

MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY INCLUSION WITHOUT APOLOGIES by Kathryn Huffman

We live in a community that offers many options for all children for recreation and sports. When my son, Jordan was five, I noticed that he had a great interest in playing baseball. He had started playing with a T-stand and loved banging a ball with any kind of bat or stick. Our community has a recreation program, CYAA, Collierville Youth Athletic Association, that offers T-ball for young beginners of the great game of baseball. I started asking other parents about T-ball and noticed many of his classmates were playing. I found out that all I had to do was sign up at the Community Center.

So Jordan and I drove on over to sign up. The form was for basic information, with a place asking if your child had any health or other concerns. I wrote in that Jordan has Down syndrome. I thought in the back of my mind, "I wonder if I'll get a call about this and if it's going to be an issue." Then I thought, "Wait a minute. Jordan has the same needs, feelings and desires as any other kid his age. So what am I worrying about?"

A few weeks later, I did receive a call from the coach with general information about practices and games, etc. I did ask him if he was aware that Jordan has Down syndrome and he replied that he wasn't aware. I talked to him about Jordan's strengths and love for the game of baseball and I told him that we were excited about being part of the team.

I must admit that I was stressed at the first game. I was worried about how the coaches would react to Jordan. Would the kids be kind? Would the parents ask me, "How come he isn't doing a 'special' program?" I really had to stop myself and remember that I'd just have to overcome this way of thinking if this was going to work.

The game went well and Jordan fit right in with the other kids. The parents cheered Jordan on when he came up to bat. The coaches were great and offered all the assistance that Jordan needed. But most importantly, Jordan had such a great time and was beaming from self-esteem, joy and the satisfaction of belonging to a team. Many of the kids at the ballpark knew him from school or church.

Jordan has played baseball for CYAA for five years. He has scored many runs and is becoming quite a great hitter. He is ten years old now and also has played in the CYAA soccer and basketball programs. Each year I sign him up. I hope for others to follow me.

A couple of years ago, a friend who is a Scout leader urged me to sign Jordan up for Cub Scouts. I asked Jordan if he was interested and he was, and couldn't wait to get his uniform. He has won ribbons in the pinewood derby, earned badges, and we even attended the Weebelos Encampment this past Fall. Cub Scouts is a great way for anyone with a disability to socialize and have many activities. Jordan's Scout leader is encouraging and supportive and he has many dads who help him at meetings and outings.

I have had many parents of children with disabilities and parents of children without disabilities ask me how I "got" Jordan into these programs. I always tell them the same thing, "Why wouldn't they let him in?" I feel like life is a challenge for everyone, in sports, social events, and clubs, with their own range of abilities. How will anyone learn acceptance and inclusion if you don't just show up or try and make a way for your child to experience all the things you want for them?

I want people to be exposed to Jordan now



while he is young and vice versa, so he will be equipped in life to handle circumstances that will present themselves. People learn more about disabilities and acceptance by personally being involved in that person's life. Jordan is a kid first, not defined by his limitations or disability. He has the right to experience all that life has to offer.

Jordan attends Sunday school and a Wednesday night program at our church, St. Patrick Presbyterian. He has performed each year singing with all the kids, dressed in costume in the Christmas program. He memorized a line and had a part to say into the microphone, which he really enjoyed. Most of the kids don't even know he has a disability because, to them, Jordan is just one of the kids.

Jordan enjoys putting on his uniform and being part of a team. He loves going to the field on game day and can't wait for the snacks after the game. He was so excited about his new Cub Scouts uniform, he has worn it to school a few times. He couldn't wait to go camping with the Scouts and sleep in a tent. He attends a great horseback riding camp in the Summer that he looks forward to each year. He is a regular during the Summer at the local YMCA pool, where he also took swimming lessons in the Fall in a group setting.

Being a graduate of the Partners in Policymaking™ program has made me more aware of how to forge on and help others make a difference. I learned many tools on how to navigate community inclusion and how to be a better advocate for Jordan. I got to meet many other parents and draw from their experiences and share my experiences with them.

I would love to see more kids with disabilities try more sports and activities. I think that it can be done for all levels of abilities. You have to be creative, energetic, cooperative, and open-minded for it to happen. I won't tell you that it's been easy. I am the practice coach for Jordan and I'm there at every game making sure all goes well. I get unmoved sometimes, but so do the rest of the parents! Parents and kids I have met through the years have learned many things about Down syndrome, and that kind of personal awareness is important to pass on.

I have recently been asked to be an advisor for the Town's Park and Recreation Department of Special Services. I joined a group of other advisors to discuss options that are available and getting more kids included in sports programs in the community. I hope that the community will continue to evolve in moving away from special segregated programs, to more inclusive recreation for everyone, those with and without disabilities.

NEWS FROM PATHFINDER By Melissa Fortson

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder has phone, Web, and print resources in English and Spanish to connect the Tennessee disability community with service providers. Referral services, free of cost, are provided to persons with disabilities, family members, service providers, and advocates. Pathfinder is a joint project of the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development.

THE PATHFINDER CAMP CONNECTION
There are many summer camp opportunities for children and young adults with all abilities. Pathfinder collects and provides information about specialty or disability programs. To access this information, go to the Pathfinder Web site at <http://www.familypathfinder.org> and click on "Recreation and Summer Camps." For more information, or to add your summer recreational program, contact Pathfinder.

PATHFINDER DISABILITY CALENDAR
Pathfinder maintains the Pathfinder Disability Calendar, an Internet calendar of trainings, conferences, meetings, and other disability-related events. Organizations post events to this interactive calendar, the most comprehensive listing of Tennessee disability events. To access the calendar, go to the Pathfinder Web site at <http://www.familypathfinder.org> and click on "Pathfinder Disability Calendar." For more information, or to request an access code that will allow your organization to post events, contact Pathfinder.

STAY CONNECTED WITH PATHFINDER
Pathfinder recently began publishing The Pathfinder, an e-newsletter containing information about program activities and other disability-related resources in Tennessee. Past issues of the publication are archived on the Pathfinder Web site (under Pathfinder Features, click on "The Pathfinder: News from Tennessee Disability Pathfinder." To receive future news from Tennessee Disability Pathfinder via e-mail, please contact us at tnpathfinder@vanderbilt.edu.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:
Tennessee Disability Pathfinder
(615) 322-8529 (Nashville area)
(800) 640-4636 (toll-free, English & Espanol)
(800) 273-9595 (TTY)
www.familypathfinder.org
tnpathfinder@vanderbilt.edu

Melissa Fortson is disability resource specialist with Tennessee Disability Pathfinder at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Family Outreach Center.

2004-2005 DIRECTORY DISCOUNT: NOW ONLY \$15

2004-2005 Tennessee Disability Services & Supports Directory published by the Tennessee Disability Pathfinder Office, is a source of information regarding state and local programs and services. The newest edi-

tion is available by geographic region (East, Middle, and West Tennessee). Order forms are available online at <http://kc.vanderbilt.edu/devents/order.html>

