

At age 18, like many young people, my son, Benjamin enrolled as a freshman at our local community college. Because he has cerebral palsy and uses a power wheelchair, he needs certain accommodations. Benjamin met with the disability services office on campus to discuss these accommodations and all seemed well—no problems!

By the second week of school, however, there were problems. Benj came home from class one day, red-faced and upset. “Mom, they didn’t put the desk up on blocks again—this is the second time!” Because Benjamin’s power wheelchair sits high, the disability services office was to ensure that blocks were placed under a desk to raise it so Benj’s chair would fit, and someone was to remove the blocks at the end of class, since other classes also used that room. This was a frustrating situation for Benj—it delayed the start of class, as he or the instructor had to contact someone to quickly get it done.

I asked Benjamin what he thought he should do about this. (Whose problem was this: his or mine? It would have been easy for me to pick up the phone and talk to the folks at the community college, but that would have robbed Benjamin of the opportunity to handle the situation himself—something he’ll have to do all his life.) Benjamin’s response was, “I’m gonna call ’em and cuss ’em out!”

“I’m sure that’s what you *feel* like doing, but that probably won’t make them want to help you,” I said. “It’s early in the school year; they’re probably not accustomed to doing this, so maybe they need to be reminded. Go think about ways to handle this and then let’s talk.” He wheeled out of the room and came back a few minutes later, and agreed, “OK, Mom, they probably *do* need to be reminded.” We talked about some options and he decided to arrive on campus a little early for the next few classes, swing by the disability services office, and in a friendly way, verify that the blocks had been placed. Then he asked, “But, Mom, why *aren’t* they accustomed

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by Kathie Snow

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to doing this?” I gulped, and answered, “Because not many students with disabilities have gone to college.” “Why not,” he asked. I gulped again and said, “Because their parents or teachers or both never thought they could, so most

kids with disabilities didn’t receive the education they needed to go on to college or get a job.” Tears welled up in his eyes—and that caused my eyes to fill with tears. It’s hard to watch your young adult son cry—he hadn’t cried in years. He said, “That’s not right, Mom, *that’s just not right.*” I agreed, and gave him a hug.

He wheeled away, but came back a few minutes later, his face full of joy, and said, “I’m so glad I have a disability, ’cause I’m going to *teach* those people at school so when other students with disabilities come along, they won’t have to deal with this kind of stuff ’cause the school will know what to do!”

His strategy worked; the blocks were always in place after his friendly reminders. He *did* teach the people at the college, and continues to teach others in many areas in his life. This is part of his legacy—a positive legacy that will continue to grow as he grows. (He’ll earn his Bachelor’s in 2012.)

So many of our actions touch others, are “teachable moments,” and/or have the potential to create change—positive or negative. Sadly, I hear from people with disabilities and families about the actions of professionals that result in negative outcomes—and the legacy of the professionals is correspondingly negative. The reverse can also be true: in their relationships with others, people with disabilities/families can leave a negative legacy in their wake.

Like my son’s initial reaction, we may *feel* like doing this-or-that, but feelings can be a poor foundation for making rational decisions. What *outcomes* do we really want: to feel good, to be right, to exert power, to retaliate, or what? If we focus on win/win outcomes, we can ensure greater success for all, and we’ll also be creating a positive legacy that will live on long after we’re no longer here. What will be your legacy?