

My Own Wings of Opportunity

The day began as any other day at “Little Red” had, except that this was the last day of my third year as a student there. Little did I know that it would be my very last day as a student in a school for children with disabilities.

I sensed something different that morning. My mother took me to school as usual; but instead of leaving right away, she lingered, making small talk with another mother. Soon Mrs. Morton came and stood close, very close beside me. She wanted to tell me something. Slowly, carefully, she explained that next year I would be going to school with my sister and all the other children in my neighborhood. I could scarcely believe what I was hearing. Questions whirled from my mouth. “How will I get to my classes?” “How will I take my tests?” Those were the spoken questions. But there were others that could not be spoken. “What will the other children (and the teachers) think of me?” “Will I be smart enough to keep up?”

In her gentle manner that was now so familiar to me, Mrs. Morton reassured me that everything would be just fine. The other students would push my wheelchair from one class to another, and I would type my lessons on an electric typewriter, also on wheels. Yes, everything would be fine, because Mrs. Morton had paved the way for me. Everything would be fine, because Mrs. Morton (“Mem”) had believed in me enough to teach me.

When I came to Little Red at age 9, Mrs. Morton wasted no time in beginning my education. In keeping with my age, she gave me fourth grade books to study. The only exception was math. This was the period in education when “arithmetic” changed to “the new math” and the whole approach to teaching and learning the rules of numbers changed. Rather than make a sudden switch, Mrs. Morton started from the beginning, with first grade workbooks. We flew through the early, easy parts, often working ten pages of problems at a time. But we did them every one, not skipping over a single concept. In three years, we waded through five grades of math workbooks, until I reached grade level knowing “the new math.”

Looking back on my years at Little Red, I find that I learned much more than academics. I realize, too, that I learned not only from Mem and from the other teachers, but from the students as well. I remember becoming friends with Martha, who also had cerebral palsy and was able to speak only with her eyes. Oh, but the volumes she spoke with those eyes! We carried on whole conversations as her eyes darted from one thing to another. I learned what made her happy (cute earrings), and what made her sad (rainy days that kept her at home). Mostly, though, I learned to understand an “I love you” that comes, not from the lips, but from the heart.

Mem devoted her life to helping children and adults with special needs. For me, Mem saw potential in a little girl swallowed up by a wheelchair – a little girl whose greatest dream was just to go to “regular school.” So it happened that when a new principal, Mr. Waits, came to the public school in our neighborhood (the school where I

had been denied entrance), and when he and his family moved next door to us and came to know me, Mem saw this as her chance to help me enter a world that I'd only looked at longingly, as a child looks through the window of a candy store but is not allowed to go in. Sharing my dream, Mem went to Mr. Waits with her conviction that I could succeed in a regular school. With a big heart and an open mind, Mr. Waits agreed to give me that opportunity. They couldn't give me my legs, so they gave me my wings.

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