

Making a Difference

Written by Gayle Nobel

Tuesday, 02 December 2008 21:44 - Last Updated Tuesday, 02 December 2008 21:48

December 2, 2008. Kyle is 25 today. Happy Birthday to my sweet son!

It became apparent within Kyle's first year that he was going to have special needs. Though I didn't feel this way at first, I have come to see him (autism and all) as a gift. To sum it up, Kyle has helped me to become a better human being. Details about this are in our book and are sure to end up in future posts.

One of the purposes of Kyle's life is this: He has made a difference and continues to make a difference in the lives of many. And in searching for the meaning of life (uh oh, we are getting pretty deep here) and trying to discern what our purpose is, isn't 'making a difference' what it's all about? Aren't we all striving to achieve this in one way or another? How many of us can check this one off our list by the age of 20?

Just by being who he is, Kyle teaches us life lessons. If people are willing to make the effort to look outside their boxes, they are forever changed by their relationships with Kyle. I've seen this over and over in the people that have been in Kyle's life. Some have gone on to become professional experts in the field of autism. They got their start with Kyle and then went on to make a difference for many other children with autism or special needs. In doing this, they also helped families. A domino effect.

Kara Hume, who is now Dr. Kara Hume wrote a beautiful piece several years ago which expands on this very idea. As a tribute to Kyle and because there is just so much beauty and wisdom contained in this essay, I present....

Fixing Kyle

Working with Kyle, and knowing him and loving him, as well as his family, changed my life inside and out. Before I met Kyle when I was 16, I was certain I wanted to be a special education teacher; however, I had never met a person with autism. And I never realized that "fixing" a person with a disability shouldn't be the ultimate goal of a special educator. Kyle wasn't going to be "fixed" (at least right away!), and in the mean time, there was a lot for me to

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learn. I had to learn to appreciate Kyle- autism and all. Not only appreciate it, but know his autism, love his autism, and ultimately accept his autism. This was the goal of a special educator—to connect with and understand the students, then from a loving place, coax and motivate them to succeed. Kyle taught me that.

Though the methodology we used with Kyle came and went, the bottom line of unconditional love- no matter how the autism interfered with our plans, prevailed. And that philosophy, taught by Kyle, has changed my life. I went on to become a special education teacher, but I felt different than most of my peers, and continue to feel different than most of the professionals in the autism field. I felt excited and energized by my students and their autism. I came to embrace it and use it to help my students grow and learn. I honored it as a part of them. This did not mean that I didn't push my students to stretch themselves—I certainly did. But my pushing came from a different place- not to change who they were, and remediate all of their deficits, but to accommodate them and focus on their strengths. Kyle taught me that.

This attitude was required by Kyle when working with him. Progress was slow and at the beginning the connections were few and far between. It would have been easy to leave each day frustrated and annoyed and thinking of autism as the enemy. Focusing on the “fix” factor would have left me feeling empty on even incompetent perhaps. However, with an attitude of acceptance, and the ability to view the world through the eyes of a person with autism, I was able to celebrate in his success, however small. I realized that it must have been very challenging for him to reach out and communicate with me—so every time he said “eeee”, I celebrated with him while providing his snack. I began to understand how difficult it must have been to connect socially, so when he hugged me or caught me eye, I validated that and respected him for his efforts. In response, he developed into a kind and gentle soul with a trusting spirit.

This spirit has stayed with him as he has continued to be challenged-- riding horses, bowling, going to Sea World, beginning to shave—as he knows he is surrounded by acceptance, patience, and understanding. He isn't “fixed”, but he sure is stretched. I, however, am fixed. Instead of becoming a teacher and professional who is overwhelmed with the difficulties my students and I faced each year, I was able to recognize the small successful steps and victories. He motivated me to devote my professional life to the field of autism—not in an attempt to fix people with autism, but in an attempt to better understand people with autism, and pass that understanding on to others. Beyond autism and special education, I am fixed in other ways because of Kyle. He has inspired me to be more patient and kind in my relationships (though it's often difficult and I sometimes fail), as well as accepting of people and who they are. He encouraged me to take the perspective of other people so I might understand them, and their point of view, more clearly. He slowed me down. Kyle taught me that.

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It was not only Kyle that fixed me—and though this may be beyond the scope of the request for this writing, Kyle's family had a hand in the fixing as well. This attitude of love and kindness was not directed only to Kyle, but to Kyle's siblings, parents, and anyone else who worked with Kyle. Though I felt anxious during some of the sessions with Kyle (and anxious about feeling anxious), I knew I was supported and cared about by Kyle's family. And in the past several years, my working relationship with Kyle has faded, but my bond with him and his family has not. To me, Kyle will always be my first and greatest teacher, and his family will always be a special part of my life. I feel as if I owe it all to them—my jobs, my career path, my life's passion is because of the doors Kyle and his family opened for me (literally and figuratively!).

Thanks for fixing me Kyle, so I could go out and NOT attempt to fix everyone else.