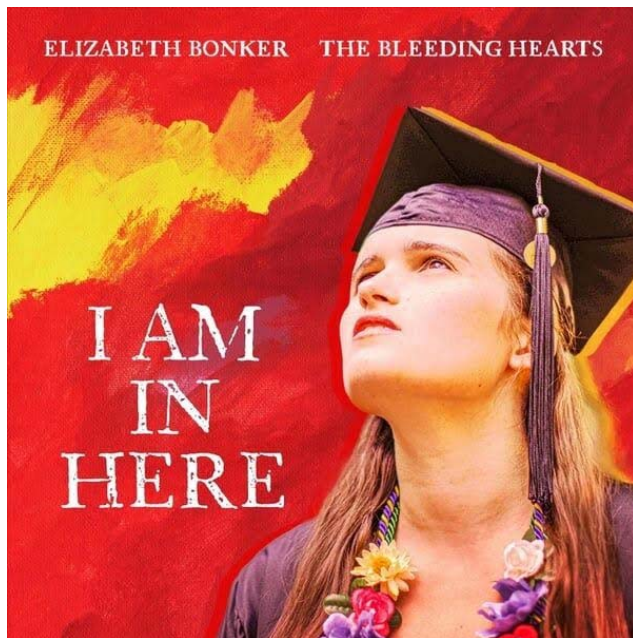


Elizabeth Bonker: “Be The Light”

By Lora Tompkins, nonspeaking author and advocate

February 2023



Hello, friends. I come here today to tell you about my role model, ELIZABETH BONKER. Elizabeth is a nonspeaking AUTISTIC who overcame countless OBSTACLES to graduate top of her class at ROLLINS COLLEGE in 2022. She is also a published AUTHOR and LYRICIST After graduating college, she established Communication 4 ALL, an organization dedicated to helping all nonspeakers find their VOICE. Her accomplishments are an INSPIRATION, and she is just getting started!

Spell: MODEL Spell: AUTISTIC Spell: DEDICATE

Who are we talking about? ELIZABETH BONKER

What did she have to overcome? OBSTACLES

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She is dedicated to helping nonspeakers find their ____? VOICE

We said her accomplishments are a what? INSPIRATION

From what college did Elizabeth graduate? ROLLINS COLLEGE

Elizabeth is a published ____? AUTHOR, LYRICIST

In what year did she graduate? 2022



Elizabeth was born healthy and developed speech on time. However, when she was 15 months old, she says, “my words were inexplicably taken from me.” Determined to help her, her parents took her to YALE MEDICAL SCHOOL, where she was diagnosed with autism. In spite of the diagnosis, Elizabeth’s parents were convinced she was an intelligent person trapped inside a “SILENT CAGE.” When her GRANDMOTHER saw a technique called the RAPID PROMPTING METHOD (RPM) featured in an episode of a news show called “60 MINUTES,” Elizabeth and her family were off to TEXAS to try it out. RPM uses letterboards to help nonspeakers communicate by pointing

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to letters and numbers to CONVEY (transport, communicate) their thoughts.

Spell: SPEECH Spell: DIAGNOSE Spell: INTELLIGENT

Where was Elizabeth diagnosed with autism? YALE MEDICAL SCHOOL

What TV show sparked the changes to Elizabeth's life? 60 MINUTES

What family member saw it? GRANDMOTHER

What technique was featured? RAPID PROMPTING METHOD

Her parents thought she was trapped in a what? SILENT CAGE

To what state did Elizabeth travel to try RPM? TEXAS

What was one word we used for convey? TRANSPORT, COMMUNICATE

Name a large city in Texas. DALLAS, AUSTIN, HOUSTON, SAN ANTONIO



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Learning to spell to communicate is not EASY. It takes time, patience, and determination. We start out by using STENCILS, poking letters and numbers with a pencil. Because most of us have APRAXIA, our bodies don't always do what our brains tell them to do. Like me, Elizabeth had a team that supported her JOURNEY. From stencils, she moved to a letterboard and, finally, to a keyboard. She says "With months of practice, I made progress, and the world began to open up to me. I started writing POETRY because it allowed me to say more in fewer words." In fact, Elizabeth was just a teenager when she published her first book, "I AM IN HERE," along with her mother VIRGINIA BREEN.

