

Lauren 00:14

Everyone, welcome to the LDA Podcast. I'm here today with Meghan Buchanan. She's an aerospace engineer, adventure athlete, and motivational speaker with dyslexia. She just summited Mount Everest in May, and she's currently working to complete the Explorer's Grand Slam, which under 100 people have actually completed. So Meghan, thank you so much for being here with us. We're so excited to talk to you.

Meghan Buchanan 00:34

Yes, I've so been looking forward to this.

Lauren 00:37

So would you start off by just telling us a little bit about yourself?

Meghan Buchanan 00:41

Yeah, absolutely. I think you summed it up pretty well. And people always ask me, you know, how did you become you? And how do you get this drive? And I always answered, I'm a middle kid with a learning disability. So that's how I became me. I always felt like I had something to prove. But yeah, you're right. You know, I was diagnosed, luckily, at an early age, at seven, with dyslexia, and my parents were told we're so sorry, your child has a learning disability, she won't achieve much academically. And my mom sat me down and she was like, 'sweetheart, you can be anything you want to be, you are just going to have to work harder than everybody else. And that starts today in this house.' And so that's where it all kind of started for me. And I think part of my therapy in life was being in the outdoors, because that was something I was just naturally good at. And I felt complete and whole because as anyone with a learning disability knows, it's a struggle, as a kid, a young adult, through your life until you can fully embrace it. And so where I had so much trauma in school and the struggles, the outdoors is where I felt so powerful and myself. And so, college was not easy, but I became an aerospace engineer, and found my gifts, my skills, of everything I learned having dyslexia, and now I have a thriving career. And then the other part of me was exploring the outdoors and pushing further. And I've always been into hiking, but one thing led to another. And before I knew it, I was climbing Mount Everest. And now I'm about to achieve the Explorer's Grand Slam, which is the Seven Summits, the highest peak on every continent, and then the last is we ski to the north and south poles. And so my Seventh Summit is going to be Carstensz Pyramid this November. And then in the spring, I will do the North Pole. And that completes it, which, like you said, really, very few people have ever done that. Only 12 women have done it. Four U.S. women. So I'm extremely excited about that and to represent dyslexics everywhere.

Lauren 02:52

Absolutely. That's huge. So going back a little bit, would you be able to explain how dyslexia impacted you, especially in your early life?

Meghan Buchanan 03:01

Oh, absolutely. It has 100% made me who I am. And, you know, thinking back in history, we don't know any different, right? We don't know what it would have been like without a learning disability. So you have to sort of imagine that. But you know, it's bittersweet. I can think back to that little girl, that little

Meghan, and the shame and the embarrassment she felt and the struggles and the pure frustration of working so hard at something and never being able to grasp it. There are certain words to this day, no matter how hard I try and I think I've got it down, I cannot remember. It's just not going to come. But what it did is it really created in me, this drive and this grit to keep moving forward, and every time I fall, to get back up if I wanted something in my life. And so it really made me a fighter. And it also developed communication skills for myself. And so growing up, you know, in elementary school, going through high school, obviously my parents recognize that I'm a smart individual. And so they, we really created our own path and how to go forward. And if I went to class, I listened, I paid attention, I got great grades. It wasn't until college that it really hit me where I could not keep up with the reading that was involved in engineering, or probably most, you know, most curriculum in college, and that's where it really was a struggle for me. And I thought being dyslexic I thought that this was a part of me. And so I wouldn't ask for special accommodations, and I suffered, my grades suffered. So I think I took some time off there and went back to college and was like, 'alright, you know what? I need to get documented as dyslexic with the university.' I really started embracing it as who I am and then things started turning around for me. And so even as our young career here, I am now an aerospace engineer, I didn't want anyone to know. I was afraid I would be discriminated against, which very much happens. And so I went through my career and always had that self-doubt, because there's always that little seed of doubt in yourself as being that kid that was told 'you can't, you're not smart enough.' And so building again, off that grit and going through my career where I realized: You know what? I am good at this. And really just building that self esteem to where now in my career, I'm a very proud dyslexic. I speak to inclusion and all and I encourage other people in their career, anything in life, to fully embrace it, and be proud, and get accommodations you need to reach your fullest potential.

Lauren 05:52

Absolutely. Well, did you always want to become an aerospace engineer? What was your journey towards that career?

