

"Those Kids" Are Our Kids, Too

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I never thought much about special education. I took, I think, one mainstreaming class in my teacher training. And, I have to admit that I didn't pay much attention. I never figured I'd be teaching "those kids." I, after all, was going to be an English teacher. I was going to teach kids to love reading and writing. Besides, I never saw any students with disabilities in any school that I'd ever attended. Oh yeah, there was one girl who always wore a bandanna on her head. She had leukemia...but that wasn't really a disability, just an unfortunate illness. Looking back, no one really bothered to get to know her. I think that was because we all figured that she was going to die. Disability...it was never on my radar screen.

So, who would have guessed that 13 years into my teaching career I'd be able to recite special education law? Who would have guessed that people would be asking me about the best practices of inclusive education? Who would have guessed that I'd consider myself an advocate? You see, it's hard to think of special education as someone else's issue when two of your own children have disabilities.

I've come a long way since 1997 when my daughter was born. Before I even laid eyes on her, I was told that she had Down syndrome. It was a day and a half later that someone finally thought to ask me if I wanted to hold her. I guess for the nurses, it seemed like the label was the most important thing for a new mother to wrap her arms around. I've come even farther since I recognized the signs of autism in my youngest son, Andrew, when he was just over a year old.

I came to disability advocacy as a reluctant warrior. I had always envisioned myself as the parent who teaches Sunday school and organizes the career day at my children's school, not the one who has to navigate her way through the maze of special education. But, I resigned myself to play the hand that I had been dealt, and I acknowledged that I needed to arm myself with knowledge. Knowledge, after all, is power. Hence, in the Spring of 2002, I forced myself to apply for Partners in Policymaking, a yearlong advocacy training for parents of children with developmental disabilities. My goal was to endure this program for a year, learn the most that I could for my own children, and not get too involved. My life was too busy and overwhelming already.

At first, I was skeptical of all that inclusion talk. I, of course, wanted my children to be regarded as full members of the school and community, but I didn't dare dream it. But, after a year hearing speakers who, in their hearts, truly believe in natural, inclusive lives for people with disabilities, and then going back to my reality and mulling it over, and then going back to Partners in Policymaking and hearing it again...it finally sank in. My kids' needs weren't so special after all. Their needs are really the same as everyone else's—to learn in a community of their peers, to explore career possibilities, to learn how to get along with people, to develop a resume of marketable skills, to cultivate a network of friends, to solve problems and resolve conflicts, to engage in social and cooperative activities with their peers, and to participate in a vigorous, flexible and varied educational program that allows them to access the general education curriculum at their own level. They, like everyone else, need to become productive citizens and lifelong learners, and this must happen in an authentic, not artificial, context. Along the way, I also learned to accept other people's negativity and doubts as their limitations, not mine. I learned that when I encounter obstacles, I simply become wiser so that I may move around, through, over, or under the barriers. I learned that it's best to surround my children and myself with people who share this vision—even if that means bringing the vision to them. I began to dare to dream of full and natural lives for my children and my family. And, in spite of myself, I found my passion.

Now, I'm co-directing a new initiative—Families and Professionals United, a program to train educators, parents, and individuals with disabilities in the best practices of supporting people with disabilities as they become productive citizens and lifelong learners. (So much for not getting involved!) The members of this group have their labels, too. We are parents, general educators, special educators, administrators, nurses, counselors, speech pathologists, physical therapists, students, employees, and more. But when we come together twice a month, we shed our labels as we learn to embrace people of all abilities—not necessarily because it is the law but because it is right. We peel back the layers of prejudice, ignorance,

presumption, and tradition to discover a new vision for people with disabilities. We realize that all people need and deserve natural lives—not

a world of segregation, exclusion, and loneliness. We find the words to say what we know to be true, right, and just. We realize that everyone benefits and all kinds of lives are enriched in all kinds of ways when schools and communities support all citizens. We discover that the only way to create a better world is to live it. We are a community. We share, laugh, cry, groan, learn, dream, talk, and, yes, eat together.

You know...the only thing I can really compare it to is the Maryland Writing Project's Summer Teacher Institute—only the focus is on supporting people with disabilities rather than writing. If you loved the summer institute, you'll love this. I invite you along for the ride.

If you are interested in being a participant in Families and Professionals United 2004-2005 or if you know someone else who might be, contact Kim Willard (T-C '93) at kwillard@bcpl.net, kwillard@bcps.org, or 410-343-1438. Participants are awarded a certificate of completion, 6 MSDE credits, or 6 TU graduate credits as well as a new view of the world upon completion of the 90-hour course. Except for tuition costs for those seeking TU graduate credit, the course and all materials are free, compliments of MSDE. Families and Professionals United is open to any member of the community: parents, educators, people with disabilities. People of all abilities and backgrounds are encouraged to participate. We are all about appropriate modifications and accommodations.

Oh yeah...remember the girl in the bandanna? Well, you can imagine my surprise when I got an email from her a couple of years ago...she didn't die after all. She was organizing our 15-year high school reunion.



Kim Willard and daughter, Grace