Spell: PENCIL Spell: JOURNEY Spell: PRACTICE

We said learning to spell to communicate is not ____? EASY

What do we start with at first? STENCILS

The author said most spellers have what condition? APRAXIA

What did Elizabeth start writing? POETRY

What was the name of her first book? I AM IN HERE

Who is Elizabeth's mother and co-author? VIRGINIA BREEN

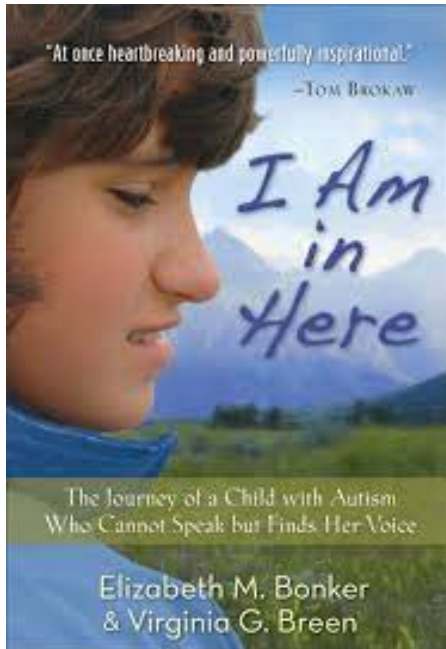
What's one thing we said learning to spell requires? TIME, PATIENCE, DETERMINATION

Use the word 'journey' in a sentence.

What's something that was easy for you to learn to do as a child?

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Elizabeth enrolled in Rollins College because she believed the strong focus on community engagement and social innovation supported her life mission. Her brother, who is also affected by autism, had also attended Rollins, graduating in 2019 with HONORS. Elizabeth had two primary goals and chose her major and minor accordingly. A major in SOCIAL INNOVATION would help her become the changemaker and ADVOCATE she hoped to be. Meanwhile, a minor in ENGLISH would develop and refine her writing skills. She took courses in many other subjects as well – anthropology, sociology, and statistics to name a few. She believes this VARIETY of subjects helped her develop multiple skill sets and she praises Rollins' flexible LIBERAL ARTS program for its diversity.

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Spell: HONORS Spell: ADVOCATE Spell: VARIETY

What family member also attended Rollins? BROTHER

What was Elizabeth's major? SOCIAL INNOVATION

What was her minor? ENGLISH

What skills did she want to develop and refine with English courses? WRITING

Other than social innovation and English, what was another subject Elizabeth studied? ANTHROPOLOGY, SOCIOLOGY, STATISTICS

In what year did Charles graduate? 2019

What subject would you like to study in college?

In 2022, Elizabeth graduated from Rollins at the top of her class. She wrote and delivered a valedictorian speech that went VIRAL and rocked both the speaking and the nonspeaking world. I encourage you to listen to the entire speech, but I chose some HIGHLIGHTS that stood out to me. First, Elizabeth relays a story about one of Rollins' famous alumni, MISTER ROGERS. Mister Rogers was a beloved television host, producer, author, and minister who created a preschool TV series called MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD. Following his death in 2003, a simple note was found in his wallet, saying LIFE IS FOR SERVICE. Elizabeth called his message "So simple, yet so PROFOUND." After telling her story, Elizabeth issued a challenge to her classmates. "Tear off a small piece from your commencement program and write 'Life is for service' on it. ...

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Let's start a new tradition. Take a photo and post it on social media. Then put it in your wallet or some other safe place, just as Mr. Rogers did. And when we see each other at our REUNIONS, we can talk about how our commencement notes reminded us to serve others."



