

DAN ARMSTRONG

Being Bullied and Mocked Led to Positively Impacting Others

Dan Armstrong is author of The Adventures of a Real-Life Cable Guy, a memoir of a career, and Smart Dust—The Dawn of Trans-Humanism, a science fiction novel based on real technology. Dan has made 8 trips to Japan to perform street magic. He is a heart-centered speaker who challenges audiences to serve others in a hurting world.

A Brutal Attack

I didn't hear them approaching. The soft grass was enough to muffle the steps of the small band of bullies until they hit the dirt a few feet behind me.

My little fingers were clasped around the metal chain-link fence behind home plate of the baseball diamond. The group of third-graders ripped me from the fence, threw me to the ground, and jumped on me. One of the boys sat on my stomach and pinned my hands to the dirt.

The ringleader began a torrent of mockery. "Say your name!"

Because of a speech impediment, consonants were difficult for me to pronounce without a burst of air following them. I had not learned the practice of slowing down and thinking, taking the time to carefully speak.

He yelled again, "Spell it. Spell it, moron!"

Slowly, I spelled my last name. "A R M S T R O N G." The "S" and the "T" were loaded with air, but the last "G" was the worst.

They burst into laughter. I was so frightened. The bully holding me down in the dirt took the cues from his gang. He repeated the demands two more times, screaming into my face, spitting on me, while the other boys cheered him on.

I discovered I was being held on an anthill as the ants began to escape their underground nest, crawling up my neck and down my shirt. Tears welled up in my eyes, and the face of my menace blurred. The attack continued as the ants began to bite my skin.

The voice of the teacher on playground duty broke through. "Break it up, boys." Finally, someone was coming to the rescue. The boys scattered.

Seeking safety and solace, I began running to the teacher's side, frantically brushing the ants off my body. Shaken and scared, I reached her only to hear, "What is wrong with you? Are you retarded?"

A Gift for Life

I was born with a cleft palate, and the result was years of learning how to overcome a speech impediment. Being mocked and bullied was a common life experience. Surgery could not fix the hole in the roof of my mouth. Because of that, a plastic prosthesis was molded for me to close the hole where the surgery had failed. Every six months, I would visit Dr. Mohammad Mazaheri of the Lancaster Cleft Palate Clinic. His Iranian accent became a voice of comfort, and he became a hero of mine. Each visit to the clinic, he would speak words of encouragement, edifying me as I progressed. It was difficult to believe him. But, I found solace in his words despite my low self-esteem.

In school, I had speech therapy. Being pulled out of regular classes was an embarrassment, but the time spent with the speech instructors was so valuable. The therapist taught me to enunciate by placing my tongue in certain places. As difficult as it was, I learned to slow down and listen to myself when I opened my mouth to speak. Consonants had to be observed and practiced. My friends never gave it a second thought as they talked, but I had to slow down and think as I placed the words from my brain to my lips. I was learning the arduous task of communicating with new confidence.

Back to the Playground

That day on the playground, the teacher's words penetrated my soul. "What's wrong with you?" She was an adult, not a child. Couldn't she see I was frightened? The initial physical assault was traumatic enough as a seven-year-old boy, but then to be chided by an adult with the intimation that I was different from everyone else was too much. I crumpled to the ground in a fetal position and cried until I couldn't breathe.

My mother was called. She came and got me, cradling my shoulders as we walked to the car. I couldn't even speak through the sobs. At home, she removed my shirt to see hundreds of red bites on my back and chest. She prepared an Epsom salt bath and sat with me until I calmed down enough to tell her the story. I was vulnerable, afraid, and lost in the world of my peers.

The words my mother spoke then would change my life. "Danny, you are special. God made you the way you are to help others. You will see. Someday, you will help others."

Her words were bigger than the moment. She saw a future for me I couldn't possibly imagine. I wept because I didn't believe it.

But I needed to keep going, and at that tender age, her belief in me was enough. With my mother's words ringing in my ears, I would borrow her belief to get me through each day for years.

The nasal quality of my speech was always on my mind as a child, and being on the blunt end of hurtful remarks kept me quiet and shy. I was an angry child, often sick, and fearful of meeting new people; especially if I had to speak. But gradually, this difference would become a pivotal part of who I was. I developed a belief in myself, a belief from within, and I would become strong because of who I was.

Pushed on Stage

My parents began a singing group called The Armstrong Family Singers. We recorded an album in 1976. The years that followed put me on the stages of churches, campgrounds, and fairgrounds as we sang gospel songs across the country. It wasn't that my parents ignored the way I spoke; rather, they put me in circumstances as though I was as skilled as the rest of the family. The trivial speech impediment was no match for the big dreams ahead.

I knew what I sounded like. I knew others tilted their heads in an attempt to understand what I was saying, but the belief I had borrowed was becoming internalized confidence. I started to ignore the snide remarks and the careless words of other people. I actually began to feel sorry for them; if they couldn't HEAR past my voice and SEE me, they were missing out.

Putting Myself on the Stage

At age thirteen, I tried out for a school play and got the lead role. My high school years put me on stage eight more times with roles in every autumn and spring production. I loved the thrill of performing, the applause, and the feeling of accomplishment.

My passion for speaking in public was growing. I had a message of hope for those who suffered from low self-esteem, for those who were made fun of for something they had no control over.

The borrowed belief from my mother was now my own. I believed I was bigger than a physical malady. The way I was born was a challenge for me to seek more of who I was to be.

