

LYSANDER was one of only a handful of students over the years I was nervous about having in Room 4. He was a big tough bully with Down syndrome. “Dear Lord,” I thought, “how am I going to do this? How will he interact with the other kids?”

We had remarkably few accidents and injuries for an elementary school, but one afternoon an episode of roughhousing resulted in a boy being pushed through a plate glass window in the hallway outside the courtyard, opening a deep wound on his head. There was blood like I had never seen. An aide ran out from the cafeteria, took off her sweatshirt, and made a tourniquet around the gash.

“Get all my kids out of the hallway!” Mrs. Martin yelled to me. I waved the kids into Room 4.

“Boys and girls,” I told my students, “quickly make room for our friends from Room 7. We have company.” Whenever I said, “We have company,” my kids knew to get into gear, make room, use their manners and offer help. Many of the Room 7 kids cried, shaken up by the bleeding and screaming. Lysander passed around tissues and Beanie Babies, and offered his Writer’s Notebook and crayons in case kids wanted to color. Then he went to the sink, filled up other people’s water bottles and brought over oranges and bananas. “Youse have to share. We don’t have enough for all of youse, so youse have to share.”

I witnessed the beauty of community that had arisen from crisis. Room 7’s children were friends my kids rode the bus with, ate in the cafeteria with, and had recess with. And now, when they needed us, my kids knew that when in doubt, give them tissues, tools to be creative, water, and food. I thought I had to be strong and reassuring because we didn’t know the severity of the injury, but the kids, especially Lysander, did all of the nurturing. I was honored to be with them when they read a chapter, accomplished

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a math problem, nurtured a seed, discovered an interest, or performed in a production, but the way they helped one another reassured me that sometimes the world seemed a little less scary through the eyes of a child. Even though we had the routine of the classroom, we welcomed each day with wonderment and curiosity and, in this way, we found grace in the situations that called upon us to act.



I began to feel like I would let my students down, that my illness would neglect their learning. The 2012-2013 school year in Room 4 had been one of the happiest, with many of the best students and staff working together. I looked forward to having many of the same students again in the fall as fifth graders. I wanted them to feel smart, to feel free to imagine their future so I had already started to plan the first few back-to-school units for my young writers, readers, geologists, paleontologists, botanists, mathematicians, and electricians. I had signed up for a two-week summer professional development adventure with Save the Bay, a local preservation society. Professional development activities always exhilarated me because I brought back such exciting hands-on learning opportunities for my students. I pictured the budding scientists in Room 4 gathered around a tank full of crustaceans with enthusiasm, each absorbing its lessons at their own pace, in their own unique way.