

Sowing the Seeds for a Good Life

Ingrid Michalowsky

Ingrid Michalowsky is a designer who, together with her husband, has two children aged 6 and 8 years. Their son has severe autism and high support needs. They are always looking for opportunities to provide their children with connections to their immediate and broader communities.

I have always loved coming from a relatively large family.

My older brother once quoted to me the well known saying that 'it takes a village to raise a child'. I realise now that I, as a daughter raised by a single mother and three older siblings, was that child, and that my family was my village.

I don't think I ever really understood the saying until now. I certainly could not have anticipated how it would apply to my children, particularly my youngest, who has a disability. Initially I believed that my son was my responsibility alone, and that I would need to be by his side to protect him for ever more.

My view has since changed, and my challenge is now to change the views of certain members of my family, and of the strong community to which we belong. My role and my husband's role will be no different to that of any other parent, to nurture and protect our children, but we will also need to assist our child to create a fulfilling and meaningful life. For this we will need help - help from family, help from friends, help from the community, and help from business. We will need networks, networks that will support both our son and our family. We can't do it alone.

We already have extensive informal networks which play a large role in our day to day life. My sisters-in-law, for example, will often ring on the weekend and offer to take our son to watch their children's soccer matches with them. They will collect him and take him to the game. He may watch, he may not, but the outcome is one that is positive for all. He is out in the community with people whom

he cares about and who care about him, doing a regular activity that is meaningful. It is opportunities such as these, opportunities that tap into peoples' existing day to day lives that best help us to achieve our goals for our son.

For our family, success lies in our son being included into existing activities and routines with no great extra effort. He doesn't speak, but it is easy to tell if he has had a good time. He will be smiling from ear to ear when he runs into the house, and on a return visit will take the person by the hand and head for the front door in anticipation.

For my son's recent sixth birthday, we held an extraordinarily large party for him. Not because the other children were his 'friends' in the true meaning of the word (he has only ever been invited to play at a 'friend's' house once), but because the children's parents are our friends, and my husband I share the view that it is our social responsibility to expose our son to as many friendship and life opportunities as possible. We also believe that it is our social and moral responsibility to give our son the chance to show people what a wonderful, loving and fun person he is. First and foremost he is a person, and secondly, an individual with a disability.

There will always be people who can only see my son's autism. However, there are a vast number of people who, if guided to open their hearts and eyes, will see that the autism is only a small part of who he is.

It's about someone greeting our son in the street and his face lighting up with recognition. It's about him turning up

to watch his cousins play their weekly soccer games, and people recognising him. The first week they stare as he runs the full length of the field 20 times over, the second week they stare a little less, the third week someone greets us, and by the fourth and fifth weeks we are just one of the crowd. It's about him being invited back to the home of one of the plethora of 'friends' we invited to his birthday party. It's about people seeing the person, not the autism. It's about allowing his soul to shine brightly.

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Part of our role in creating these networks is to recognise that special quality in a person which will allow them to 'see', to want to 'see', and to want to be part of our son's life. Our role is to ask and to create opportunities which allow people into our lives, and to support both parties for success.

I use to find it hard to ask for help, because I thought that I was asking people to do me a favour. Now I see that it is me who is doing them the favour. I am asking them into my son's life and into ours. It is not perfect, and it is often a little messy, but it is filled with real life, with love, and with a sense of achievement and optimism. My children are delightful, special people who can offer a great deal to those willing to see.

'It's about whom you know, not what you know....'