Meghan Buchanan 05:59

I did. That's such a great question. I did. So my father was an engineer. And my dad was a brilliant Rhodes Scholar at MIT. So that was kind of what I grew up with, like, oh, my gosh, and here, I was having a learning disability. I never thought I could make it but I had such amazing parents that were my advocates. And my father was so kind and gentle with me and my dyslexia. And so I grew up, he worked in space, and I was actually home sick when I saw the shuttle explode. And I was so devastated and upset. And I remember talking to my parents about it at night, and my dad explained to me what being an aerospace engineer would be, and I could help design spacecraft so it wouldn't happen. I was like, 'That's it. That's what I'm going to be.' And my parents never let me think I could be anything less than that. And so that is, you know, but again, when you get to school, college, oh my gosh, and everyone was telling me 'you're dyslexic, you can't do this, you won't be able to do this.' And now when I go back and talk to, you know, kids, high schoolers, college, I had to take calculus two, three times. I kept failing, but I wanted it so bad. And I kept going back. And my GPA may not have been the most stellar, but I tell you what, I have such a wonderful, successful career. And I think part of that as an adult, is there isn't any challenge I'm not willing to take on. And companies love that. And yes, so it is something I always wanted to do. And that is what I'm doing now.

Lauren 07:37

That's fantastic. So I know, you mentioned that in college, a lot of the reading was a struggle, but in your career now, is there anything that's a little bit...that you might have to work a little bit harder with, with dyslexia?

Meghan Buchanan 07:50

It is constant. And especially now, we are in such an age of, you know, information, it's so quick, most everything is done over email. So I will get...and the engineering personality type is very detail oriented. A lot of data information. So my team will send me the longest emails. And whenever I take over a new team, I'm like: Here's the best thing, send me a long email, but then send me the bullet points, give me the quick the fast, or pick up the phone and call me if you need a decision immediately. So I think you need to embrace where are those challenges and just address them head on. I used to hide it from people, I didn't want them to know. And now I'm just dead on with it. Like, here's the best way that we're going to get through this fast. And so then you can...there's a lot of, you know, presentations to customers to higher management. Also a struggle for me was always catching those spelling mistakes or little things that no matter how many times I go through it, I'm never going to see it. And so thank goodness for spell checker. That helps, but it doesn't catch everything. And so, again, then I will have someone I'll be like, 'Hey, here's the deal. I am dyslexic, I cannot catch everything. Will you please proofread this?' And again, it's owning it. It's being proud of it and putting in place accommodations to make you successful.

Lauren 09:16

Absolutely. Well to switch gears a little bit, how did you get interested in mountaineering and adventure sports? I know you mentioned having a learning disability you know, getting outside was where you felt powerful. How did you find that out?

Meghan Buchanan 09:31

Um, yeah, again, so it really sort of my dad was an avid hiker, as well. And I have a brother and a sister who are not affected with learning disabilities. But my dad and I, that was our connection with the outdoors, and it was my time with him without my brother and sister, who are very brilliant. And so I think I gravitated to it as well because it was special time with him. And so we would, in Colorado, you know, climb fourteeners. The first time I climbed Kilimanjaro, which is the highest peak in Africa at 19,300 feet, I was 29 years old, and I did it with my father. And so it was always just something that I loved in the outdoors. When I really decided to get into technical and big mountains was in my early 30s, I had a life threatening snowboard accident in the backwoods of Vail, where I severely broke my femur, almost died. And they told me I'd have probably a wheelchair or cane the rest of my life. And at this point, having struggled through dyslexia, becoming an engineer, and also being female in engineering, this accident happened, I was given that diagnosis, and instantly my brain went to 'No, no, we're going to fight for this, we're going to get it back.' And so very intensive physical therapy surgeries, I actually ended up having a titanium allergy. But it was two years of extreme pain and trying to get figured out and my brain was just so focused on the positive of 'I want to go hike Kilimanjaro again, or go back to Everest base camp,' which I had done. And so when I repaired, that is what I did. And when I went back and did those mountains that I had done before I was a different person. And my mental fortitude was to such another level up that I was like, 'that was so much easier than when I did it

