

Kids Crusaders

By: Julie Fioravanti

One of the greatest joys I have learned on my journey of raising a child with special needs is the magic of “paying things forward.” The act of doing something for someone who least expects it, without expecting anything in return. Often on this journey there is great joy in knowing that the smallest act of kindness can truly turn a person’s life around.

We have always been blessed by people that surround us in times of crisis with Nick and that feeling of knowing we are not alone has often been the lifeline that has saved us. Being conscious of being that kind of person for others has always been at the forefront of my daily living. It doesn’t require the act of kindness to be limited to someone with special needs. Truth be told, we all have special needs. We all have really bad days that can be turned around by someone taking a few extra seconds to acknowledge our presence. I read a quote once that has stuck with me. It said “Some of the shells that wash up on the beach were once very beautiful. You never know what kind of journey they had to take to get them in the fragile shape they are now in. Same with people. Be kind.”

Being the pay it forward kind of person that I tend to be, I am never one to expect things from anyone. In fact, during my own personal darkest moments, I often find the greatest light in reaching out to help others. I’m notorious for paying for the coffee at the drive up window for the car behind me, or leaving sticky notes on someone’s desk or car with a positive quote or saying. It’s just a feel good thing knowing that you possibly made a difference in someone else’s life.

We recently returned from a much needed vacation. We had not been on a family vacation for over 4 years due to some pretty severe medical issues with Nick that required major reconstructive surgery. We planned a vacation for last September only to have to cancel it after I had been in a major car accident which totaled my car and left me with a fractured leg. Our reservation was non-refundable and I had not purchased trip insurance. The owner of the condo that we were renting was very nice and stated that under the circumstances she would fully refund our

cost. I was so thankful and promised we would book again the following year once I had healed, which we did. This time I purchased the trip insurance, just in case. And as life would have it, my mom passed away 2 days before we were supposed to leave for our vacation. Feeling very defeated in so many ways, I was truly at a loss as to what I was supposed to do. The owner of the condo would have gladly refunded our money again, but we were unable to push out the scheduled week due to restrictions with our school district. She worked with us and was able to push off our arrival date so that I could be home for my dad to help him with arrangements and we all were in agreement that my mom would have wanted us to still go.

It was a difficult decision, but we chose to do just that. We arrived at our destination an hour before sunset. My mom's hobby was painting. Her specialty was sunsets and lighthouses. As we sat on the beach watching the most beautiful sunset that first night, I couldn't help but think that was my mom painting for us, telling us everything would be ok.

We made the most out of our vacation. Some days felt more somber than others. Calls from my dad back home were the hardest. But we tried to focus on our family time and the much needed break away from the stress we had been living. The Beach Patrol in Cape May, New Jersey where we stayed, was kind enough to lend us a water wheelchair so that Nick could experience being in the ocean for the first time in his life. His screeches of laughter echoed into the wind with every crashing wave. A random act of kindness from the beach patrol turned our day around and made it very special. By the end of the week we were ready to start our 8 hour car ride home, with 2 separate vehicles as we obviously don't travel lightly.

The best option was to stop for a good breakfast before getting on the road. We had driven around all the tourist spots and just really didn't feel like spending a fortune at these obvious places with big neon letters screaming PANCAKE HOUSE. We had done that before only to be disappointed with the food. As luck would have it I had remembered passing a small restaurant on the side of the road where we had stopped for gas. On the side of the building was a small sign that

said Rio Grande Diner. Ah, a place where the locals ate. Jackpot! I immediately noticed there was a ramp to the front door and although the parking lot was full, people seemed to be coming and going at a regular pace.

Once inside we were greeted by such friendly staff. You could tell that it was a place where everyone seemed to know everyone. The man at the register immediately asked me where the best place would be to seat us to accommodate Nick's wheelchair (which impressed me even more than the huge plates of homemade food being carried past us, convincing me that this had been the best vacation find ever!)

We were seated in less than 10 minutes. Our waitress was extremely friendly and had asked us all about our vacation. People seated around us knew the staff by names. It was a place that just felt like home. We had ordered an army of food to prepare us for our impending long car ride. The food was beyond delicious. The service made it taste even better. As we were finishing up our meal and waiting for our check, our waitress came back and said "Have a safe trip home. It was nice meeting you. And your check has been taken care of. You are all set." With that she made a quick departure into the kitchen leaving me quietly confused and looking around the restaurant. Nobody seemed to be looking at us, so, more confusion. When the waitress reappeared, I asked her who had taken care of our check. She smiled and said the owner had.

It clicked that the owner was the man at the register that had greeted us upon arrival. I asked the waitress to ask him to come over and talk to us. My kids looked at me and said "Mom. Are you crying?" (Yeah, not something I openly do.) He came over and hugged me and said "Don't cry, you are going to make me cry." He then walked over to Nick and kissed him on the forehead. He proceeded to tell us that his nephew has Cerebral Palsy and Hydrocephalus. He is 7 years old and has had 17 brain surgeries. As he stood there hugging Nick and calling him "family," there was nothing to stop my tears. It was truly a random act of kindness that I never saw coming and has touched my heart forever.

In this fast-paced, electronic world we live in, nothing can ever compare to the warm embrace that I felt that day. The feeling of knowing that family is

everywhere. It is who we choose and who chooses us. And that day the world became a much smaller place; a safe place with kind hearts and unconditional love and understanding. You never know the journey that someone has been on. Be kind. And know that you are never alone.

Peace and love until next month....Julie