

## LOOK AT HIM NOW

# ENSURING DAVON'S MENTAL HEALTH

When 10-year-old Davon met Children's Law Center attorney Elizabeth Bowker for the first time, he rushed to her and gave her "the biggest hug."

Davon held on because, as his mom Ebony Priester pointed out, he knew Bowker was fighting to make sure he could get the mental health and education help he needs.

We met the Priester family when Children's National partner Dr. Erica Eisenman referred Ms. Priester to CLC through our medical-legal partnership. The call came after Ms. Priester, a domestic violence survivor, bravely relocated her family to escape an abusive relationship. With the move came a different school for her children.

Davon has bipolar disorder and ADHD. He was struggling in his new classroom without the right mental health resources. At his previous school, Davon had an individualized education program (IEP), which helped him thrive.

Administrators at his new school refused to provide mental health support, despite Ms. Priester's repeated requests. For months Davon didn't receive the services he needed—not even the essential medicines his doctor prescribed.

Dr. Eisenman knew it was time to call Children's Law Center.

"It's disappointing that even though Ms. Priester was doing everything she could to advocate for her children, the school ignored her and her children's needs. They even tried to pressure her into withdrawing from the school," Bowker remembers. "It wasn't until a lawyer got involved that the school took her seriously."

When Ms. Priester pushed school administrators to provide the mental health and special education evaluations her son needed, they retaliated by calling child protective services, claiming Davon was missing school. In fact, the school wasn't providing him with the legally required transportation. Child protective services quickly closed the case after recognizing that Ms. Priester was acting responsibly.

That's one of the reasons Bowker took the time to drive the Priesters to a specialist in Virginia for an independent and comprehensive psychological evaluation—testing that Davon's school originally

refused to provide. The results again proved that Davon needed the mental health and special education services outlined in his IEP.

Now, thanks to Bowker's legal advocacy and Ms. Priester's refusal to

back down, Davon is excelling. The school was forced to implement every piece of his IEP, from help with math to a specialized classroom setting. He's receiving the mental health services he needs, in addition to help with his classes and transportation.

Ms. Priester says that cases like this one aren't just about Davon—they are about all children in DC who are legally entitled to services that will help them succeed.

"Mental health resources affect a child's entire future," Ms. Priester said. "We need to make sure mental health remains a part of our schools because children can't thrive if we don't give them the right tools. They know when adults have given up on them."

Davon's grades have jumped a full letter in just a few months. Ms. Priester is proud of her son and thrilled about his progress.

"Ms. Bowker fought for my children the way I was fighting for my children," she remembers. "She was awesome."

Ms. Priester knows many other families face similar challenges and encourages them to never give up on their children. She recalls feeling like the school didn't care about her son—or believe in his potential.

"They treated my son like he was nothing," Ms. Priester said. "Look at him now."



*Children's Law Center works hard to protect our clients' confidentiality. Davon's image has been changed. All other details are true.*