before.' And I'm like 'I want to go higher, and I want to take on something else.' So I decided on Aconcagua, which is the highest peak in South America, in Argentina, 23,000 feet. So I did that. And I loved it. And at this point, I started also figuring out, man, this comes from mental drive. That's how you do these big long duration mountains. And I came up with GGRIT, which is gratitude, growth, resilience, integrity, and tenacity. And with those things I can like, I attribute that...that's how I got through learning disability. That's how I got through engineering. That's how I got through my accident of putting those things in place. And I met a woman on that hike, who had done the Seven Summits. And she was like, 'if you were okay with Aconcagua, you can do the Seven Summits, but it's going to take discipline, it's going to take work.' And I'm like, 'that is what I am all about.' And so then I started, you know, improving those skills. And it was a lot of falling and getting back up. And I got myself to the point where I could climb Denali. And once Denali was done, I was ready to try for Everest and improve on those skills as well. And so it became this thing, and then the North and South Pole as well, because I wanted to do something that few women had done, to, again, inspire others. Learning disabilities, accidents, whatever your goal is, whatever your Everest is, you can use these tools and commit to it and achieve what you thought was impossible.

Lauren 13:10

Yeah, that's really amazing. Well, I wanted to expand on GGRIT a little bit. How did you choose these principles?

Meghan Buchanan 13:18

Again, you're... you have great questions. Yeah, you know, I think the word GGRIT, I actually was, so I have an undergrad in aerospace engineering. And then my master's I went on to get as when I was older, and working is in engineering management. And so one thing we study is emotional intelligence, which I will tell you as someone with a learning disability, I think it's something that we are very keyed into, we're very empathetic, we look for ways, you know, to get around not the linear path. And so I was taking a course where they wanted us to go to all of our friends and family and say, 'give me one word to you that describes me.'; And this word grit, people independently came up with this word grit for me. And I was like, interesting. And so it's something that stuck with me. And it's something that I think that I really developed from having dyslexia is grit. It is that willingness to struggle, that willingness to keep going, that resilience, that tenacity to keep taking one more step forward, even though you might be in pain. And so that's how I came up with the acronym. And regular grit, of course, is with one G. I actually kind of thought it was funny that I misspell it. But it also is because honestly, just grit wasn't enough. And then for me, everything I do in my life, and everything that I recommend for others is to start with gratitude. You can be going through the hardest of times, if you can wake up and be grateful for one thing, look for one thing around you that you are grateful for. That really helps turn your narrative around, and that positivity to keep moving forward. And then after that is the growth, be willing to always be learning and growing, and I know with a learning disability, I will always be in that position of being vulnerable and learning to go through those growing pains to get where I want to be. Resilience is absolutely key, that taking that next step, and taking that next step. And integrity has always been important to me. Really, you know, my parents taught me to speak up for myself, to speak up for others. And I think with a learning disability, you need to be able to do that, be impeccable with your word. And then tenacity, having that spirit to keep moving forward. And a learning disability and dyslexia is a...it's your entire life, you will be working with that, you've got to have that resilience and that tenacity. It's the

same with climbing a big mountain or an endurance sport, that willingness to keep persevering and moving forward. I love the analogies between a learning disability and taking on a big mountain like Everest

Lauren 16:16

Absolutely, there's a lot of similarities.

Meghan Buchanan 16:19

Yeah.

Lauren 16:20

So you had mentioned a little bit about it being a mental challenge, as well as a physical challenge for these mountains. Could you tell us a little bit about how you protect your mental health during this, and sort of what is your self-talk like?

Meghan Buchanan 16:34

Yes, oh, my gosh, I love that you said self-talk. I actually talk a lot about that on my Instagram and what I share with people, I'm constantly self-talking. And that is a huge part of my life. And it's been a huge part of starting as a little kid. When people tell you, 'you're not smart enough, you're stupid, you can't do it,' you have to learn to be your own voice. And I again, I had great parents who were those words of affirmation, but they also taught me to be my own words of affirmation. So when everyone's telling you, 'you can't,' you have to tell yourself you can, sometimes you are the only voice telling you, 'you can.' And so self talk is super important. So that carries on then as an adult. And on these mountains where, you know, especially climbing Everest were these long periods of time where high altitudes it is very difficult, your body does not feel good. And I think one of the most amazing things on this last journey for me was at the top, and going for that summit push, it's not down to just every hour and every minute, it's every single second. And you take ownership of that second, and the choices that you make and your mind. And that self-talk telling you 'take one more step.' And you have this understanding, I could turn around at any point I want. But I'm choosing to take another step forward. And that is so powerful. And that comes from a lifetime of practice. It comes from starting as a kid with learning disabilities, of, you know, failing calculus and being like, 'I'm going to take it again, I'm going to get back up.' And that choice, you have that choice to own every decision. And that's such a powerful tool, of changing your narrative of dyslexia, or a learning disability being a weakness, and I'm choosing to own this, I'm going to make it my power. And so as we get older, we practice that and you get so much better at it. So I think, 'man, I wish I had known I was as good at mountain climbing in my 20s and early 30s.' It's physically easier, but I don't think I was mentally like, just practicing it and taking those steps forward and becoming easier and easier. I really came into my own, I think in my 40s. And I think that's why a lot of people do try these mountains, or get to the point of doing it later on in life. Because you have gone through struggle, it is nothing but a thing. You know how to withstand long duration pain, mentally and physically. And so I think at that point it's about you know, saying how do I practice my mental health and, or how do I make sure that's happening? It just comes from years of practicing and honing in on it to where I know how to talk to myself, and how to move forward. And I know how to identify what I can and cannot control. And the things I cannot control, I've learned to set those aside and use my energy for the things I can control.

