

Stutter with Courage

With eyes closed, I quietly breathe in and exhale. My eyes slowly open, revealing a crowd eager to hear the dulcet narrative of my six-year-old voice. I gaze upon an open book resting on the large podium in front of me as I begin to speak into the microphone. My voice, so much larger than my small frame, echoes through the room as I read aloud. Will the countless hours of practice pay off? Will anyone notice my stutter?

An estimated 3 million people in the United States have a stutter. Those who stutter tend to limit their participation in certain activities, have lower self-esteem, poor school performance, and experience social anxiety. In today's world, communication has become more digitized, and this new way of conversing has presented a different set of challenges for teen stutterers. As all eyes are visible on screen, a stutterer can feel overwhelmed when asked to speak or comment out loud. Anxiety may increase, which can manifest into increased stuttering episodes.

Through the encouragement of family and friends, I have been able to thrive with my stutter. My speech impediment was not viewed as an obstacle but as an opportunity to shine brighter because of it. Although I was treated with kindness and patience, I sometimes felt alone in my overwhelming struggle to communicate with others. I asked myself, "Are there other teens in my community who are stutterers? Would they like to share their struggles and triumphs with others who are like them?". Upon further research, I was amazed to learn that an organization for teens who stutter in Hawaii did not exist. Teens already have a difficult time navigating through these awkward years, and when compounded with being teased and bullied due to conversational difficulties,

it can be too much to handle. Stuttering is a complex disorder that no teenager should have to tackle by themselves. I didn't want other teens to feel alone.

As Clarence T.C. Ching overcame obstacles to help his fellow man find their voice within the Hawaiian community, I wanted to provide a place where young people felt empowered to rise above their speech disorder. I created a support group called CHATS (Caring for Hawaii Teens who Stutter) as way for teens to feel accepted and strengthened by connecting with others who stutter. It is a safe place for teens ages 13 through 17 to gather and share their stories. Having a speech disorder does make us different, so I want to encourage us teen stutterers to be different together. Teens have unique voices which need to be heard, not mocked. By spending time with others who are experiencing the same things we are, we can find our own resilience and determination. I designed the CHATS website and organized a six-week virtual series on stuttering. As the founder, I will be leading the weekly discussions, which focus on different aspects of this disorder. Local guest speakers, including speech pathologists and representatives from Mental Health America of Hawaii, will be featured during the series to offer valuable insight and provide resources for teens and their families.

So, how does the story end about that six-year-old stutterer who read a book in front of a large crowd of people? Yes, I did stumble through a few words, but no one seemed to notice. When I finished my narration, applause filled the space with happiness, acceptance, and understanding. It was clear to me that my courage outshined my stutter.

While creating CHATS, I was inspired by my younger self, and I knew that I wanted to help other stutterers find their voice. I hope to show my community that

stutterers are human beings who want to be heard; some of us just need a little more time to speak.