



Patrick at his graduation ceremony May 30, 2014

Dear Eighth Graders

Beth Foraker

In June 2014, Patrick Foraker graduated from St. James School, in Davis, California, which he attended from the kindergarten to the eighth grade. Patrick's mother wrote this letter to his classmates 100 days before their graduation.

Dear Eighth Graders,

Way back in the fall of 2005, you entered kindergarten and a little experiment was going on.

You had a student in your class with an extra chromosome, otherwise known as Down syndrome.

No one came out and told you about this student and you just accepted him the way you accepted all of the other children in your class.

He couldn't run as fast as you could.

He couldn't write as well as you could.

He couldn't speak clearly.

And yet, he was part of you.

You figured it out.

You naturally, without any adult intervention, knew that this guy needed some support.

You let him use a different kind of basket when you played two-on-two basketball.

You threw the ball a bit differently so that he could catch it more often.

You walked a little slower to be by his side.

You accepted him.

Did you know you had a choice?

Not really...because we tricked you.

We just put him in your kindergarten class—where kindergarteners just want to have fun.

When Patrick was born, as soon as he was born, the doctor whisked him away, checked him all over, and brought him back to us a few hours later with a new label:

Down syndrome.

The doctor closed the door.

He put a sign on the door telling others not to visit us.

He didn't even let Jack or Mary Kate come in to see their little brother.

He thought this label would take some getting used to.

He thought we would be crying and scared.

He wanted us to have time.

He was coming from a good place...trying to be kind... but in truth, he was being cruel.

You know why??

He never went to school alongside someone who had this label.

He was afraid of it.
He didn't understand it.
He thought it was worth grieving.

Patrick did not get a celebration in those first hours of his birth.

No joy.
No laughing and photo-ops.
A whole lot of serious.

Can you imagine?

Probably the one person who is as joy-filled as could be and that was his welcome.

Maybe that's why he celebrates birthdays, all birthdays, in the biggest way possible now.

What was it like when you were born?

Oh, how your family celebrated!
How loved and awaited you were.

So here we are nine years after beginning the experiment.
1,520 days you've been together.
Only 100 left until graduation.

I can't thank you enough for your acceptance.
Your grace.
Your friendship and kindness...

You know why?

Because you weren't nice out of pity or because morally you thought you should or because you were trying to be nice or even because your parents told you to be nice.

You were accepting because you had the chance to get to know someone before you knew his label.

Best of all, Patrick had this chance.

That was our dearest hope for Patrick...at St. James he could be Jack and Mary Kate's little brother.

He didn't have to be "Patrick with Down syndrome."

He got to just be Patrick.

If only you could know how profound that gift is.

Everywhere else, and I mean everywhere else, he is "Patrick with Down syndrome."

Here, in this little school of 300, he is label-less.

It's grace in the ordinary every single day.

Did you know that Patrick will be the first person with Down syndrome to graduate from a Catholic school in our entire diocese???

He's the only person I know who has Down syndrome and is on student council, anywhere.

Do you know that because of your acceptance and the way your class has shown the school and the bigger world how to be as people that you are changing the world?

For the better.

Do you know that still to this day principals and priests at other schools say no when a family who has a child with Down syndrome asks to go to their parish school??

That craziness still happens.

Why?

Because that principal or that priest didn't go to school alongside of people with disabilities.

They're scared and ignorant.

They don't realize just how normal it is.

Someday you might be a principal.

Or a teacher.

Or a banker.

Or a parent.

I know that your kindness and awareness will be reflected in those jobs.

I can't wait to see what you do with your level of justice and equality and care.

I'm so excited about our future.

Because of you.

(And your parents, of course.)

Let's make the last 100 days the best yet.

Now you know the experiment.

You can tell your side of the story.

Share what you know.

Share your experiences.

Share with the world what equality and social justice look like and feel like...

wait, it just feels normal....

like how it's supposed to be.

Exactly, my friends.

Never tolerate segregation or separation.

Anywhere.

You know the truth.

Together, we're better. ■

BETH FORAKER is a former school teacher, blogger, and founder of the National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion. To read more of her writings, visit grace-in-the-ordinary.blogspot.com.

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