Lauren 19:47

Absolutely, that's huge. Well, and again, just speaking of discipline, and all of the resilience that it takes to climb on these mountains, could you tell us how long it takes to train for a mountain like Everest? What is your schedule like?

Meghan Buchanan 19:59

Yeah, you know, it generally, it's a lifetime training, like we talked about the mental health, the mental training to get to that point. But, you know, doing the Explorer's Grand Slam is generally like, that's a decade of work. I mean, I'm actually at this point now doing a lot of back to back. Because the training is hard. Everest, I ended up training seriously for three years. And so once you're already at a level of fitness, like I did Denali in Alaska, in 2019, I summited early July, I was gonna go right into Everest that following spring, so about nine months later, so I was already in shape. But then you need to keep that shape. And the joke is, don't be in the best shape of your life, be in Everest shape, because once you're in the best shape of your life, then you got to kick it up a notch. So 2020, I was ready to go. But two weeks before it's ready to leave, this thing called COVID happened. So Everest is not, you can't go whenever you want. There's generally a two week window you have to summit. So I had to wait and train and try another year. And training is very intense, the best way to train for the elements in the mountains is to be on the mountain. And so I split time between Colorado and California, and so it's everything from mountain biking really, like steep for lungs and legs. It's weight training, it's trail running. And then also being in Colorado, it is hiking all the time, you want to get six to eight hours in hiking, and then doing it in the snow with your crampons. You know, in Vail here, I would, I would get my crampons on and go straight up ski lifts and straight down for six to eight hours, with a weighted pack. So if you want it, take it seriously and really give it a great shot. I mean, you really need to be doing that. Then so I went in 2021, I was on the mountain for...at that point, it took about six to seven weeks, we were going for a summit push. And then all of our climbing Sherpa got the Delta variant of COVID. Everyone ordered off the mountain, and like that, it was done. So I had to train a whole other year. And I went back this year, and we made it and we had beautiful weather. Yeah, the stars were aligned this time. So three years of really serious Everest training. But to me again, it is not something I'm a stranger to because I have that grit and that willingness to struggle from growing up with a learning disability. So to me, I was like, if this is what I want, I gotta work for it. So that's what we do.

Lauren 22:46

Absolutely. So do you have any favorite memories from the Explorer's Grand Slam so far?

Meghan Buchanan 22:53

You know, so many and every mountain is so unique and amazing and fantastic. And I will tell you this, this last December, January, I was in Antarctica, and I did back to back the last degree ski to the South Pole. And we ended up there at New Year's Eve. And that was really special. Because you're at the South Pole and like you can walk around it. 'You're like I'm in 2021, I'm in 2022,' it was really fun. And then after that went right and climbed Vinson. Antarctica is such a special, amazing place. And it wasn't lost on me that so few people get to go there, I was overcome with emotion of how beautiful and untouched and pristine it was, just absolutely beautiful. But for all of them, and the Himalayas will always have a special place for me. The one thing though, the Explorer's Grand Slam takes you to the

farthest reaches of the earth and the extremes. And the people you meet are absolutely amazing and different. You learn something every place you go, you learn about this world and this earth and how it's changing, and some of the devastation that's happening, and how lucky I am to get to see that firsthand. But what I really love about it is being able to share it with people. You know, for social media, the good and the bad, but really good is to share these experiences with people. And I'm so proud to be climbing now to raise awareness for learning disabilities. I get teary, like it's so important to me when I have a parent write to me and be like, 'I want you to know my kid is watching your journey.' That means so much to me because I was so lucky to have parents who told me I could and I want to be able to provide that to anyone I can. And at the top of Everest, I stood there with a sign that says: Dyslexia gave me GGRIT, and that I'm so glad I did that because I think that might be one of my favorite moments ever, because it did. And for any child or adult with a learning disability, you have such potential and power with you to again, change that narrative. Turn it into something positive. And what is your Everest? Go achieve it, because you have it within, you know how to struggle, you can do this.

