk. It was so neat, I couldn’t believe it was Brian’s. He’s come such a long way. ▲

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