

Fixing Kyle

Written by Gayle Nobel

Friday, 21 January 2011 12:19 - Last Updated Friday, 21 January 2011 12:29

Blog-a-thon Day 5, but who's counting?

Last night I went to visit a special friend. Kara is a former volunteer, therapist, sitter, and support person for Kyle and our family. I love that whenever she is in town she makes an effort to get together and connect.

She is now a grown woman with a husband and two beautiful young children. Seems like just yesterday she walked thru my door, age 16, fresh and enthusiastic and ready to do her high school community service hours in my home-based program. Several times a week she showed up in her school uniform with enthusiasm, openness and tremendous willingness to learn. She told me from the beginning she wanted to be a special education teacher. Of this, she seemed very sure. She got her start with the exceptionally challenging Kyle, age 7.

Little did I know 20 years ago that I would stay connected to her for many years to come. After she graduated high school and went off to college, she continued to visit on summer breaks, sometimes reinserting herself back into our program and often doing respite for a week at a time so we could take our girls on vacations. In fact, for many years she was our "go to" person for these family vacations. Even after she graduated college and became a "real" teacher, living in another state, we still hired her to stay with Kyle and give us some much needed respite. Then she married but was still willing to help. I hope I expressed to her at that time how grateful I was. I felt so comfortable and trusting when Kyle was in her care.

In the time that I have known Kara, she has evolved from eager high school student to teacher to autism specialist to researcher with a PhD, though she still lets me call her Kara :-).

After I left last night, I was reminded, once again, of how Kyle has brought some very special people into our lives. She is one of several extraordinary gals I have watched bloom and go on to embrace people with autism as she dedicated her career to helping them be the best they can be.

There are many who have come and gone but just a handful of really special souls who have stuck to the perimeter of our lives. Had it not been for Kyle, I don't know that I ever would have

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connected with Kara, or any of the others, for that matter.

Last night I saw an amazing, attentive, mindful, loving mother interact with her children. It has been most gratifying to watch her bloom.

PS Coincidentally, I just ran across a piece called *Fixing Kyle*. Seems so apropos as it was written a few years ago by Kara.

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 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

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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 my 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.

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.

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