I am Laura Newell, and I am an active Self Advocate. When I was three years old, I experienced an alarmingly high fever with a case of chickenpox, and it was only by the grace of God that I survived. As a result, I developed secondary encephalitis, which was not uncommon in the days before immunizations, but it sometimes caused other problems later.

As I approached school age, it was evident that I was having some problems with balance and coordination, and when I began school, it appeared that I had some learning problems, especially in math. That same year, my mother's support system at home died unexpectedly, placing most of the responsibility of mothering on my 17-year-old sister and my grandmother as my father traveled for work and was gone from Mondays to Fridays.

Thanks to ADA, a child in public schools with learning problems are tested, diagnosed, and provided with whatever support is necessary to succeed in school in the least restrictive environment. Still, back then, there were no special education programs, and the only intervention provided for me was to repeat the first grade and go to summer school after second grade.

I had struggles outside the classroom as well. At recess, when they played softball, no one wanted me on their team because I was uncoordinated, and I was always chosen last when it came time to pick teams. I would often go off to the side and sit under a tree with a book.

During the spring of second grade, my family moved from Charlotte to Huntersville/Cornelius area back when it was country. This move would have meant a new teacher, a new class, and a new school in a different town, but every day, my grandparents drove me back to my old school, which was thirty miles away, to finish out the school year. Fortunately, I had caring teachers who worked with me to help me keep up.

When I was 10, my dad remarried, and I finally had a real mom again. My stepmother was very supportive, patiently teaching me to tie my shoes and do other things that no one had had the time to teach me. Most importantly, she always encouraged me to do my best at school, even though I made average grades in a household of over-achieving sisters who always brought home A's.

 Jr. High school brought another set of challenges, and I was often the target when insecure people looked for someone to belittle. Instead of stooping to their level, however, I channeled my energy into doing something positive. My love of reading inspired me to write stories of my own. I started by writing short stories and poems, and my dream was to become a published author, a plan which eventually came true.

My journey from first grade to graduation was an uphill climb, but never once did I consider that my learning disability might keep me from having the same opportunities in life that everyone else had. Giving up was never an option for me. Without any formal help from the school system, I graduated from high school with a regular diploma, only one year behind the children I had started school with within 1969. Unfortunately, I knew that I was different but did not get diagnosed with a learning disability until I was out of school and college so I missed out on any support that could have been offered to me at that time.

One of my biggest disappointments was not getting my driver's license at sixteen, as most of my peers did because of visual impairment with my paraphernal vision. Even though I came through the written test with flying colors, I could never pass the Road Test. Determined not to let the fact that I couldn't drive stop me from furthering my education, I moved back to Charlotte to live with my grandmother, where I had the option of bus transportation.

I attended a community college taking secretarial classes and earning a child development certificate. While I was at the community college, a teacher recommended getting tested for a possible learning disability. The tests they gave me revealed that I had encephalitis, which caused me to have a learning disability that I had most likely had since I was three. It had taken twenty-three years for an explanation for my problems. Even though it was a relief to understand why I had struggles in school, the diagnosis came too late to get any special tutoring since I had already graduated from high school and college by that time.

When I graduated from college, I had planned to work in daycare, but I struggled with classroom management and was often sick because of all the germs the children brought in. I had been in and out of jobs for a couple of years, never finding the right fit when V.R. sent me to Goodwill for job training and gave me a job coach. Goodwill provided training on how to look for a job and what to do on an interview. I had several jobs in stores, and I worked at an optical laboratory and even at a bank, but I would get frustrated and make mistakes when things got busy.

I went through a Goodwill job training program where I met my first husband Curtis Hall.

Something that happened to me on a job interview accompanied by my job coach clearly illustrates the absolute need for people to step up and advocate for individuals with disabilities. I was astounded when, during the interview, my job coach told the prospective employer flat out that she was accompanying me because I was retarded! I was humiliated, and I was furious! I explained to the employer that I was by no means retarded and that I processed information differently than most people and needed some extra support during training.

 Still oblivious to the error she had made, my job coach dared to reprimand me for embarrassing her by correcting her in front of the prospective employer! If this was the misconception of someone whose job was to help people with disabilities succeed in the workplace, imagine how other people must see us! My passionate response to her actions was one of my first acts of defiance against a flawed system. Despite my job coach's comments, I DID get offered that job, and the tiny spark that was lit in me that day changed my life. The job only lasted six months since the man that owned the optical lab where I filed prescriptions decided to retire and the new owners sold the business.

 After dating my husband Curtis for sic years we were finally able to get married on my birthday in November 1993-I had struggled with finding and keeping a job for several years so my Dad said that if I got a job and got approved for disability we could get married.

 I got my job at inReach in April 1993 and got approved for disability in July 1993 and then we started planning our wedding. Little did I know that our married life would be cut short when he died suddenly of a chemical poisoning cleaning a doctor’s office-he got sick on a Monday night and died three days later a Thursday-he was 31 years old-died October 12, 1995.

I now work for InReach, a private nonprofit agency that provides services for people who have developmental disabilities. I started as a part-time receptionist, and now I am the office assistant and peer mentor at the day supports & activity center. I have served as an officer on several boards, including the First in Family state board, the People First board, and the ARC of Mecklenburg Board

 In 1998 I went to a National Self Determination conference where I learned about self-advocate groups and Self-Determination from people all over the country. Some of the groups were primarily social, but what interested me most were the groups that advocated for the rights of people with disabilities. The stories I heard at the conference inspired me to start my group. I started the Self Advocates of Mecklenburg group in 1998. Our group teaches advocacy skills to adults with developmental disabilities, organizes advocacy projects, and plans trips to conduct travel training. We have attended meetings with the bus system CATS, County Commission meetings, and the state legislature in Raleigh several times to lobby for increased funding for programs that benefit the disabled. We have even been to Washington, D.C., to speak to Congresswoman Alma Adams.

If you are wondering about my dream of becoming a published author, I published my first book in 2010, and I currently have three fictional novels available on Amazon. These are the first three out of five stories in The Lindsey Series about a European princess who marries a U.S. congressman.

I have written an inspirational book of people’s stories with disabilities called Hope is on the Horizon and I am working on book 2. All my books are available on Amazon.

I married Rob Newell May 20, 2006, and he is the President of the Self-Advocates of Meck. group. He has been dealing with circulationary issues complications from type 1 diabetes for a couple of years. He has been disabled and unable to work for the past couple of years with limited walking and using a wheelchair. He got very sick with sepsis Christmas 2022, and he ended up getting his leg amputated on New Years Day 2023. He now can walk with a prosthetic leg. He is a inspiration to me and encourages me with everything I set my mind to doing.

I also sell Avon and I have been selling it for a long time, they have good products at affordable prices. If you want to order anything, check out my website at www.youravon.com/lnewell.

We are told that adversity builds character, and I, for one, believe that this is true. I hope that my story will inspire you to dream big because you can overcome things and accomplish your goals no matter what your struggles are.