

## Motivational Speech on The Importance of Reading

### ***“BECAUSE I COULD NOT READ”***

Good morning everyone,

My name is Donnell Wilson.

Thank you for inviting me here today. I also would like to thank my lovely wife Leslie and daughter Avery for supporting me in my efforts to reach out to all with the need to read. My life story is titled “BECAUSE I COULD NOT READ”. I’m going to read it to you today, not so much because I don’t remember. I remember it all to well. I’m reading it because I CAN.

When I was growing up on the south side of Chicago, I could not read and neither could my mom nor my younger brother and sister. Only my big sister could read because she caught on in school. We all went to the same public school. *(Gym and art were the only classes I got good grades in. My art teacher even took a couple pieces of my art work home with her, because she really thought they were very good. Drawing, painting and doing crafts were my favorite things to do in school.)* But the rest of school was a nightmare. I remember being laughed at and made fun of by my other classmates when the teacher would call on me to read out loud in class, because I stumbled over every word and on top of that I had a real bad stuttering problem. These were the most embarrassing and shameful moments of my life. I would get so angry, I would flip over my desk and run out of class. I got suspended a lot from school because of my bad temper. Sometimes I would ditch school to avoid being laughed at and made fun of. I failed two grades while in grammar school because I ditched too many days, got suspended a lot and couldn’t do the work. *Because I Could Not Read.* A couple of times I was passed on to the next grade when I shouldn’t have been. *(We did not have end of grade testing like you all have here.)* I wasn’t a bad kid -- I just was ashamed that I couldn’t read and I felt no one cared. I was headed down the wrong path in my young life.

My mom loved me with all her heart but she didn’t know what to do with me. She was afraid that I would become a menace to society so she sent me to live with my father, whom I had never met. *(As I look back on my life, I’m glad my mom made the sacrifice to send me away because I could have wound up joining the neighborhood gang just to fit in somewhere.)* My father and his family lived in Vicksburg, Mississippi. All of my half brothers and sisters could read and spell by the time they could talk. It was very hard living with them, being their big brother and all. I barely spoke and was even more ashamed that I couldn’t read a simple sentence, while all of them read well above their levels. *(I didn’t even speak much when I went to visit my favorite cousin, Keith. My aunt Carolyn, always tried to get me to talk about what I was going through. I wouldn’t talk to her at all. I would sometimes overhear her talking on the phone with my mom, and she would say.... “I can’t get him to talk to me.” She said this repeatedly with frustration and sadness in her voice. I also wouldn’t talk to my own mom. I was afraid to talk to them about my new life living with my father, because I feared that my father would find out and I would be in serious trouble.)* My father ran his house like the military commands its troops. It was always “yes sir” or “no sir” and everything was done very

quickly or else. For example, one summer day my father was in the backyard working on his car, he told me to go in the house and get him a towel or something like that. I didn't move fast enough so he threw a spark plug and hit me in the back of my head. After that I did my best to respond quickly and move faster even if I had to run. I did what I could to avoid his wrath.

I remember going on road trips while living with my father and we all took turns reading and spelling the states, cities and towns we drove through. When it was my turn I would be in the hot seat. I was always nervous and would stutter a lot. If I didn't get it right or didn't do it quick enough, my father would call on my youngest sister. I would be embarrassed and shamed by a four year old. *Because I Could Not Read.* On one particular road trip to Florida that I remember too well, we all went to the beach. I was in the water near the shore collecting sea shells, when all of a sudden, the ground fell out from under my feet. I was caught by an undertow. I could not swim and I was drowning. After going under about six times a man saved my life. I still remember his name. His name was Joe. I remember his name because it reminded me of one of my favorite cartoons, GI Joes. But what stuck with me the most was my father's response: He said... "I saw you." At that moment I felt that my father did not love or want me. I wasn't smart enough to be his son. *Because I Could Not Read.*

I was a very sad kid and I lived in constant fear of my father. (*My half-sisters and brothers only feared him sometimes because they could read.*) My father's favorite saying was..."I brought you in this world and I will take you out." He said this all the time to me with so much venom. It scared me to death. I was badly under weight because I was too nervous to eat around him at the dinner table and could not keep my food down. I would excuse myself and hurry to the bathroom to throw up. This happened every night at dinner when he was around. *Because I Could Not Read.* When it came to school I was not allowed to bring home a grade less than a C, and when I did I was severely punished. Most, if not all, of my C's came from how hard I tried to do the work. The last time I got a D grade, I begged and begged my teacher for a C and promised I would try a lot harder. That was the first time she had heard me talk so much and to hear so much pain. I had my poor teacher in tears. But to me I felt she just saved my life. *Because I Could Not Read. (I had heard of a kid who committed suicide because of his bad grades, but I never thought of taking my own life. But I did seriously think about taking my father's life out of fear and survival. I thank God for sending my mom and her new friend to rescue me in time before I destroyed the rest my life.)*

