

Brief, amazing moments of inclusion

Janice Fialka

“Real inclusion” of kids with special needs occurs everywhere, inside the classroom as well as outside. This is a fairly basic principle, however, it is not always easy to achieve.

When our son Micah started high school, we thought long and hard about what after-school activities would engage him, keep him healthy, and help him stay connected to his peers in a natural way. As we explored our options, we were fortunate that Micah had a peer mentor, a junior in high school who helped us think through Micah’s choices. J.J. was the captain of the high school cross country running team, so it may have been natural for him to suggest that Micah join the team.

“Great idea!” my husband and I thought. J.J. could mentor Micah in the ways of becoming a runner and a team member. Micah would be physically active every day after school and have the chance to hang out with his new peers. Perfect! It never crossed OUR minds that Micah rarely walked briskly, let alone ran. But that was a minor point—for us! For Micah, running was the farthest thing from his mind. But he liked J.J.; he liked hanging out with a cool upper classman, and he was willing to try it “for two weeks, Mom.”

Three weeks into the season (he made it beyond the two-week trial. Yeah! Our plan was working), we received a phone call from Micah’s coach. He asked if my husband and I could meet with him to talk. “Of course,” I responded but my heart sunk deep, knowing that “bad news” was on its way.

We set a date to meet, but we knew what was happening. The coach was getting to know Micah and was realizing that our son was NOT a runner. My spirits dropped as I anticipated that I would have to “go back to the drawing board” to find something else for Micah to do after school. Perhaps I would have to stage an “inclusion fight.” It wouldn’t be the first time.

We went into the meeting prepared to be told that it just wasn’t working out. The coach greeted us and then quickly began, “I want to talk to you about a goal I have for Micah.”

“Goal,” I said to myself. “G-O-A-L. Goal.”

The coach continued. “I would like Micah to run one mile of the standard three miles in a cross country meet in a few weeks.”

I was stunned. I thought to myself, “You mean you are not going to tell us it’s not working out for Micah to be on the team? You mean Micah can stay on the team? You mean you have a goal for him?” I didn’t say these things but I marveled at the fact that I didn’t have to go into my “strong mom-advocacy-warrior role.” I didn’t have to convince the coach that Micah should be included. All I had to do was say, “Yes, Coach. Sounds like a great idea, Coach. Way to go, Coach.”

I am sure that the coach had no idea how relieved, pleased, and excited we were. At this same meeting, the coach made another request. He explained that during one practice each week, the kids ran for several miles in local neighborhoods. He worried that because Micah had a “bit slower” pace, Micah was often left behind and alone. Coach was concerned for Micah’s safety. I suggested that on those days, Micah could skip practice and run with me or my husband at home.

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Micah (left) and coach Paul Yowchaung

Coach quickly disagreed, saying, “No, I want him to remain connected to the school and his team. I was wondering if it would be okay if he spent that practice in the weight room in the school gym, running on the treadmill. There are lots of other students working out in the gym.” I was stunned—again! We seem to have encountered a coach who genuinely wanted Micah’s running routine to be as closely aligned to the team as possible.

“Sounds perfect!” I said, hardly believing what I heard. I know that I shouldn’t have been stunned, relieved, or amazed but those families who have had to “fight” for inclusive education know how uncommon these types of conversations are with well meaning staff who have limited experience with full inclusive opportunities.

I left the meeting pleased and excited. I met a man, a high school coach, who had probably never read anything by the leading thinkers of inclusive education, but who understood “inclusion” from his heart. Coach just “got it” and we were thrilled.

In mid-October of Micah’s freshman year, on one of those glorious brisk autumn days, where the sky is a brilliant lapis blue, and the orange and yellow leaves dance lightly in the soft breezes, our son ran in his first meet. We video-taped all 11 minutes and 32 seconds of his run. Best friends came to watch. I choked back tears of pride and awe, and his team cheered, “Go Micah. You can do it.”

In May of Micah’s freshman year, we learned that Micah’s coach would not be coaching the next year. This news sent me into a downward spiral of panic. When parents find adults who believe in their child, they cling to them like Velcro®. We did NOT want coach to leave.

At the end-of-the-year meeting to plan for Micah’s sophomore year, we met the new coach. I eyed him suspiciously, wondering if he knew how terrific my son is, if he knew how desperately we wanted Micah to continue in this rewarding experience of running cross country. Fortunately we quickly learned the answer. The new coach stated in a clear unwavering voice, “I have a goal for Micah. I want him to run in EVERY meet and I want him to increase his distance to two miles each meet.”

I clenched my hands to the bottom of the chair so that I wouldn’t leap up and burst into cheers of jubilation. My husband and I were beaming, too stunned to find any words (again, no “inclusion fight!”) Micah’s reaction to his new coach’s goals was a bit different. He groaned, muttering, “Two miles, two whole miles . . . No way, Mom!”

While delighting in the day’s success and the feeling that luscious sense of hope, I thought of the wonderful poet Adrienne Rich’s description of how life is really lived. She said, “I live not as a leap, but as a succession of brief amazing moments, each one making possible the next.”

Her reflection on how she lives her life, describes Micah’s cross country story perfectly. There were many amazing moments, each building on the previous one. J.J., his peer mentor, opened the door to cross country. Micah’s first coach got him running in one meet. His second coach really got him running and in EVERY meet. Each high school year brought new accomplishments. In his junior and senior years, the new captain and other teammates began driving Micah home from practice every day. Eventually Micah ran two whole miles in 23 minutes, non-stop. Not bad for a young man who could only run ONE BLOCK in his freshman year. In Micah’s senior year, he received his Varsity Letter. He was proud.

Getting from running one block to wearing his Varsity letter four years later wasn’t easy (as Micah will enthusiastically tell you). “Real” inclusion is hard work, an idea, something to move toward—something like a cross country run. Micah’s running career evolved over time, without huge leaps. He learned that he must run every single part of the mile to get to HIS finish line.

There’s a lesson in that for me (there is always a lesson for me!). All of us who believe in inclusive education, inclusive communities, and inclusive living have to run every part of the inclusive course (darn it!). Some of the tracks are smooth and straight, others have steep hills, twists, and turns. But each part must be run. Each part is connected to the previous section. Each must be encountered, traveled, negotiated. As Micah has learned, we all must keep a steady pace, look ahead, practice, keep breathing, be encouraged by the cheering of our teammates, move forward at our own pace—but move forward. We’ll probably groan as Micah did, “Two miles! No way, Mom!” But we, like Micah, are spurred on toward our goal, our dream. There are no leaps in cross country running or in building inclusive lives, but there can be many brief amazing moments in both.

Janice Fialka is a poet and prose author working in the field of inclusive education and advocacy.