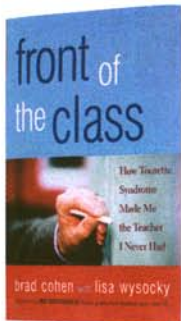




"My kids are my biggest supporters," says Cohen (with his second graders at Tritt Elementary School).



# Special Educator

Tourette syndrome made Brad Cohen's school years a torment—and inspired him to become a first-class teacher

**A** teacher at Tritt Elementary in Marietta, Ga., Brad Cohen, 31, was 11 when he was diagnosed with Tourette syndrome, a neurological disorder that causes involuntary vocal and muscular tics. In his candid new memoir *Front of the Class*, Cohen describes his tough youth—and how he overcame his disability to become an award winner in the classroom.

The intruder had been sleeping in the basement of my life, but when I was in fourth grade it was waking up fast. In addition to clearing my throat constantly, I developed a habit of knocking my knee against the door of the car when I was a passenger. The knocking provoked my father to the point that he would slap me to make me stop. Medical professionals had

told him that I had a "behavioral problem" and should be dealt with firmly. But telling people with Tourette's to stop a behavior is like ordering someone with allergies not to sneeze.

My mother was engulfed in frantic research, because I had been doing other things that alarmed her. My face, arms, legs—major muscle groups twitched without warning. Off and on

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARC ASNIN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARC ASNIN

ADAPTED FROM *FRONT OF THE CLASS: HOW TOURETTE SYNDROME MADE ME THE TEACHER I NEVER HAD* BY BRAD COHEN WITH LISA WYSOCKY. © COPYRIGHT 2005. USED BY PERMISSION OF PUBLISHER VANDERBEEK & BURNHAM (VANDERBEEK.COM), ACTON, MASS.

## Book Bonus

I had a smelling tic—every time I saw a newspaper, I'd have to smell every section.

Once, in a store, I heard a woman suggest to my mother that I might be “possessed by the devil.” What's even worse is that, for a short time, my mother seriously considered the concept.

In fifth grade, my noises got louder. After one series of barks, my teacher humiliated me by making me stand in front of my classmates and apologize. As much as the humiliation hurt, that teacher had a huge positive impact. Because of that incident—and many others like it—I eventually vowed that someday I, too, would become a teacher—the great teacher I never had.

*In 1985 a doctor confirmed his mother's suspicions, diagnosing Cohen with*

At 4, Cohen (right, with brother Jeff) was symptom-free.



*Tourette syndrome. While that answered some questions, it brought little relief.*

We discussed switching to a private school, but I didn't want to be treated differently. I wanted to be normal, and

## TOURETTE SYNDROME The Facts

- Some 200,000 Americans have Tourette's; less than 15 percent of those exhibit coprolalia, the form that causes involuntary cursing.
- One person in 100 has mild, transient tics that may not develop into Tourette's.
- Three to four times more boys than girls develop Tourette's.
- Symptoms usually peak in the early teens, then may improve.
- Drugs including tranquilizers can sometimes suppress tics.
- Tourette's is diagnosed if motor and vocal tics persist for at least a year.

I wanted friends. I knew I just had to work harder at both.

When it came time for my Bar Mitzvah, my family—except for my mom and brother Jeff—were on edge. The

thought of my odd ways being showcased filled them with dread. I was excited. Was I making noises? Sure. But I had control—of myself and of the ceremony. I read both English and Hebrew successfully. People learned to look past the tics. They saw Brad, and they found that they liked him.

*Still, high school and college were challenges, in part because Cohen, like many people with Tourette's, also suffered from attention-deficit disorder. After graduating from Bradley University in Illinois in 1996, he moved to Atlanta, determined to land a teaching job. But his interviews proved difficult.*

"To tell you the truth, Brad," one principal said, "I can't see you as a teacher. I feel like Tourette syndrome would get in the way." He shook his head. "Brad—they'd laugh at you. I've known a lot of teachers—and I've never met one with Tourette syndrome."

I felt my cheeks get hot. And at this worst possible of moments, I let out a

piercing yip and my neck jerked to one side. "I assure you, sir, that I *can* teach. In fact, I think I'm a better teacher because I have battled to overcome this disability."

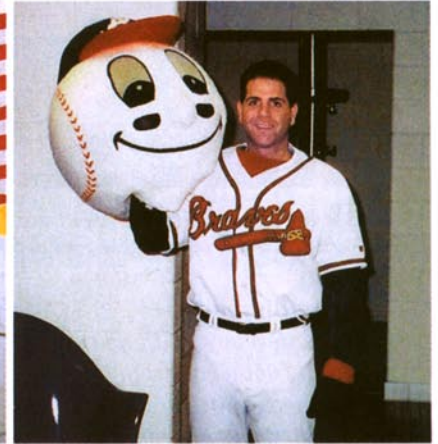
He leaned closer. "The kids I'm deal-

ing with at this school . . . they would beat you up. You wouldn't be safe here."

