



Leading Change

Ensuring That Every Child Has an Equal Opportunity to Learn & Succeed



Nudging the Network



by Janice Fialka, Licensed Michigan Social Worker, Academy of Certified Social Workers, Parent

When our son Micah, who has cognitive difficulties, was a fifth-grader, he was on the neighborhood basketball team. As parents, we were happy he was spending

time with his peers, getting some exercise, and involved in a “typical kid” activity.

Micah participated in all of the practices and team activities and dressed for each game. The team and coach were supportive of his involvement, however, most of the time Micah only played for the last three minutes of each period. He was proud to be on the court, but it wasn't really enough time for him to get relaxed, engaged, and attuned to running fast while looking for the basketball. After the three minutes were up, the screeching buzzer would announce the end and Micah would return to his seat, having barely moved or touched the ball.

As the 5th grade season neared its end, everyone—from the coaches to the referees to his teammates—was planning to make Micah's last game the best for him. Their plan was simple. Micah would play most of the game. The teammates would constantly pass the ball to him. The referees would bend the rules... just a bit. Everyone imagined that at the final buzzer, the crowd would go wild and Micah would be carried off on the shoulders of his teammates.

The problem was that Micah hadn't really learned how to play basketball. During this final game, when the ball was passed to him, he reacted as if he were being attacked by a flying saucer. He'd duck, slide to the side, or just be oblivious to the ball coming toward

him. Without success, both teams became disenchanted with their plan and resumed their regular play, with Micah on the sidelines.

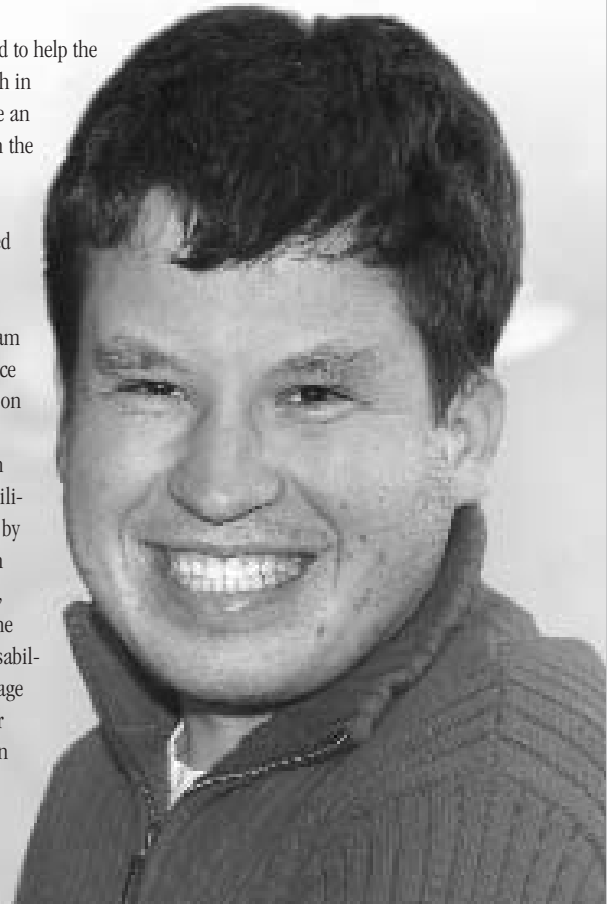
Learning to Nudge

The experience taught us that we had to help the school and neighborhood include Micah in meaningful ways over time. It had to be an intentional inclusion. Including him in the game of basketball or the game of life couldn't be done all of a sudden and at the final stage—even if it was motivated by good intentions and love. *We had to nudge!* We had to sit down and have a conversation with the coach and the team to strategize ways for Micah to experience the game, learn the skills, and practice on a regular basis while IN the game.

