

The Special Edition

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A Parent's Perspective—Twenty Years Later

by Wilner Cusic, INSOURCE

(Wilner Cusic is a staff member with the Indiana Resource Center for Families with Special Needs)

I am thoroughly convinced that we can have a profound effect on those whom we come in contact. Acts that seem insignificant can shape someone else's future. The right words or acts of kindness at just the right time can totally change someone's life. This is what happened to me 22 years ago. My daughter Amber's and my life were dramatically changed because of dedicated and compassionate teachers, administrators and related service providers.

While tending to the menial task of cleaning closets, I stumbled upon Amber's old communication notebooks from her years in the Special Education program at McKinley School. I immediately sat in the middle of the hallway floor and began reading. Looking through these old notebooks brought back many memories and caused me to reflect back on my daughter's life and educational experiences.

I remember it as if it were yesterday; the day Amber's dad and I went to the Education Center to meet with Chuck Moore (Special Education supervisor). That was the day we were told what we already knew but weren't ready to face. Chuck had to tell us that our beautiful daughter, Amber, had a significant disability.... autism. Surprisingly to me now when I think of that day, it's not the horrific diagnoses that first enters my mind, but the compassion Chuck showed towards us as he delivered the bad news. It was as if it hurt him as much to tell us as it was for us to hear it. I remember him consoling us as we cried, giving us the time and space we needed to compose ourselves. I will be forever grateful to him for his kindness. I'm pleased to say the first impression made by Chuck would be echoed over and over again through others on staff.

When Cyndi Smith (Autism Resource Consultant) and I met, not a lot was known about autism. There were certainly many more questions than answers. I remember days when I would drop Amber off at school feeling totally overwhelmed and depressed. Cyndi would take me aside with words of comfort and encouragement. If she didn't know the answer to a question she would say, "I don't know, but I'll find out". Her honesty garnered a relationship of trust, Thank you Cyndi.

Michelle Hack (teacher) was an angel of kindness. No matter what kind of day Amber had, she never sent her home and always wrote something positive in her communication log. Looking back I realize I didn't know how good we had it. Michelle and her family were wonderful supports to me family. I still miss and

think of her often.

The list goes on. Tom Spencer, Jeff Myers, Pauline Busby, Denise Domonkos, Barb Deitz and so many others. I often think of and make mention of you during my InSource Regional Parent Resource Trainings. I share that we didn't always see eye-to-eye and even had some contentious moments. However, through good and bad, the victories and defeats, there is "The Other Side of Through".



Wilner and Amber Cusic.

On the other side is a beautiful 28-year-old woman living a fulfilling life in her own home with the support of the Medicaid Waiver. As I look back, I realize that it took all of us to get Amber to this place. Whether you're a parent who was drafted into this army or an educator who enlisted, we're all in this battle together and together we win.

I say to all parents and educators stay focused and encouraged. I end this as I started. I'm thoroughly convinced that we can have a profound effect on those with whom we come in contact. We're proof that you have made a difference in our lives!