

“Sometimes being a brother is even better than being a super hero”

By: Matthew Fioravanti

My name is Matthew and I am 16 years old. My brother's name is Nick and he is 23 years old. Nick was born with Cerebral Palsy and I've had the honor to call him my brother. Living with a brother who has special needs has taught me a lot of life lessons. From the memories of us laughing and having fun at the park, to the memories of the trips to the hospital, living with Nick has been a joy ride with lots of ups and downs.

Being the only other son besides Nick in the family, I've had to take on the role of the “older brother” (despite actually being the youngest child). I've taken a lot of responsibility not just for Nick but also for around the house in general. I get Nick off his dayhab van, some nights I tuck him in bed. We sometimes just like to lay in the living room and watch movies together. I help my mom a lot around the house since we always have way more laundry than average families. My mom and dad both work and I can see how hard it is for them to do everything plus take care of Nick. Sometimes they need a break and I feel bad that they don't get one.

When Nick was really sick about 2 ½ years ago, I would sleep in bed with him to keep him company at night and make sure that he was alright. There was a point when the doctors thought that Nick was going to die. Those were the worst days of my life and I never wanted to leave Nick's side. I couldn't imagine my life without Nick. Thankfully, a doctor came along and took Nick's case. He didn't have good chances of surviving, but surgery was his only option.

We all waited expecting the worst. But Nick once again showed us all how strong he really is. He's fully recovered now and those days are just bad nightmares, hopefully that we never have to have again.

There are some downsides to having a sibling with special needs. Compared to some of my other friends, I don't get to really go out to tons of social events. I'm not saying that I'm a hermit crab and never go out, but I just don't have the opportunities to do the things that other teenagers get to do (like going on

vacation to Hawaii, or rock climbing the side of the Adirondack Mountains ...not saying I would even do that, because I'm scared to death of heights).

Even though I don't have the chance to do things like that, we still find ways to do extremely fun activities and go on amazing vacations. We have gone to the beaches of New Jersey, we have been to Disney World in Florida, we have been to Niagara Falls a lot (that's one of Nick's favorite places) and we have even gone on cruise ships down to the Bahamas. (The cruise ships fall into good and bad groups. One ship was not so much "fun" because they wanted to make Nick sit in places so other people on the ship wouldn't have to look at him. That was bad and got my mom really upset and that is when she met a great lawyer who tried to fight to make things right, since that was against the law. The other ship we went on was a different company and they treated our whole family like we were movie stars!)

As a family we also do a lot of fun activities right at home! We go out to dinner, bowling, we go to the movies, walks in the park, car rides, the State Fair, and even Kayaking (that was a tricky but fun adventure). Even though Nick is unable to walk, we still have many ways to have an amazing time that's enjoyable for all of us, including Nick. Nick probably has more fun than all of us combined!

One of the most amazing feelings in the world is seeing Nick smile and laugh. It's one of those feelings that can brighten up even the darkest of days. And there is something about the way he laughs that no matter how bad your day is, you can't help but feel happy.

Now even though there are a lot of positive things about having a sibling with special needs, there are some negatives. One thing that I have learned growing up is to be accepting of all others no matter what. I have also learned that not everyone else in the world is like that. There are many people that can be complete jerks.

When we do go out in public, there will be people that just stare at us and stare at Nick. Sometimes when we walk away, people even start to laugh at Nick

or make comments towards him. It makes me just want to punch those kinds of people in the world.

It is those people in the world, however, that have made me the person I am today. I will always defend my brother, and any other person that has a special need. It is inhumane for any other person to judge or discriminate another person for having a special need. They are people just like you and me. They shouldn't have to live their lives with other people staring at them and making comments. They never know if someday that person that has a special need might be someone they love and care about.

Nick is the best brother that I could have ever wanted. I wouldn't want anyone else as a brother. Living with Nick has made me more aware of the whole topic of special needs and even just human rights.

Of course from time to time I will complain about the stupid little things like how we are 20 minutes late to a party because Nick wouldn't get in the car, or how Nick will change his mind about what TV show he wants to watch about 100 times, or how he will only wear Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck shirts and we can never be right. If we put him in a Mickey, he wants a Donald. There will always be those little things that he will do that get on everyone's nerves, but it's those qualities about Nick that make him... Nick! And I love every part about him (except when he decides to wake up at 3am on his birthday and decides everyone else in the house should also be awake).

I always tell myself "don't take any moment for granted" and I tell myself this because there have been times where Nick has been very ill to the point we didn't think he would live. My entire family was impacted during those times. I had never seen my father cry before the day that Nick was admitted to the hospital. Watching as my family was all crying and hanging on to the last hope that Nick would be okay was scary and I felt very alone. None of my other friends could understand what that felt like. Never had my family been so close. We all pulled together for the sake of Nick, and every day someone would be right next to him as he woke up every morning in the hospital. I was not allowed to see him

in the hospital, which just made the reality that he may never come home again that much more real, and scary.

It was during those times when I really reflected back on all the memories that we have shared like swimming with dolphins in Florida (thanks to the Make-A-Wish Foundation), to even just riding my bike alongside Nick down our neighborhood. Every memory I have ever had with Nick has so much love in it. I thought it would keep me from being scared or crying but it didn't help.

I have cherished every single moment I have had with Nick. He is the best brother in the world and I am so glad that he is a part of my life. He is a part that I can't see myself without. If someone were to ask me if having Nick as a brother was a good thing or a bad thing, I would have to say that it has been all good. I will be his legs when he can't walk, I will be his arms when he can't reach for things, and I will be the voice that speaks up when his can't be heard or understood. I will be all of that for Nick because in return, I know he will always be the greatest brother ever. And for me, that makes every day just a little more special.