I was the fool at school, a member of the “dumb class,” the mentally challenged. I was branded as incompetent in a politically correct way: a special needs student. Apparently, because I was not interested in school, did not care for my grades, and took a more creative approach to homework, I was termed as such.

Over time, I started to believe in my stupidity. I absorbed the fact that I was in special needs classes in high school and regurgitated it out as anger and depression. But one activity changed this view of myself: chess.

I started to play chess with my father after school because I wanted to beat him at something. It was as simple as that. My father was a smart man, fond of physics, writing, spirituality, almost every discipline. He was called a walking dictionary. So, winning in chess against my father would be a sign that I had intellectual power. **In that limited field, 64 squares, I had a chance to overcome my so-called inability.**

Game after game, I wanted to beat my father even more. I started to study chess books and play against a chess computer to beef up my skills. One weekend, I checkmated my father while we were on a ferry ride to Port Townsend. It made me feel ecstatic.

Fast forward two years and some, and I am the second board on my high school chess team, with our top board being the best high school player in the state. There was an exhibition match held before the tournament season, and our top player could not come. It was my chance to play as top board against the best high school players in the state.

**I was determined to show who I had become: an intelligent person able to win with calculation, logic, and will.** My most memorable game came in the fourth round. Our team was facing a prep school where only elite students attended high school. It was essentially a match up between a special needs student and a rich valedictorian. I was playing the black pieces and played my usual double fianchetto King’s Indian Defense. The valedictorian was playing well and I was just holding onto a little less than equality in the position. He kept attacking and I kept defending, finding hidden resources to keep my king safe. After he thought long about how to take me down, his clock was almost spent. He tried to break down my kingside defense, but could not find the final push. His time was almost up and he started to make rapid moves. I returned with more defensive maneuvers and trying to make it as difficult for him as possible. Before he could make the final deliberation, he lost on time. Honest to God, as his clock flag fell, I leaped up out of my seat and kissed the floor out of excitement. Of course it was not the most sportsmen-like behavior, but I could not contain my emotions.

I went on to draw my last game against the first board from the top-standing high school for chess in the state, and had achieved a lossless result with three wins and two draws. While holding my winner’s trophy at the end, I knew I was not stupid. **The stigmatization had melted away, and I realized that underneath our thoughts, each person is a genius.**