A year after graduation, I was asked to be part of a band called Damascus. I was the lead singer for some of the songs and also the frontman keeping

the audience entertained between numbers. We recorded an album in 1984, and the song I wrote, “Saturday Morning Cartoons,” is still being played today.

At one concert, I looked over the crowd of six thousand people and thought to myself, *How did I get here? Am I nuts?* I had to remind myself of the belief my mother gave me, and at that moment, the belief became my own on a deeper level. The thought occurred to me, *Of course I am on this stage. I belong here! I am not a victim of a cleft palate, I am Dan.*

My mind shifted to what I could do with the talents God gave me regardless of the stage I was standing on. Each platform was a step on this successful journey. Pulling out deep reservoirs of creativity, I expanded into new arenas. To me, it was no longer about what I sounded like but rather what my mind could think and then say out loud.

I was in the band from 1982 to 1987. Four years later, I was asked to record one-minute words of wisdom on a local radio station. The manager of the station had seen me perform several times and remembered the humorous stories I would tell on stage, keeping the audience engaged with short parables pertaining to the messages of our songs.

The Wacky Words of Dan Armstrong began in 1992 on our local radio station at 8:20 PM every weeknight for six years. I wrote over one thousand spots. Along with my writing ability being developed, my communication skills were expanding. I was recording messages for the radio to be heard by thousands of people INTENTIONALLY!

You Are Special

The little boy who was once mocked and bullied had now spoken to hundreds of thousands of people in various formats—churches, college campuses, radio, speaking gigs at banquets, and Toastmasters clubs—telling my story of triumph, and all because of my mother’s words. “Danny, you are special. God made you the way you are to help others. You will see. Someday, you will help others.”

Through patience, practice, and persistence, I learned to see others in a different way. There was always someone better off than me and someone worse off than me. I was on my own personal journey, as we all are. I had to be ME and that included what was considered “wrong” with me.

I learned to perform magic and develop my humor. I learned basic Japanese so I could travel to Japan to perform. My future was bigger,

brighter, and far more interesting than I ever could have imagined without the borrowed belief from my mother.

We all seem to harbor secret pain. The heart is broken, the mind is dark, or the body is deformed. But, we are bigger than the labels, brighter than the limitations, and better for rising above them.

To compete or compare has always created struggle. *Why was I the one who had to endure this lifelong imperfection? Why were people so mean to me? I didn't ask to be born this way.* My healing process took a lot of time, tears, and trials, but when I look back at my journey, being born with a cleft palate has been my greatest asset.

A New Stage—The Author and Speaker

My writing skills developed in 2015 as I authored and published a book entitled *The Adventures of a Real-Life Cable Guy*. I served seven cable companies over more than thirty years and in doing so met well over 120,000 people in their homes. Each person I met was a stranger, and each person was an opportunity to use my speech to communicate.

Almost every day, I would come home and tell my wife of the adventures—the threats from people when I was disconnecting them for non-payment, people who had just lost their spouses, and a man who was beaten up so badly and I was the one to stave off the bleeding until the paramedics arrived. There was the man I spent some extra time with who I was the last one to see before he passed. Later, his sister would visit the office and thank me for praying with him.

I was aware that my career was a vehicle for me to be in someone's life, if only for an hour, to encourage them to see the bigger picture—they were special. My wife believed in me and prompted me to write the book. Not six months after publication, I found myself sitting in front of live TV cameras on ABC27 *Good Day PA!* speaking without fear. When I left the station, I waited until I was in my van, rolled up the windows, and let it all out.

My mother passed away two years before my first book came out. She was never able to see the full extent of what her little boy had accomplished. Through sobs, I whispered, “Mom, I am special. I am helping others. Thank you, Mom, thank you.”

You Can Overcome

Sometimes I go back in my memory and see the little boy who was bullied

on that anthill. I want to tell him that he will become a public speaker, a singer, a performer, and an author. I want to wipe his tears, whisper belief into his ears, and give him a huge hug in front of that insensitive teacher. I want to tell him he's going to be okay.

I was given a gift at birth. Yes, I said a gift. It turned out to be one of the most beneficial gifts God has given me. To this day, I wear a steel plate to “fix” the problem that surgery could not. It is still a defect but certainly not a deficit. The obstacle of a speech impediment has been overcome.

The tragedy of a little boy's fear and trauma would become a triumph. The pain would become a promise, and the struggle would become strength. Just as the moth or butterfly struggles to leave the cocoon, strengthens its wings, and flies, I was flying into a whole new world.

Every audience I speak to mirrors back to me the pains we all experience. We all have challenges to overcome, don't we? No matter what has got you thinking that you are less than others, IT IS NOT TRUE! We all have something that is preventing us from truly expressing who we are. Remember this—you are not alone! You CAN overcome! You CAN beat back the bully with belief and become the brave.

You were created as you were for greater things to come, warts and all. If you need to, borrow someone else's belief in you until it becomes your own. There is no shame. If no one in your world can lend it to you, take my belief in you and know—You Are Special!



Dan Armstrong is married and father to four daughters. He is a Certified DreamBuilder Coach. Dan is available for speaking engagements on heart-centered transformation and how to make an impact in the lives of those around you. Dan has two new books on the horizon.

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Tweetable: We all have something that is preventing us from truly expressing who we are. Remember this—you are not alone! Beat back the bully with belief. You are the brave.