

A Self-Determined Student

A Self-Determined Athlete Achieves His Goals with Help from Parents, a Peer Mentor, and Open-Minded Coaches

Jan Fialka, MSW, ACSW, Parent

“Real inclusion” of kids with special needs occurs both outside the classroom as well as inside. This is a fairly basic principle, however, it is not always easy to make it happen.

When our son Micah started high school, we thought long and hard about what after-school activities would engage him, keep him healthy, and help him stay connected to his peers in a natural way. As we explored our options, we were fortunate that Micah had a peer mentor, a junior in high school who helped us think through Micah's choices. J.J. was the captain of the high school cross country running team, so it may have been natural for him to suggest that Micah join the team.



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“Great idea!” my husband and I thought. J.J. could support Micah in becoming part of the team. Micah would be physically active every day after school and would be hanging out with his new peers. Perfect! It never crossed OUR minds that Micah rarely walked briskly, let alone ran. But that was a minor point—for us. For Micah, running was the farthest thing from his mind. But he liked J.J., he liked hanging out with an upperclassman, and he was willing to try it “for two weeks, Mom.”

Three weeks into the season (he made it beyond the two-week trial period—our plan was working!), we received a phone call from Micah's coach. He asked if my



husband and I could meet with him to talk. “Of course,” I responded, but my heart sunk to the basement floor. We set a date, but I knew what was happening. The coach was getting to know Micah and was realizing that our son was NOT a runner. My spirits dropped as I anticipated that I would have to “go back to the drawing board” to find something else Micah might do after school. Perhaps I would have to stage an “inclusion fight.” It wouldn't be the first. We went into the meeting prepared to be told that it just wasn't working out. The coach greeted us and then quickly began: “I want to talk with you about a goal I have for Micah.” “Goal,” I said to myself. “G-O-A-L. Goal.” The coach continued. “I would like Micah to run one mile in one of the cross country meets in a few weeks. For those of you who are, like me, new to high school sports, cross country meets are five kilometers long, or about three miles. “You mean you are not going to tell me it's not working out? You mean Micah can stay on the team? You mean you have a goal for him?” I didn't say these things out loud, but I was shouting them silently. “Bravo!” I thought. We did not have to fight! We did not have to convince anyone that my son should be included. Instead, all we had to do was say, “Yes, Coach. That's a great idea!” All we had to do was let the coach work with Micah while we sat back in the stands watching our son run. We liked this a lot! To this day, I am sure Coach has no idea how thrilled and relieved we felt about his goal for our son. At this same meeting, the coach made another request. He explained that during one practice a week, the kids ran for several miles in local neighborhoods. He worried that because Micah had a “bit slower” pace (those were his words!), Micah was often left behind and alone. Coach was concerned for Micah's safety. I suggested that on those days, Micah could skip practice and run with me at home.

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The Fialka family: Rich, Janice, Emma, and Micah

Coach quickly disagreed, saying, “No, I want him to remain connected with the school and team. I was wondering if it would be okay if he spent that practice in the weight room in the school gym, running on the treadmill. “I was stunned to know that the coach truly wanted Micah's



running routine to be as closely aligned to the team as possible.”

Whaam! Another surprise—a welcome surprise! “Sounds perfect,” I said, hardly believing what I heard.

Continued on page 28...

A Self-Determined Athlete Achieves His Goals with Help from Parents, a Peer Mentor and Open-Minded Coaches (continued from page 17)

I left the meeting pleased and excited. I met a man, a high school coach, who had probably never read anything by the leading thinkers on inclusion, Marsha Forest or Jack Pearpoint, or subscribe to *Inclusion News*, but who understood "inclusion" from his heart and not from any mandate. He just "got it" and we were thrilled.

In mid-October of Micah's freshman year, on one of those glorious autumn days with a backdrop of blue skies, with orange and yellow leaves dancing lightly in the sweet, soft breeze, our son ran in his first meet. We videotaped all 11 minutes and 32 seconds of his run. Best friends came to watch, I choked back my tears of pride, and his team cheered "Go, Micah! You can do it!"

In May as we began to think about Micah's sophomore year, we learned that his coach would not be coaching the next year. This news sent me into a downward spiral. When parents find adults who believe in their child, they cling to them like Velcro. I did NOT want coach to leave.

At the end-of-the-year meeting to plan for Micah's sophomore year, we met the new coach. I eyed him suspiciously, wondering if he knew how terrific my son was, if he knew how desperately we wanted Micah to be part of this experience. I quickly learned the answer to that question. This new coach stated, in a clear, unwavering voice, "I have a goal for Micah. I want him to run in EVERY meet and I want him to increase his distance to two miles."

We beamed, nodding our heads, too stunned to find the words to express our excitement (again, no "inclusion fight"). Micah's reaction to the coach's goal was a bit different. He groaned, muttering, "Two miles ... No way, Mom!"

While delighting in the day's success later that night, I thought of Adrienne Rich, a wonderful poet. She wrote about growing older and wiser and recalling the lessons she had learned along the way. She said, "I live not, not as a leap, but as a succession of brief amazing moments, each one making possible the next."

The poem describes Micah's cross country story perfectly. There were many amazing moments, each building on the previous one. J.J., his peer mentor, opened the door to cross country. Micah's first coach opened the door to his first meet. Micah's second coach opened the door to running in EVERY meet and running longer. And this year, in his junior year, the new captain and a couple of other kids are driving Micah home from practice every day.

Everything is not perfect. "Real" inclusion is hard work, an ideal, something to move toward, something like a cross country run. Micah's cross country career evolved over time, without huge leaps. Micah has learned that he must run every single part of the mile to get to his finish line.

There's a lesson in that for me, as well. All of us who believe in inclusion have to run every part of the inclusion course. I cannot leap onto the finish line without running the entire course (darn it!). Some of the tracks are smooth and straight, others have steep hills, twists, and turns. But each part must be run. Each part is connected to the previous section. Each part must be encountered, traveled, negotiated. As Micah has learned, we all must keep a steady pace, look ahead, keep breathing; be encouraged by the cheering; move forward at our own pace. We'll probably groan as Micah did: "Two miles! No way, Mom!" But we, like Micah, are spurred on toward our goal. There are no leaps in cross country running, but there can be many brief amazing moments.

For more information, contact:

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Micah Will Attend the 2002 National Youth Leadership Conference

Micah Fialka-Feldman, a junior at Berkley High School, has recently been selected to participate in the 2002 National Youth Leadership Network Conference for Youth with Disabilities in Washington, D.C. July 26-29, 2002. Conference goals are to help prepare the next generation of disability leaders and to identify ways to improve policies and supports for young people with disabilities. The application process included a letter of reference and completion of three essay questions:

- 1) Describe two experiences you have had as a young person with a disability and what you learned from them.
- 2) List your school and community activities and honors.
- 3) Describe how your leadership skills have been developed.

Micah attributed some of his leadership skills to his participation in the 2001 Michigan Youth Leadership Forum (see "2002 Michigan Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities is Looking for Candidates" on [page 10](#)) and to his national Board Membership in Kids as Self Advocates (KASA). Seventy youth from around the U.S. were selected for this honor.

For more information about the National Youth Leadership Network, contact:
www.nyln.org

For more information about Kids As Self Advocates, contact:
www.fvkasa.org