Nudging, however, is easier said than done. We parents of children with disabilities often allow ourselves to get trapped by our discomfort and inexperience, which leads us into silence, anger, withdrawal, curtness, or aloneness—or sitting on the sidelines. As parents of children with disabilities, we must find the energy and courage to talk with coaches, our neighbors, our family, and our children. We must begin to form the words which will lead folks into conversations about how all children can play more than three minutes of each game. Micah and his

teammates deserve to feel that kind of involvement and success.

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Approach to Program
Improvement**

**Building Connections
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**Kindergarten, Here I
Come!**

**Barth Elementary:
Improving
Collaboration**

Applying the Lessons We Learned

Since that 5th grade basketball game, my husband and I have gotten better and more comfortable with encouraging community members, peers, teachers, and others to include Micah in meaningful ways. We have learned to hold conversations and meetings and to ask explicit questions, “What can we all do to ensure that Micah has a role in the action, an assignment, a part of the play, a ride to the dance, a meaningful way to be involved?”

A Circle of Friends

Since 3rd grade, we have supported a circle of friends with Micah. Although not always easy and clear, it has been one of the essential aspects to his successful growth and that of the entire community. The circle has changed in membership and focus over the years. The focus moved from making toys for sick kids in the hospital as a circle in 4th grade, to going to a Piston’s basketball game as a circle in 7th grade, to planning how to dance with girls at the school dances in the 10th grade, to planning a school-wide program on disability issues in the 12th grade. The opportunity to have a group of classmates was the right thing to do for Micah, for us, and for his community. It was this network that was the springboard to many successful inclusive experiences.

We’ve learned that it’s okay—in fact, necessary—to nudge his network a bit. For example, one of Micah’s personal goals for his senior year was to go

to the prom. After little success hoping that he’d get a date or be invited to join one of the groups, we decided to nudge his network; that is, to make contact with his circle of friends. Soon we connected with one of the newest recruits to the circle, Shosh. As a fellow cross country team member, she wanted to include Micah in her group going to the prom. After many phone calls to the other 13—yes, 13—members of her group, Micah joined them, and thus achieved his most important dream of his senior year.

Getting Micah to the prom did not happen in a typical way, but it did come. We have learned over the years that sometimes you just have to bring people’s wishes or dreams to the attention of others. There was intentionality behind this event, by way of many phone calls to the kids, to a few of their parents, and the intervention of a very helpful school social worker at the last minute. We’ve learned that this kind of careful but direct involvement, or what I’ve learned to call “nudging the network” is just the way it is and it isn’t so bad. The kids were happy with Micah and he, all decked out in his tuxedo, had the time of his life. Like the other moms, I cried as we watched the long limo slowly move down the street, perhaps not with all the same thoughts as they had about their growing-up teenagers, but all of our tears flowed down our cheeks in the same way!

Although that infamous basketball game so many years ago might have seemed a game of defeat, it really was far from a total loss. We learned that many folks want to be helpful, but don’t always know how.

We learned that as parents we have to advocate for and with Micah to truly integrate him into as many activities as possible. We have to be specific in our problem solving. We learned that we can’t be silent and hope for the best. We learned that it’s okay to speak the truth to others and to ask them to think about some tough issues. We learned that we have to do it in a respectful manner that is tolerant of their unawareness of the issues. We learned that not all people will be on our side, but that you *can* find at least 13 teens who will say “yes” to having Micah in their limousine and will enjoy having him there—even if the evening took a bit of nudging.

Since Micah attended the prom more than six years ago, we have learned a lot about “nudging the network.” Micah now advocates for himself on a regular basis and has his own group of friends from Oakland University. Many of Micah’s friends have told us how much they learned from being with Micah at school, learning to be more comfortable with differences in people. They learned it is worth the effort to get to know all kinds of people. Perhaps those are the real lessons of education.

In addition to attending college, Micah is currently speaking at workshops, professional trainings, and other staff development activities. For more information, contact: Janice Fialka, Licensed Michigan Social Worker, Academy of Certified Social Workers, ruaw@aol.com.



Pictured Left and Top: Micah poses for individual photos before joining classmates for a group shot.

Pictured Bottom: Micah at Oakland University.

