

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class Period: \_\_\_\_\_

MAKE-UP ASSN

## **WHY MY SON DOESN'T MAKE ME A "SPECIAL KIND OF PERSON"**

In 2012 when my son was born with spina bifida, a birth defect of the spine, I joined the ranks of millions of people worldwide who love someone with a disability. I've learned a lot in the year since – how to find the best wheelchair accessible parks, how to schedule multiple therapists, how to be a mom. But more than that, I learned that I am "a special kind of person." At least that's what people told me.

I'll be honest and say that at first, I *really* like being a special kind of person. Who wouldn't? It was nice. It meant I was doing something good, something important and noble. I am, after all, raising a child who has a disability.

But after a few months it didn't sit so well anymore. Being called a "special kind of person" began to make me feel uncomfortable. And then I saw a photo on Facebook that made me realize why. It was a picture of a teenage girl dressed for prom and standing beside her was her date – a boy with Down Syndrome. The picture was charming, but it's the comments that got to me"

*"Honorable move, looks like she made his day!"*

*"Someone at my school did the same thing this year. It made me proud of her because she's absolutely beautiful and could've had anyone she wanted."*

*"That is very sweet of her..."*

Turns out, she was a special kind of person just like me. But it felt hurtful somehow. I started wondering, "How would I feel if the boy in this picture was my son?" Sixteen years from now, when my son goes to prom, will people applaud his date? Will they see her as a martyr? As a saint?

Just what are we saying about people with disabilities when we glorify those who love and care for them?

Think of it this way: I am married, I have a mother and father who love me, I am surrounded by friends but what if, time and again, I overheard snippets of conversations – words that praised them for the love and care they've given me? Imagine whispers to my mother: "It takes a special kind of person to raise a kid like that." Or to my husband, "You are such an inspiration – I don't know if I could be with someone like her." These comments would say so much about my worth – my value.

Believe me, I am not diminishing my work as a mother. I am not ignoring the extra time and energy it takes to carry a wheelchair up a flight of stairs. I am not pretending that my son is just like everyone else. But when we glorify his friends, or his mother, or his one-day prom date, we imply that he is less-than. We imply that those with disabilities are not equally lovable – that it takes someone "special" to muster up this kind of affection. It seems we reveal our innermost bias – at least I think I did.

The thing is, all love should be praised and all sacrifice too. Loving someone is hard work – whether they're a football player, a musician, or a wheelchair tennis star. So call me hard working or call me a wonderful mother. But if you call me a special kind of person I'll probably nod and smile because I know a secret: if you knew my son, you'd love him too.

So, I guess, you're a special kind of person – just like me.

1. How would it make you feel if people praised your friends and family for being “able” to love you?

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2. In what ways have you been guilty of thinking of people with disabilities as different or less important than you?

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3. Did this article change the way you see people who work with people with disabilities? Why or why not?

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4. What are some ways you can advocate for the students in our class? How can you help other people see them in a more positive light?

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