

James Carville

About His Experience as an Adult with AD/HD

by Bryan Goodman, MA

JAMES CARVILLE NEEDS NO INTRODUCTION. The 64-year-old Ragin' Cajun has spent decades as a political strategist advancing the careers of representatives, senators, governors, and even presidential aspirants. He is probably best known for his work inside the "War Room" in the early 1990s working for the then-governor of Arkansas who would go on to be a two-term U.S. president. These days Carville lives in New Orleans, Louisiana, in a home that he shares with wife and fellow political strategist Mary Matalin and their two daughters. As a political celebrity, Carville's life has been an open book, but few people know that Carville lives with AD/HD. He was diagnosed with the disorder as an adult. Recently, Carville took time away from his busy schedule to talk with Bryan Goodman, executive editor of *Attention* magazine, about his experiences with politics and AD/HD.

Would you mind telling me about when you were diagnosed with AD/HD?

Probably when I was like 58 years old. My wife made me go see someone to get diagnosed by a medical professional. It was determined that I was pretty happy with the way that I was, and the doctor determined that I have structures built in my life to deal with this, so we just left it untreated.

What prompted your wife to encourage you to get an evaluation?

She said I was driving her crazy because I couldn't sit still or pay attention. So we talked about it and discussed it, and I have been fortunate enough that I have a structure around me that I have built over a period of time to deal with it. If you have AD/HD, you instinctively know that you do, so you try to avoid situations that manifest themselves. You learn not to sit in the middle of a crowded movie theater. You think, I've got to get out of here. *(Laughs)* It is pretty compelling. I have friends who call me to see if I sat through a movie because, if so, then everybody knows it has to be pretty good. You do have a tendency to drift off in the middle of a sentence and a lot of times

other people take it personally. Most people are able to complete a thought before they begin the second thought. We generally get about a third of the way in and then we are moving to something else.

What was school like for you when you were growing up?

I went to Catholic schools. I had a nun who used to make me sit next to her, and she would beat me and hit me over the head with a piece of molding when I wouldn't sit still. Other kids had it then but you didn't know what it was. It was called being scatterbrained. That is what we would call it. It wasn't like a controllable thing. We lose stuff more than other people. We forget things. I have lost the gross domestic product of a small country in airplanes and hotel rooms. It is just the way we live.

What would have been an ideal school environment for you? I am sure you got used to the nun sitting there hitting you over the head, but...

One of the things that you have to do is function in the non-AD/HD world. And I mean that is something that every educator, every parent, has to decide the mixture

when making accommodations. You have to function outside. This disorder has a very good upside to it.

Tell me about the upside of AD/HD.

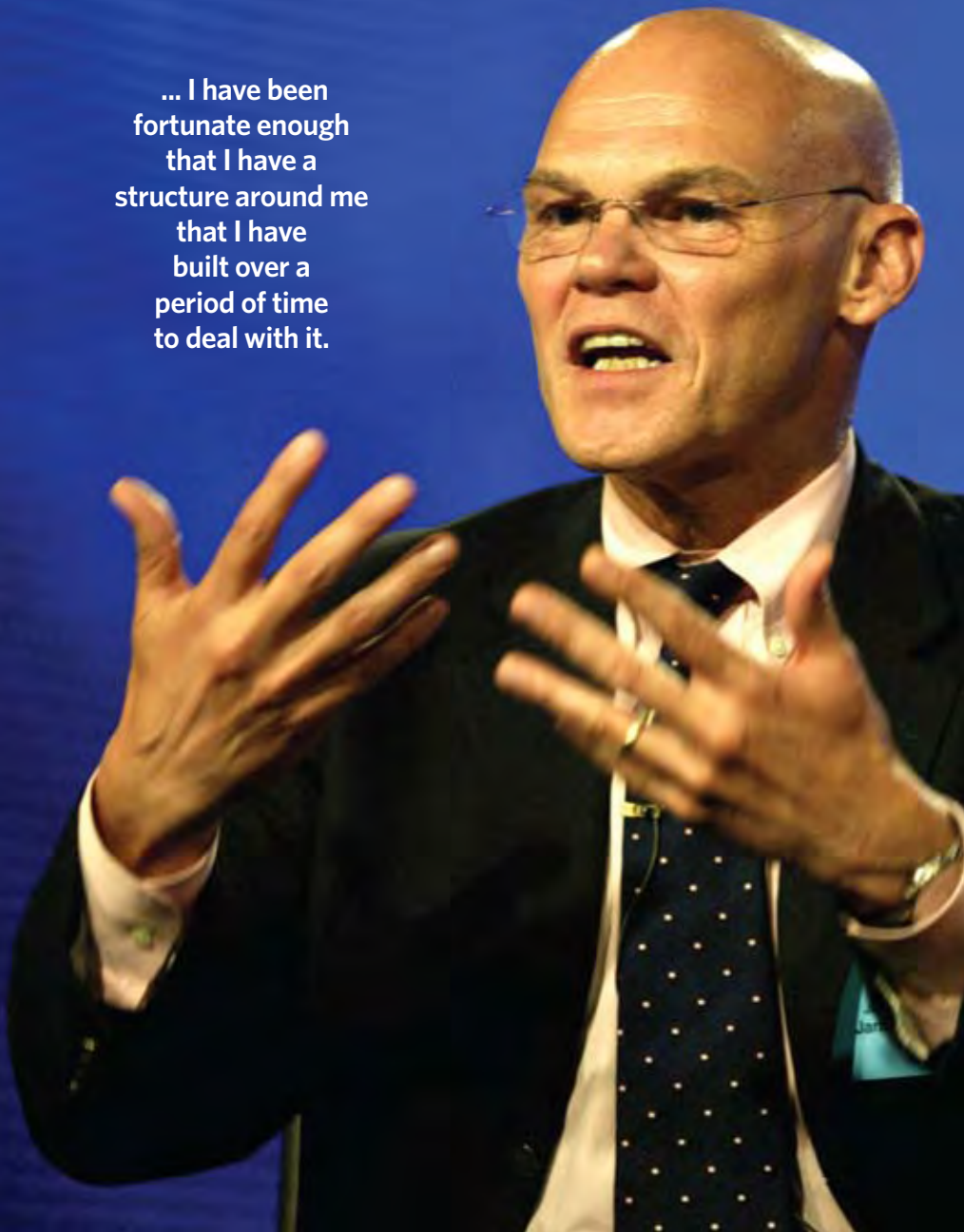
Well, like, we don't schedule long meetings; but then again, long meetings are shown to be horribly non-productive. So we are able to force other people to have a time limit. We are very good restaurant patrons. We are not going to sit around and have six cups of coffee and do nothing. I think that we bring a lot with us when we come out of our world and go into the other world. I think we are a positive force. Now we are not going to be very good accountants.