I experienced a lot of physical and emotional abuse while living with my father. *Because I Could Not Read.* One night while I was in bed I finally somewhat understood why my father treated me the way he did. I heard my step-mother and father talking in their bedroom and she said... "He will grow up to hate you." My father then said... "I would rather he hate me than to be dumb." (*When I became a young man my father told me why he treated me the way he did. He said... "That's all I knew. When I was growing up my uncle had to beat my ABC's into me. I wish He didn't stop until I learned to read." I did not grow to hate my father. I understood why he was so hard on me but not why he was so cruel. His own reading ability was not all that great either. I grew to dislike and not respect him. I tried a few times to mend our relationship but his cruelty and disrespect for me never changed. My father didn't learn to read until later on in life when he got a job out of state. He needed to be able to read a map to drive there and back.*)

While living with my father and his family my very best friend was God and I spoke to him all the time in my head. I always envisioned us together in outer space during our talks. I could only see God's face which was made of the brightest stars that I could look at without hurting my eyes. He brought peace to my life when I had none. It also helped that my father worked out of state, somewhere in Illinois, as a pipe fitter. He was gone about two months at a time. I thanked God every time he left for work. My father and his family were not church goers.

My step-mother wasn't able to teach me how to read. One night while I was in bed I over heard her talking to my father and she said... "It's too late for him. He will never learn to read." From that point on my life changed. I was determined to prove her wrong and everyone else who thought the same. I didn't care how long it took or what I had to do. I would have to practice a lot of self-control and self-discipline. *Because I Could Not Read.*

After two years of living with my father I was extremely happy to return home to Chicago. It was like being reborn and given a second chance. I was empowered to study harder and longer than I ever had before. I absolutely did not for any reason at all want to be sent back to live with my father. I was strongly determined to see that I didn't by doing a lot better in school. (*I do not regret the two years I lived with my father. That period of my life happened the way it should to make me into the strong man I am today. God puts hardship in our path today to make us stronger for tomorrow.*) The first thing I did was to figure out a way not to struggle so hard while reading out loud in class. *Because I Could Not Read.* I took all my books home no matter if I had home work in that subject or not. I tried to read the chapters the class would be working on the next day in school. I bought an electronic hand held spell checker that pronounced words and gave the definitions. This tool really helped me get through my last year of grammar school and high school with an A and B average. I still struggled in class but not nearly as much, and my other classmates didn't laugh and make fun of me as much either. When they did I practiced self-control and stayed in my seat. After a while the laughing and being made fun of stopped all together. Mainly because I no longer let it get to me and taking speech lessons helped to stop the stuttering. By the time I got to high school I had about a third grade reading level. It only gets harder the higher the grade. I tried going to college right after high school but the same methods didn't work, so I dropped out. I got a full time job at a restaurant in downtown Chicago as a dish washer. *Because I Could Not Read.*

I didn't want to be a dish washer for the rest of my life, so I got very motivated to learn to read. I knew my choices would be limited if I didn't. (*I wanted more out of life and I knew learning to read and write would give me unlimited choices and boost my self-confidence throughout the rest of my life.*) I tried to find a tutor but I couldn't find one that would tutor an adult. I also tried Sylvan Learning Center, but it cost too much. I did not know where to go for help but one day I was sitting at home watching TV and a commercial came on that caught my attention: a commercial for Hooked on Phonics. All through my childhood I never heard of phonics. (*I found out that phonics is the basis to learning to read. I learned the rules, how to sound out words and how to break them down into syllables.*) At the time I started Hooked on Phonics I was 19 years of age. I studied everyday after work for two hours, seven days a week. *Because I Could Not Read.* I was so happy it came with audio instruction tapes from start to finish. It took me a little over two years of hard work to finally learn to read all on my own. Nine years later I got sole custody of my daughter Courtney, and I used the same Hooked on Phonics method to teach her to read. She was six at the time and only knew her ABC's. I had only three months to

get her ready before she was to start 1<sup>st</sup> grade. By the end of the summer she was reading nearly at the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level. I also taught her to spell and for the words I didn't know we learned them together. I did not want my daughter to go through what I went through while growing up, and I do not want any of you to go through it either. Courtney loves to read and is a very good student. I'm so proud of her and Avery too. Avery is my second daughter and has always been an excellent reader and speller.

