

Capable.

Molly McDougall



When I think about my brother, Michael, a never-ending stream of words race through my mind, each word carrying a memory, feeling, or deeper meaning. Michael is my brother, my buddy, a junk food fanatic, a wiz at public transportation, and a cheesesteak connoisseur. He is the mayor of the neighborhood -- always with the

juiciest gossip and the latest updates. Michael also has a disability. Most importantly: Michael is capable of success.

You could say that Michael and I go way back...we make up two-thirds of the "McDougall Triplets". Our lives have been intertwined since the very beginning and we share an unyielding bond that is rooted in love and understanding. Early on it was evident that Michael was different from the rest of us, but how? When I was young, I struggled to put Michael's disability into words, because I never fully grasped the notion of what made Michael different. There was no label or combination of words that could accurately define who he was. To this day, I still cannot pinpoint the exact moment when I came to the realization that Michael had a disability, because it was our normal. In the simplest terms, Michael was my brother and that was all that mattered.

Michael was diagnosed with ADHD, developmental delays, and fine motor difficulties in preschool. This diagnosis marked the beginning of many years of education without Michael. In preschool, Michael was in the "upstairs" classroom. I remember feeling confused by this change. We had always been together, but were now separated by a staircase. Once Kindergarten began, Joey (the other third of our trio)

and I went off to a Catholic School in East Lansdowne and Michael began attending a public school in Upper Darby. For the next nine years, we had our separate educational lives: different buses, different schools, different friends, and different homework. These nine years reinforced the idea that Michael was in fact different in some way. Again, I still couldn't fully grasp Michael's disability.

I have always found it challenging to explain to others that I have a brother with a disability because of the stigma and misconceptions that are often associated with the words "Special Education". I have always felt that I had to explain "how he was different" or "what his disabilities are" in order to clarify and avoid others from forming an inaccurate image of Michael in their minds. I never wanted anyone to perceive him as incapable or make judgements before they had the chance to meet him.

As a special education teacher, I often find myself thinking back to my childhood with Michael. As I look at my students, I often try to picture "Little Michael" sitting in my class. *What would he be like? How would he respond to instruction in the regular education classroom? How could inclusion have helped him be more successful?* As I walk into Oak Park Elementary School every morning, I am reminded that education has the power to propel all students towards a successful life. I credit my drive to educate all children, regardless of ability, to Michael because he has taught me patience and has shown me that every person is capable of a fruitful life. I have seen my brother flourish into a self-sufficient individual.

Today, Michael is holding two jobs, successfully navigating SEPTA, and has an active social life. He is thriving and continues to demonstrate that he is capable of achieving and living a successful life as independently as possible. I have witnessed the ups and downs of Michael's education, which helps me guide my own career as a teacher. A disability does not define an individual. Every person is capable of achieving success.