Lauren 25:27

Absolutely. It's such an important message. It's just awesome. So we're excited to see more of your progress. Do you have a toughest climb? I know they're all probably pretty different.

Meghan Buchanan 25:52

Yeah, you know, a lot of people will ask too who've done both, whether Denali is tougher or Everest is tougher. They're tough in very different ways. One thing Denali, oh man, she is a beast, that lady who, for those who don't know, that's the tallest peak in North America and Alaska. And it is harsh and amazing and beautiful. But it is completely unassisted. So again, you have a 50-60 pound pack, and you're pulling a 50-60 pound sled behind you. And you and your team, unsupported means there's no porters, Sherpas, anything like that. You carry all your team gear, your tents, you're putting up everything, you're taking down everything. I love that because also that mountain doesn't care if you're male or female. If you weighed 120 pounds or 220 pounds, they don't care. It doesn't care how many Instagram followers you have. It treats you the same and you have to put in the work. And you either get to the top or you don't. And I do think, when Everest was canceled, I knew I had to go back. I'm like, 'okay, man, I'm so glad I don't have to go back and do Denali.' Although I probably would go back now, I don't know which one's tougher. Everest takes longer, and you're at high altitude for a longer amount of time. And that can be really difficult. It's very hard on your body. But I think those two are kind of tied. But they're also, there's such amazing, gorgeous, fantastic moments, I will say I enjoy the journey every time. So the super hard ones are under my belt. And after I'm done with Explorer's Grand Slam, we'll see what comes next after there. There might be some harder mountains in the works.

Lauren 27:39

That's very exciting.

Meghan Buchanan 27:41

But we'll see. Why not?

Lauren 27:42

Right, right! So do you have any advice for individuals of learning disabilities who might be facing a more metaphorical Mount Everest?

Meghan Buchanan 27:52

Yeah, you know, it all comes down, again, of what I've already said, you know. First of all, learn what you can and cannot control. And the best thing I did is separating, again, the things you can't control, you've got to learn to let those go and use your energy on solutions to move forward. I think that's one of the most important things you do because we only have so much energy and you want to use that towards your full potential. And owning it, being proud of it. And changing your narrative, and embracing that grit. And I know it is hard, it is very, very hard. But nothing amazing and wonderful in this world doesn't come without a little bit of pain and struggle. And I think you know, once you keep using it, you get better and better at it. It's almost to the point where I seek out challenge and struggle, I don't even know what I'd do if something was easy anymore. So for those who do, you know, whatever your Everest is, don't give up on yourself. Use that self-talk, keep, keep telling yourself you can and just make that little choice every day to take one more step towards that goal. It could take you 10 years to get there, whatever it is, you make the choice every single day to keep taking one step closer. And that's how you get there. You know, you don't get to Everest...it's so intimidating to look at the top of Everest from the very bottom. But that's not how you get there. You literally get there one step at a time. And that's any goal in your life. And for people with learning disabilities, you know, getting a high school diploma, getting through college, getting that job, getting that interview if your GPA isn't where it needs to be, but there are ways to be creative and work around it and make that your superpower.

Lauren 29:50

Absolutely. Thank you so much for talking with us today. How can people follow you and track your journey?

Meghan Buchanan 29:56

Yeah, absolutely. Again, so just GGRIT which is, GGRIT is my website, .com also on Instagram at GGRIT. And you know, we haven't mentioned this yet, but you and I are doing this podcast because I really, every climb is dedicated to raising awareness. And so I am so excited to be taking your all's name LDA to the top of Carstensch Pyramid. So I'd love for everyone to follow me while I train right now and then go on the journey to finish the seventh summit this November with Carstensch pyramid and hold an amazing LDA sign at the top at Summit and just break some boundaries for women for people with learning disabilities. And I appreciate so much everything you guys do for the whole community. We have to advocate for each other and we have to have support. You don't do this on your own. You need those voices of support telling you you can until people can create their own self-talk for themselves. So thank you for what you guys do.

Lauren 30:59

Absolutely. Well, we are so excited to follow your journey and to hear more from you soon.

Meghan Buchanan 31:04

Absolutely.