I couldn't get away from that school fast enough. By the time I found the main road, tears blurred my vision. It's over, I thought. No principal will ever



**The childhood he never had? Cohen goofs off in class (left, in '99) and suits up for a part-time gig as an Atlanta Braves mascot (in '03).**



## Book Bonus



**"Brad is the sweetest guy," says fiancée Nancy Lazarus, an insurance claims adjuster Cohen met online and proposed to in a hot air balloon in July.**

look past my disability.

*After 24 interviews with no results, Cohen finally got a call from the principal of Marietta's Mountain View Elementary, who wanted to meet him.*

What I didn't know then was that the principal, Jim Ovbey, was more than a little concerned. I apparently was barking so frequently on the phone that Jim had problems concentrating on our conversation. But Mountain View had six classes for children with learning disabilities. "We had told those children that they could do anything they wanted to," Jim said later. "My assistant principal said, 'If we're going to talk the talk, then we'd better walk the walk.'"

*Hired to teach second grade, Cohen faced an emotional first day.*

Due to a combination of nervousness and excitement my tics were pretty bad, so I talked to the kids about Tourette syndrome right away.

"I was born with this . . . woop! . . . condition and right now JA! there's no medicine that can cure it," I said.

"Do you go to movies?" a child asked.

"Yes, but sometimes I get kicked out, and that makes me feel sad."

"Does it hurt?" someone else asked.

"Sometimes, like when my neck jerks," I answered. "But the noises don't hurt at all."

"Is it contagious?"

"No," I answered. "Tourette's is not . . . dra . . . DRA . . . contagious."

One girl asked, "What can't you do with Tourette's?" I asked what she meant. "Like can you not eat or drink?"

I smiled and responded that I could eat and drink. But I told them that we wouldn't be playing hide-and-seek. Mr. Cohen always loses at hide-and-seek.

**“At this worst possible of moments, I let out a piercing yip and my neck jerked”**

When the kids laughed, I knew everything would be just fine.

I soon discovered that a funny thing happened when I taught—I didn't tic much. The tics come out most when I am bored or uncomfortable or stressed, and at school that just never happened.

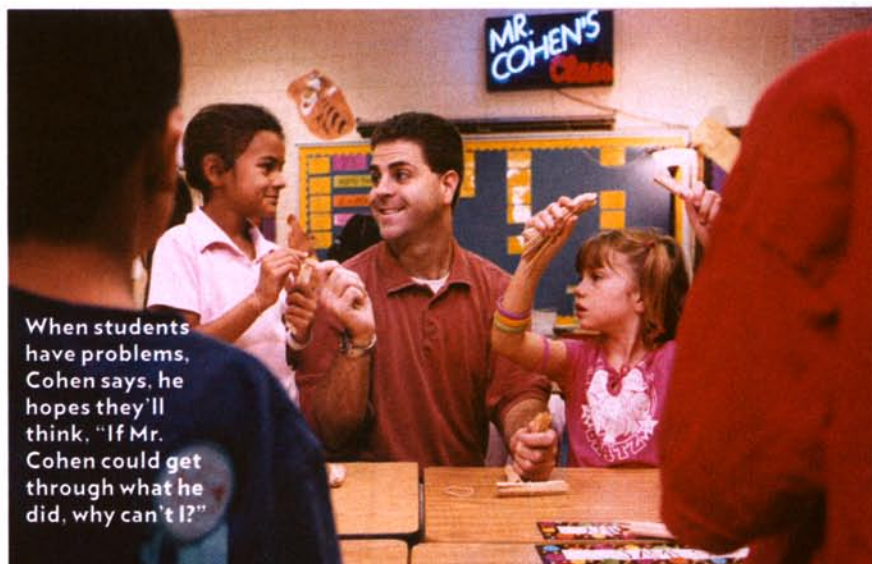
My second graders, like young children everywhere, were not caught up in how people are different, so they were unfazed by my Tourette's. As days passed, I knew more and more that teaching was what I was born to do.

Some of the boys in that first class were a special handful. I had to deal with a lot of academic and behavioral issues. I worked really hard to make a difference in each student's life. I also gave up lunch hours to go into as many classes as I could, to teach them about Tourette's. After a month, the entire school knew why there was a teacher walking down the hallway barking.

I must have done my job well, because before too long, kids of all ages would wave to me in the halls.

*Cohen's talents and efforts were recognized in July 1997, when he was named Sallie Mae First Class Teacher of the Year for the state of Georgia.*

Tourette syndrome is not a problem in my classroom. The kids don't blink when I insert a series of woops in a lesson or when I scoot up on my rolling chair in the middle of some facial grimaces to check their work. Instead, because my Tourette's is so relentlessly persistent, it keeps me determined to focus on showing my students that the impossible can truly be possible. ●



**When students have problems, Cohen says, he hopes they'll think, "If Mr. Cohen could get through what he did, why can't I?"**