Recalling back my childhood as a little boy, I remember I could only look at the pictures in a book, wishing that I could read the words but now "*BECAUSE I CAN READ,*" I'm proud to say that I have read 362 books over the past 15 years. As you all could probably imagine, I have a nice collection of books. I'm never seen without one. I read about four to six books a month.



Anywhere from 300 to 750 pages per book, and that's without pictures. The best pictures are the ones you form in your own mind while reading. About 5 years ago my lovely wife gave me the best gift that I ever received from anyone: a custom-made book cover that stays with me everywhere I go.

By teaching myself to read it allowed me to get the job of my dream. I'm the head of the records department at one of the best small to mid size law firms in downtown Charlotte: Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP. I assist about 35 attorneys, 6 paralegals and a good number of secretarial staff. I'm also a board member of ARMA (Association of Records Managers and Administrators) as hospitality chairperson. *(There's a lot of reading and writing involved in my daily work. I'm not an excellent speller but I take the time to check my spelling and grammar with the help of my new spell checker. I'm studying to improve my spelling to the point I would no longer need the use of a*

*spell checker or at least not as much.)* At the firm I run the entire department all on my own. I have received nothing but outstanding annual reviews since I've had this position for the past three and a half years, after only two years of previous records experience with no college degree. I started out in the mailroom twelve years ago and I worked my way up. I transferred here from Katten's Chicago office. I took a big risk that was well worth it even after my old manager said... "If it doesn't work out you can't come back." *(I believe life is not worth living if you don't take a risk from time to time.)* Things worked out terrific even for my wife who also got the job of her dream as Enrichment Coordinator for Ada Jenkins which deals with at-risk kids in Davidson, North Carolina. I told my story at my wife's job in hopes of motivating the kids on the importance of reading.

For those of you that have problems with reading and writing, please talk to someone. *(I think if I had talked to someone and told them that I was having a hard time reading, versus acting out*

*and misbehaving, I would've received help sooner and wouldn't have had to do so much on my own so many years later.)* If you are one of our youth you can talk to your parents, your teacher or your youth minister just to name a few. If you are an adult, there is help out there like the ProLiteracy Local Literacy Program 1-888-528-2224 press 1 after the prompt then ex. 315 for Carol Kurtak. She will assist you in finding a local literacy program anywhere in the U.S. I called a couple locations on the North Carolina list and was told there is no cost for Cabarrus Literacy Council located in Concord 704-786-7323 and Fill My Cup! Located in Charlotte 704-605-4366. Other locations might be free as well. If you would like the list for all North and South Carolina locations, please see me or pick up a copy on your way out. You can also try Hooked on Phonics like I did. The cost of Hooked on Phonics Master Reader Deluxe Edition is \$199.96 and it starts with the reading levels 3<sup>rd</sup> and up. The number is 1-800-532-3607. Life doesn't have to be so difficult. You can learn to read or improve your reading skills just by taking the first step and picking up the phone today.

*Dennell R. Wilson*

*The gift of reading is the greatest gift to give!  
It could also save a life!*

**Open discussion about everyday life not knowing how to read & write:**

**Getting a better understanding on the importance of reading.**

- (1) Not knowing how to read and write going to the doctor what could happen? (or) What could be some consequences?**
- (2) Not knowing how to read going to the grocery store what could happen? (or) What could be some consequences?**
- (3) Not knowing how to read and write and you went to apply for a job what could happen? (or) What could be a consequence?**
- (4) Not knowing how to read going on vacation what could happen? (or) What could be a consequence?**
- (5) Not knowing how to read driving a car what could happen?**
- (6) Not knowing how to read going out to eat at a nice restaurant what could happen? (or) What could be a consequence?**
- (7) Not knowing how to read receiving important mail what could happen? (or) What could be some consequences?**
- (8) Not knowing how to read going to vote for government officials what could happen? What could be a consequence (Deciding not to vote.)**

**(Most people that can't read live in secret!)**

**In America 50 million people can't read or can't read above a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level!!! Lets all do our part to change that outrageous number.....**

Thank you so much. I really enjoyed speaking with you all today!

*Donnell R. Wilson*

*Learning to read is the path to knowledge!  
Knowledge is the key to success!*