While the pitcher who wore the famed bloody sock was leading the Red Sox to two World Series championships on the field, the Schilling homefront was falling apart. All four of Shonda Schilling's children had been diagnosed, within a span of two years, with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a condition that causes an inability to focus, impulsivity, and behavioral problems.

Schilling's battle didn't end on the field

Wife Shonda recounts son's Asperger's syndrome in 'The Best Kind of Different'

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By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

The Boston Red Sox opened their season with a win against the Yankees last Sunday, but for all the fans dreaming of being a professional athlete, their former hero Curt Schilling had an important message.

"Making $15 million a year didn't make our family happier or healthier than anyone else's," he told a crowd of 150 while introducing his wife Shonda on a recent Friday night at Hubley Hall in Madison.

Indeed, while the pitcher who wore the famed bloody sock was leading the Red Sox to two World Series championships on the field, the Schilling homefront was falling apart, according to Shonda, who's written "The Best Kind of Different," a moving chronicle of her son Grant's struggle with Asperger's syndrome and the chaotic conditions in her household that led to the diagnosis.

All four of her children had been diagnosed, within a span of two years, with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a condition that causes an inability to focus, impulsivity, and behavioral problems. Her oldest son had anorexia. Shonda herself was in remission from malignant melanoma and was suffering from a depression so severe that at times she would spend most of the day in bed.

Perched on a stool, the dimunitive, blonde-haired Schilling spoke with poise and striking candor from the stage: "I felt like I was a failure as a parent," she said, "a failure at my favorite job, the one I took the most pride in." On top of that, she was struggling alone, one of the prices paid by a baseball wife. Not being there eight or nine months of the year, she said, "Curt could never have understood what I was going through."

And then there was Grant, her third child, with his sensitivity to touch, to the texture of certain foods, and to loud music, his fixations on dinosaurs, and his meltdowns during family's car drives to see Curt pitch. At home, she'd say "freeze," and her other children stopped and stood in place quietly. Grant kept running around. If his older sister and brother teased him, he'd go into a "high-pitched frenzy." Still, she managed to convince herself that he was just quirky or acting like a middle child.

In public, his irrational behavior only seemed to escalate. Once he threw a tantrum at a Baltimore Orioles baseball game, shouting he wanted to go home, loudly and insistently, despite his mother's pleas and bribes of toys and ice cream. That it was his father on the field; that "he was one of the greatest pitchers in baseball who had brought all these fans to this huge stadium," was immaterial.

Shonda Schilling spoke in Madison about her book "The Best Kind of Different," a moving chronicle of her son Grant's struggle with Asperger's syndrome.

People recognized who she and her family were and shot her condemning looks for not having the parenting skills to control her son. It was unbearable, the slender, seemingly fragile forty-two-year-old told the sea of red jerseys: "I was constantly worried about whether people were silently judging me—not just as a parent, but as a wife of a star pitcher on their beloved Red Sox."

It was one morning in the summer of 2007 that Shonda Schilling finally, in her words, "flipped out." Her three other children were ready for day camp but she couldn't get Grant going. "Everything I did was met with a resounding "No!" she writes. She yelled at him. He was unfazed. She tried grabbing him to dress him herself. He pulled away. "Why was this seven-year-old so unaffected

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Schilling family: 'The Best Kind of Different'

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by what I was asking, so uninterested in listening to an adult?" she writes. And Curt's advice, when she called him, sobbing, that she simply needed to show Grant who was boss, was of no help.

Looking back, there were certain ways Grant behaved that made it clear that he was different. "Grant had trouble socially in a way that went beyond quirkiness," she said. On a play date he had awaited with great anticipation, she found him alone in the family room, watching television. Friends his siblings invited over he met at the door with a barrage of non-stop talking.

Yet when a neurologist told her Grant was on the autistic spectrum – albeit the high-functioning end – she went numb. "Even though it made so much sense, I didn't want to hear what the doctor was saying," she remarked. "Autism was always something other parents' children had." Grief followed, then, as she told the audience, "a heavy sense of guilt for all the times I had flown off the handle at him."

As she eventually learned, there had never been anything malicious – or even intentional – in Grant's actions. All her yelling and threats of punishment might as well have fell on deaf ears. The way Grant's brain was wired – the way an Asperger's brain is wired – dramatically affects the ability to understand social cues and process various kinds of sensory stimuli – hence, his strong reactions to textures and noise. While an Asperger's child, like an autistic one, has no awareness of what another person is feeling, someone with Asperger's has otherwise highly developed abilities. Grant can read an entire book in one night and is a good student, but without a tightly structured schedule, often flounders.

"The hardest part of dealing with Grant's Asperger's was realizing that I couldn't force him to behave like a 'normal' kid because he wasn't going to," she said. "What I had to do was manage my responses to his behavior and get the whole family on board with that." Yelling and name-calling were in the past, she told their two oldest children. Grant's meltdowns from their seemingly harmless teasing came from sensory overload: he couldn't process what the words meant and it made him feel out of control.

Another daunting challenge has been to rein in basic parental impulses – for example, to hug and show physical affection, on account of Grant's sensitivity to touch. It's an ongoing process, according to Shonda, and a daily trial through which she's navigating with the help of specialists, teachers, and aides. And, through it all, she's come to see that Grant, even with the misfortune of Asperger's, had given her a gift. "Because he doesn't spend time worrying about what others think about him," she said, "he's taught me not to care so much about that. Which is a beautiful thing."

"Their story is our story," said Roland Marks of Meriden who, with his wife Caroline, has a middle son with Asperger's. As for Schilling's cautionary words about fame and fortune, the self-proclaimed diehard Red Sox fan shrugged. Their older son Johnathan is a star quarterback at Platt High School. "We'll see," he said with a twinkle in his eye.