

# The Remy Johnston Certificate of Merit

## Recommendation for Mika Bardin

Each year I have the honor of working with hundreds of students with dyslexia. As a person who shares their learning profile, I am attuned to the psychological and emotional challenges they face. More often than not, I am disheartened to see these students subscribe to the false narrative that their struggle with literacy indicates that they are stupid and worth less than their peers.

The one exception is the student-athlete with dyslexia. Revered by their peers, these individuals cling to their athleticism as an emotional lifeline. What they frequently sacrificed, however, is the autonomous thinking and independent expression that can be discouraged by the coach/athlete dynamic.

When I agreed to be interviewed by 14-year-old Mika Bardin for her podcast, *Dyslexic Solutions*, I knew she was a gifted athlete. I understood that Mika's skill on the squash court had earned her the #1 ranking in the United States. I also knew that Mika's dyslexia had created academic challenges that she had worked hard to address. Frankly speaking, I expected to meet a gritty, high caliber athlete who would be more inclined to echo my sentiments during our interview than to formulate her own.

I could not have been more wrong. When I met Mika on the MIT campus, I immediately noticed her vibrancy, self-assuredness, and intensity. Rather than shaking my outstretched hand, Mika looked me dead in the eyes, proclaimed her excitement for our interview, then enveloped me in a confident hug. Impressed by her welcome, I stepped aside to allow her to greet MIT's Dr. John Gabrieli who, like me, had agreed to sit for the podcast. To my surprise, Mika immediately threw her arms around Dr. Gabrieli and greeted him with the same vigor and enthusiasm. It is important to note that Dr. Gabrielle is not the 'hugging' type... But for Mika, it appeared, he was willing to make an exception.

Over the next few hours, I got to know the young woman behind the broad smile and the twinkling eyes. I got to know the multitudes of Mika: The Fighter, the Empathizer, and the Advocate. During our conversation, we spoke about the challenges facing students with dyslexia, the often neglected and misunderstood talents associated with this learning profile, and the determination needed to empower this population on a global scale. We spoke candidly about the impact of being misunderstood and the desire to have our dyslexia celebrated not pitied. To my surprise, Mika and I spoke not as interviewer/interviewee but rather as peers allied in spirit and mission.

Mika is the embodiment of what I wish I had been at her age: A confident, compassionate individual who is cognizant of her strengths and aware of her challenges. I see in Mika an insatiable allegiance to neurodiversity, equality, and the empowerment of all dyslexics. Simply put, I see Mika as a torchbearer for the next generation of students with dyslexia.

Dean Bragonier, Founder and Executive Dyslexic of *NoticeAbility Inc.*  
Board member of the *International Dyslexia Association*