

Book Review

Our Friend Mikayla

Written and Illustrated by Mikayla's Third-Grade Classmates

The Bubel/Aiken Foundation, 2006

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673 words

“This book gives me hope,” said Diane Mosley, mother of a boy with significant disabilities similar to Mikayla. “It shows in simple terms that it is possible to welcome a student who uses a wheelchair, can not speak, and has medical issues. These kids welcome Mikayla.”

Mikayla's third grade classmates at Lower Nazareth Elementary School in Nazareth, Pennsylvania wrote and illustrated *Our Friend Mikayla*. This is not a pity book. It is an honest account of how a group of nine-year-olds discovered that at our core, we are more alike than different. On the first page they write, “She is in a wheelchair and has lots of disabilities. But that does not mean we cannot be friends.”

This is a rare book. Rare because it comes from other children; not from adults telling them how to feel or act. It addresses the reality of more students with significant needs being included in regular classrooms. Accompanied by bright watercolor and ink illustrations, the children tell their readers about Mikayla. They acknowledge that when Mikayla first came to their class, they were afraid of her. They write, “we felt scared because we thought Mikayla was different and not like a ‘normal’ kid.”

But they learned that there was nothing to be scared of. They learned this because adults gave them information, opportunities, and held the expectation that they would figure it out. They did. They learned she was in a wheelchair because she had brain damage. They learned she like bright colors, American Idol, and shopping for clothes. They learned she can skate at Rollerway using her wheelchair.

Though the adults take a backseat in the book, this book would not have happened without a strong teacher and Mikayla's family to help them understand how to include Mikayla. “As this book shows, kids are accepting of differences, it's usually the adults who create the barriers,” says Diane. “Teachers are the ones who can encourage children to be involved with a student with disabilities. Too often the adults prevent inclusion because of safety concerns.”

“People were way too protective of Spencer,” Diane explains.” So he missed out on lots of opportunities. In this book, the kids figured out that she could be the pitcher in kickball by pushing the ball down a ball ramp. I would have loved to see that for Spencer.”

People with significant disabilities are both easier and more difficult to include in regular classroom. Easier because it's obvious they have limitations so others know they need help with most tasks. More difficult because it requires effort to find out who the person is, what they like, what they can do, and what is most helpful to them. It's a challenge to see someone as a learner when their ability to communicate is so compromised. Kids usually know a lot more about their classmates than adults think they do.

As our country slowly understands that all students, regardless of abilities, have the right to be in regular classrooms and part of their communities, we will need tools to learn how to talk about differences and similarities. We are not all the same and treating everyone fairly does mean that everyone is treated equally.

Our Friend Mikayla is a wonderful resource for teachers. Reading about someone else who has a disability is a safe way to start a conversation. This picture book, in its refreshingly matter-of-fact approach, gives readers a way to talk about fears, obstacles, similarities, and disabilities.

With tears in her eyes, Diane said, "this book says so eloquently what our dream was for our son." Spencer died in 2006, but he leaves a standard for those he touched. Can we create inclusive learning environments where Spencer, like Mikayla is understood, valued, and an active participant in school and in life? The children close the book by saying that they hope that Mikayla will be in their class again. That is more than a welcome, that is an invitation to someone they have come to know. We should all feel that wanted.

Anna Stewart, mother, mentor and author, has published over 300 articles. She is the author of Mother Blessings: Honoring Women Becoming Mothers, an artful guide for creating ceremonies for pregnant women or families adopting. Order it at www.wovenword.com or www.amazon.com. She also serves as an instructor for coaching pregnant women through the Academy for Coaching Parents (www.acpi.biz). Go to her website, www.motherhands.com for more information on Anna's workshops.