Spell: VIRAL Spell: HIGHLIGHT Spell: REUNION

What famous alumnus is the subject of the first theme chosen by the author? MISTER ROGERS

What was the name of Mr. Rogers' show? MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD

What did the note in his wallet say? LIFE IS FOR SERVICE

Elizabeth called the note so simple yet so ___? PROFOUND

Name one occupation Mr. Rogers had. TELEVISION HOST, PRODUCER, AUTHOR, MINISTER

Name one example of where her classmates might post on social media. INSTAGRAM, FACEBOOK, TWITTER, TIKTOK

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In what year did Mr. Rogers die? 2003

How long ago was that? 20 YEARS

If you were to write a short phrase to yourself, what would it be?

In what ways would you like to provide a service to the world?

At the end of her speech, Elizabeth gives some incredible examples and quotes to inspire and motivate her classmates. First, she REVEALS her dream: communication for all, saying “There are 31 million nonspeakers with autism in the world who are locked in a silent cage. My life will be dedicated to relieving them from suffering in silence and to giving them voices to choose their own way.” She reminds her classmates “God gave you a voice. Use it. And no, the IRONY of a nonspeaking autistic encouraging you to use your voice is not lost on me. Because if you can see the worth in me, then you can see the worth in everyone you meet...I leave you today with a quote from ALAN TURING, who broke the NAZI ENCRYPTION code to help win World War II. ‘Sometimes, it is the people no one imagines anything of who do the things no one can imagine.’ Be those people. Be the light!”

Spell: QUOTE Spell: MOTIVATE Spell: IRONY

Whose quote does she add to her speech? ALAN TURING

What code did Turing break? NAZI ENCRYPTION

What country was home to the Nazis in WWII? GERMANY

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How many nonspeaking autistics does Elizabeth estimate there are in the world? 31 MILLION

What was the highlight of Elizabeth's speech for you?

Creative writing: Imagine you are invited to give a speech about your own spelling journey to a group of teachers who are considering allowing letterboards into their schools. Write a short, compelling argument to help sway them.

Note from the author:

I'm sure you can now see why Elizabeth is my role model. Like her, I was also set free by spelling, and now my life is full of possibilities. I am getting a high school DIPLOMA and will go on to college. I can finally show the world how smart I am. We have met other spellers and their families, and it is wonderful to spend time with my PEERS. I am already starting to help spread the word about spelling. Last summer, I was invited to MINNEAPOLIS to be on a panel of spellers at a conference. In September, we presented to interested parents and teachers here in LAS VEGAS, and I answered questions from the audience after the presentation. I also traveled to CHICAGO in November to address some of their school faculty. Like Elizabeth's mission, mine is to help those with no speech find their voice. Each time I see a nonspeaker, I feel DESPAIR. I hope one day that all nonspeakers have access to the communication they deserve. They have so much to offer the world, and without their voices we are missing all the wisdom and compassion they can bring.

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Spell: DIPLOMA Spell: PEERS Spell: MISSION

Where did the author serve on a panel of spellers?

MINNEAPOLIS

What did the author say she feels when she sees a nonspeaker?

DESPAIR

In what city did Lora help present to interested parents and teachers? LAS VEGAS

What's one thing the author says we're missing from nonspeakers if they don't have a voice? WISDOM, COMPASSION

In what state is Minneapolis? MINNESOTA Las Vegas? NEVADA Chicago? ILLINOIS



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See Elizabeth delivering her speech here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8g5aJExZQwg>

Learn more about her organization here:

<https://communication4all.org/>

Here are links to her book and album:

[I Am In Here](#)

<https://elizabethbonker.hearnow.com/>

About the author:

Lora Tompkins, 18, lives in Las Vegas, NV with her parents and has been spelling for almost two years. This is her first S2C lesson, and she hopes to write many more!



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Sources:

<https://www.rollins.edu/college-of-liberal-arts/news/elizabeth-bonker-commencement-address/>

<https://communication4all.org/>

<https://www.rollins.edu/college-of-liberal-arts/news/raising-her-voice/>

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