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Our Lady of Lourdes

Lessons Learned

So many people, when asked what they want to accomplish before they die, respond the same. The prevalent requests tend to be slightly complex such as skydiving or traveling the world. Yet other answers are more simple, consisting of watching the sunset or dancing in the rain. Every life goal, be it small or near impossible, means something different, something personal, to each person who dreams of it. Yet, out of all of the varying goals that these people yearn to reach there was always one I didn't quite understand: Change someone's life. It was always a mystery to me how someone so desperately working to change their own life would voluntarily take on the prodigious task of changing someone else's life too. Yet, thanks to many years of strong role models and a solid faith I have learned to always have an open mind when questioning what I did not understand. Never would I have guessed that all it would take was one little boy for me to reevaluate everything in which I believed.

Only two months into eighth grade I had already been engulfed by the chaos of the hectic year. My days consisted of studying for the High School Placement Test, working towards Confirmation, attending student council meetings, singing in the choir, and endless sports games. I didn't have a second to relax, much less breathe, and I wouldn't have had it any other way. Doing what I loved most, while surrounded by those who loved me, was what I lived for. This was what made me who I am. This was me. I knew that I only had one year left at my school and I wanted to accomplish everything I could and more. So when I had subconsciously added my name to a list of students volunteering at a Special Olympics Sports Night I never expected it to be such a memorable or life-changing experience.

During the first couple of nights I spent at Special Olympics I took the time to learn the names of all the kids. Being around these kids who struggled so much and were still so radiant and carefree was a very overwhelming and powerful experience. I counted the days until I got to see them again and the time I spent with them always managed to make my day a little brighter than it was before. I began to realize that I was giving these kids much more than a few hours of my time. I was slowly giving each and every one of them my heart.

Although I grew to love every single child I had met, there was one little boy that caught my eye from the start. His name was Eli and he was four years old. To this day I am not sure why I was so drawn to him. It could have been the distant gleam in his eyes that he wore like a security blanket, or even the fact that he wanted nothing to do with me. All I knew was that I was determined to befriend this little boy.

As the weeks passed by I learned more about Eli and I watched as he slowly let me work myself into his life. My only goal was to replace that distant look he portrayed with a happier one. I became determined to give him the carefree hour he deserved. Sometimes, this meant roller skating, other weeks we bowled or rode scooters. There were also bad days where he would sit in my lap and we'd sing the ABC's as he calmed down from a bad outburst. I had accepted that no matter what had to be done, be it playing silly games or making the tears disappear, I would do anything to see him smile.

I am sure that from the outside you could not see the bond Eli and I had been building. Eli's lack of real communication and his refusal to make eye contact made it difficult for people to understand him. Yet, with effort we had learned a new language all our own. At times though, this made it harder and I was forced to watch from the sidelines as he slipped away, knowing that the sound of my voice would not bring him back. It was the moments, though, that he would whisper my name or unexpectedly glance up at me that kept me going. It was in moments like these that I knew he was letting me into his world, even if only for a second.

Eli still plays a continuous role in my life. I truly believe that the strength of the friendship we have built is based on the knowledge we have shared together. I know that I have had an effect on his life even if the results are not apparent, and there is no denying that he has taught me just as much. Out of all the many lessons we shared between us I know he taught me the most valuable one. Eli taught me that it does not take miracles or tremendous sums of money to make a difference in someone's life. He taught me that a smile is more powerful than you'll ever know and that actions really do speak louder than words. Most importantly, Eli taught me that if you set out to change someone else's life they just might change yours too.