

Cherry Jubilee - Inclusion Program Speech 2015

My name is Julie Vanderpoel. As a parent of a Cherry Inclusion Alum, I am honored to have the opportunity to come back to share our story. To share with you, how the Cherry Inclusion program not only guided us through the critical formative years of our son's early education but how it also shaped the foundation of all our children's FUTURE education. How Cherry not only offered us hope for our son INSIDE the classroom but also our entire family well beyond the school doors. As I share our family's story, it is my hope to unveil how the compassion and connection of the entire Cherry community fostered much needed courage to help us stand where we are today.

Before I tell you about Jamie, our second oldest son and Cherry Alum, I want to introduce you to Matthew. Matthew, our oldest child, was diagnosed with a seizure disorder and global developmental delays shortly after his first birthday. At age three, very behind his typical peers, the public school system choose to place him in an instructional classroom with 9 other children with special needs. All of these children were non-verbal and lacked social skills like Matthew. There were no play dates after school, invitations to birthday parties, or opportunities to connect with other families. After a year in the program, Matthew made little progress. There are very limited school options in the Chicagoland area for children with special needs requiring an assistant. We basically had two options: 1.) remain in the public system 2.) enroll in a therapeutic school that cost more than we could afford on top off all the medical testing, doctor visits, medication and therapies. Both did not offer our son the opportunity to be educated with his typically developing peers. A friend suggested I look at the Cherry Inclusion Program. A program that not only offers an opportunity for a child with special needs to be educated with his typically developing peers but the school also paid for an aide to help him successfully navigate the classroom. However, at the time we lived 25 minutes away from Cherry Preschool and Jamie had already entered our lives and he too began having difficulty with seizures as well as signs of developmental delays. Between both boys, we had about a dozen therapy sessions a week, many doctor visits in addition to school. The 25-minute drive to

Cherry one way seemed impossible. So, Matthew remained in the Chicago public school system.

At age 3, Jamie was placed in a blended pre-school program in Chicago. Although he was in class with typically developing peers, Jamie was still struggling to be a part of the group. After a few weeks, his teacher wanted to place Jamie in the instructional classroom. I knew I would regret that decision. Although the 25-minute ride to Cherry seemed hard at the time, I felt it was our best option for Jamie. I called Rhonda to see if there was room at Cherry. Being in the middle of the school year, we were placed on a wait list. In May, we were accepted into the program for the next school year.

After his morning school program, I drove Jamie 25 minutes to Cherry. He ate his lunch in the car. Matthew still attended Kindergarten by our house and his school got out while Jamie was at Cherry. So, I drove the 25 minutes back to Lakeview everyday, picked up Matthew, and drove back to get Jamie in Evanston and back home with both. It wasn't easy but I know it made all the difference.

What were the differences? At Cherry, Jamie was included in all classroom activities no matter his level of ability. He was encouraged and guided by his inclusion aide to socially interact with his peers. Above all, Cherry honored his strengths rather than focusing on his struggles. For the first time, we felt that Jamie BELONGED to a community rather than trying to just FIT IN. This was evident not only in Jamie's academic and social progress but also in his medical stability. During his last year at Cherry, Jamie had ZERO seizures compared to FIVE the previous year.

Our Cherry experience opened my eyes to a new perspective of educating a child with special needs. I learned that educational opportunities are not limited because your child has a disability. Through the monthly support group offered by Cherry for parents with children in the Inclusion Program, I gained the courage to learn about special education law and began advocating for my children. With basic special education rights knowledge, I insisted that Matthew attend Kindergarten at our home school with his typically developing peers. Three

weeks after placing Matthew in the general education setting, he began speaking in sentences. Matthew is now in the fourth grade. While he still receives special education services, he attends our local school and spends part of the day in the general education setting.

I agreed with Jamie's Cherry teachers when they told me he was not ready for Kindergarten and that he could benefit greatly by remaining at Cherry. When the Chicago public school system ruled that despite teacher recommendations, developmental delays and a late August birthday, Jamie could not repeat Pre-K, I opened a legal dispute. We successfully came to agreement with the school district and Jamie did remain at Cherry. This extra year turned out to be an imperative decision not only for Jamie's future education but also our family.

During this time, I was pregnant with twins and received devastating news that one of our twins had a rare condition called fetal hydrops as well as a heart defect. She was not expected to make it to birth. However, defying the odds, on Friday of the first week in our final year at Cherry, both twins were delivered at 34 weeks. The Cherry community (teachers, parents, and even students) offered the most compassionate support as our twins were receiving care in two separate NICUs in Chicago. All were beyond excited when our first twin came to pick up Jamie from school 4.5 weeks later

Our other twin had a much more difficult journey. After 2.5 months in the NICU, doctors were 99% certain that she most likely had a condition that was not compatible with life. She was scheduled for a diagnostic surgery the next day. Whatever the outcome, I knew our family was in the best place at Cherry for whatever support we would need. I knew the teachers and parents would hold us tight and help us navigate the unthinkable. In the end, the surgery that was supposed to confirm a fatal diagnosis ended up saving our daughter's life. Just over a month later, after 120 days in the NICU, she came home and soon made her debut at Cherry. Not being able to commute back and forth, the twins and I spent each weekday morning in the community room at Cherry.

A few years ago, I came across the following quote by Joan Ryan, author of the *Water Giver*, “Motherhood is about raising – and celebrating – the child you have, not the child you thought you would have. It’s about understanding that he is exactly the person he is supposed to be. And that, if you’re lucky, he just might be the teacher who turns you into the person YOU are supposed to be.”

This IS Cherry Preschool. A place that not only accepted my child for who HE is but also HONORED him for it. So thank you Cherry staff and community, for showing me that I don’t need to change my son. I don’t need to fix him. I only need to accept him. Today, Jamie is in the second grade. He is reading, writing and attending regular Math class.

At last year’s Jubilee, I was inspired to share our story this year. Although I still attend the monthly support group meetings, I thought our Cherry story was complete since we had moved further away. But it wasn’t. Two months later I was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer. I wrote Rhonda an email to share the news – she always knows just what to say and I thought she could yet again help us navigate the kids through rough water. What I didn’t expect was the overwhelming response from families of the Cherry Inclusion Support Group who brought homemade meals to our home after my first surgery. I will never forget opening the door one evening to greet Rhonda and Jamie’s former teacher, Kim – hands full with bags of food. Long after our school days at Cherry, the compassion and connection from the Cherry community is still shining brightly in our lives.

Tonight, we, the Cherry Community, have a great opportunity to help the Cherry Inclusion Program continuer to flourish by participating in the paddle call in a few minutes. Much of the funding for this program relies on the money raised here tonight, right now. We, all of us in this room tonight, can make the Inclusion Program for next year happen. All we have to do is raise our paddles and offer a donation. Remember any amount will make a difference. It doesn’t matter how we reach the goal; it only matters that we reach it.