

VARMA and his family escaped the war in Liberia. He was my student mayor. As a result of an attack on his mother, he came into the world under horrible circumstances; he was born with muscular dystrophy and an autoimmune deficiency. He used a wheelchair for long distances but was able to get around the school with a walker. Wise beyond his years, he loved textbooks and assignments, but he also had a stubborn, defiant streak.

One day, Varma was in the “think about your life choices chair” when it was time for recess. But he refused to move. He took his sweet old time while we were all lined up, waiting for him to get his act together. The other classrooms were already in the field, the teams already chosen for kickball. He wasn’t the type of kid who sat in the dugout; he always wanted in on the action. I saw him inch over to the field in his walker. “They’ve already started the game, they’re not going to let him play,” I thought. “Maybe I’ll go over and ask the outfielders to let him have a turn.” But then I thought, “This isn’t about you, Maureen. Everything they need to learn about school happens at recess.”

When I looked over again, Varma was at home plate. They had let him come up to bat. I went to the fence and watched the play unfold. He kicked the ball and walked his walker to first base. The second baseman missed the ball so Varma rounded first to second. When the outfielder overthrew the cutoff man, Varma scurried from second to third. The cheering got louder. I realized what was

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going to happen. Kids celebrated along the third baseline as Varma, gasping, rounded the base toward home. Home plate flooded with a parade of his peers clapping and reaching out for high fives as he crossed it; he took his hands off his walker and pumped his fists.

I started to cry. I walked over to my colleague, who was also crying, so proud of her class for including Varma. We put our arms around each other. “This is why I do this job,” she said. “I am so blessed to be here to see this.” It made me fulfilled to be part of a school where *that* was success, *that* was greatness. It wasn’t measured by accountability or state tests, but by the children’s purest actions.

