Reflection on Kristen Iversen’s “Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats”

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Every family has their own mountains to climb and battles to fight. Whether it’s financial troubles, bickering in-laws, or just getting past everyday stresses, everyone has their own story. Kristen’s story is one that is relatable to anyone’s heart. Now, although not everyone may have a secret bomb factory in their backyard, Kristen’s personal life and internal struggles are things that anyone can understand, and as I read through her journey I found many connections to my own life.

My father is not an alcoholic and there’s not much in our backyard besides trees and some wild foxes, but my family does have a personal situation to cope with. My brother David, born in February of 1993, was diagnosed with autism just a few years after his birth. Autism is a developmental disorder that interferes with the normal function of a person’s mind and body. It hampers their communication and social skills, and, in addition, can produce physical defects. There is no known cause of the disorder, and many times families are left with unanswered questions.

My parents spent hours researching possible causes and spoke with other families in similar situations, including doctors, trying to figure out why this happened to my brother.

They weren’t able to find a definite answer, but they came to the conclusion that David’s condition was caused by a product called Thimerosal, an additive in many vaccines that is given to children when they are infants.

It is used as a preservative, but contains traces of Mercury, which is what we believed to be the cause of his autism. At times it’s very hard to communicate with David and get to his level of understanding. He faces many challenges in his life because of his condition, and simple tasks such as remembering to brush his teeth and use deodorant after showering are difficult. My
family has to work on getting to communicate with him just as Kristen had to learn how to communicate and speak with her family.

In *Full Body Burden* it is mentioned that “to speak out or to remain silent is the first and most crucial decision we can make.” I couldn’t help but think of my brother when I heard this, because it brought me back to a moment when I had to make the decision to either speak out on his behalf or stay quiet. It was my freshman year of high school: 2009.

I was in study hall and, oddly enough, so was David.

Both of us were busy doing our work, but he refused to sit next to me because he was “too cool” to sit next to a freshman since he was a sophomore. As I was sitting doing my work, I couldn’t help but overhear the conversation going on at the table behind me. A group of upper-classmen was making fun of David and how he acted. I sat there for a minute trying to just ignore them and keep quiet, but the longer it went on the more difficult it was to sit there and not say anything. It took a lot of courage for me to say something but I finally couldn’t take it.

I turned around and politely informed the group that David was my brother and that I would appreciate it if they stopped. I was sure David could hear them, but due to his autism he didn’t really know what was going on. The kids at the table continued to mock David and that’s when I made my stand. I stood up, looked right at them, and used some very choice words that quieted the group, but earned me a front row seat in the principal’s office later that day. My actions may have gotten me into trouble, but I stood up for my brother because he couldn’t, just as Peter Nordberg stood up for the thousands of citizens in Colorado.

When I first started reading *Full Body Burden* I didn’t think I would find any relation to it. Surprisingly, though, after getting deeper into the book and finding out that I could relate to the personal struggles of another person, the book really hit home. Kristen’s battle reminds me that life isn’t always easy, but it’s how we choose to deal with our situations that either make or break us. Kristen stood up for what she believed. She spoke out just like I did with David. We both had our times of aggravation and struggle, but it’s how we dealt with them that made us stronger, and that is the one lesson I hope to never forget because of this book.