An expert who often speaks at CHADD conferences, Bob Brooks, talks about the importance of finding your island of competence. You have certainly found yours. And you have a lot of confidence. How did that develop?

It is funny because I kind of tried a lot of things in life and literally the first time that I sat in a meeting with people—very smart people, and they went to really big schools—I remember sitting there and thinking, "Well, they don't know any more about this than I do."

Bryan Goodman is director of communications and media relations at CHADD and executive editor of *Attention* magazine.

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You certainly picked a profession that was really good for you, one that is fast paced, which I think would be good for anyone with AD/HD. You are disclosing to others now after a late diagnosis, but was there ever any issue with disclosure early on? For example, did you ever mention to colleagues that you don't do well in long meetings?

People instinctively knew that. I run every day. I can't tell you how many times I met with presidential candidates, governors, senators and you know, oh well, it is five o'clock and he is getting up and going running. That's it. At first somebody might have thought it was rude, but somebody who had been with me for a long time would say,

"Don't take it personally; this is just what he does. You will be having a conversation and he will start a completely different conversation." But my wife would say, "You don't hear anything I have said." And I can repeat the last paragraphs. Just like I can hear it and understand it, but I am thinking of something else. My mind has to move on.

Do you think that the Obama administration will be able to make the necessary changes to the education system that will help meet the needs of diverse learners?

It might be cheaper and better for the local school district to just pay the tuition for a child to attend a private school as opposed

to trying to make accommodations within the public school. I am kind of sympathetic to the plight of some of these schools that have to, by law, take everybody, but everybody is not really the same. But their model probably works for 85 percent of the kids whom they get, and in some places it works quite well. I am not trying to break or broadside the public school system at all, but it may be better in some instances if specialty schools like Commonwealth Academy are able to do that.

Tell me about your experience with CHADD. When did you first learn about CHADD, and how has it helped you and your family?

I heard about all of this very late. And then some people read it, and it is the whole kind of thing where we feel all alone. I lived in Carville, Louisiana, where a patient center for Hansen's disease is located. One of the best books written about that disease was entitled *Alone No Longer*. One of the great motivating factors behind CHADD is that parents see that other parents are dealing with this and dealing successfully with it. CHADD is a place people can turn to for more information and support. This is a condition that has down sides, but it has up sides. And you have to learn to deal with the down sides and accentuate the up sides. I think it has actually helped me. Not in every way or in every instance but it is a little like what Winston Churchill said about alcohol, "I have taken more good from alcohol than alcohol has taken bad from me." He never denied that he had a hangover or two along the way. ●

In the August issue of *Attention*, **Bryan Goodman** will talk with Carville's wife, Mary Matalin, about her experience raising children with different learning styles.