

10.03.2014

Inspirational Speech Contest

The rebellious wheelchair on ice

“Those who live are those who fight.” Victor Hugo

Dear Contest Chair, fellow Cardinals and most welcome guests,
We all know this story...

A young man falls in love with a woman. They move in together and make plans for starting a family. They dream of having little children running around and watching them grow up.

In November 1981, my parents' first child and my oldest brother Jonas was born. Complications at birth caused a lack of oxygen and he was born with Cerebral Palsy. He is seriously disabled, both physically and intellectually. He has to sit in a wheelchair, can't speak and needs care throughout the day. Unfortunately, his condition has been getting worse in the last 5 years and he now needs artificial nutrition and respiration. Jonas will remain a child all his life.

But that's also his strength. He easily wins people over with his childlike charm and an ever positive attitude. He enjoys laughing a lot - especially when things go wrong. And he likes feeding his wicked sense of humour with the little pranks he plays.

He can only move his arms and fingers, and even those just a little bit. But once when we weren't being careful, he managed to pull down a tray full of my parents' wedding dishes. They all crushed to the floor. We were shocked but Jonas started laughing and cheering. And we realized: Actually, it's quite funny, isn't it?

Growing up with a disabled brother, I learned there was a 'normal' world outside and there was us. Wherever we went, we stood out. Children pointed at us asking their obviously uncomfortable parents: What's wrong with him? When we went to a restaurant, we needed specially prepared food. At a cinema which didn't have disability chairs we needed to negotiate to get Jonas in. And we weren't allowed to go into an art exhibition because the wheelchair might have destroyed the sand installations.

I remember one day, it was a Sunday afternoon, when the whole family decided to go ice-skating. We went to a big ice stadium nearby. At first we left Jonas outside the rink in the spectator's area. It was cold and Jonas was wrapped up in warm clothes, with only his face showing. His eyes followed us, while we were skating and waving at him. But of course, he wanted to join in. So my father took him onto the ice, pushing the wheelchair in front of him. After only a few minutes he was stopped by the supervisor. The guy looked a bit like David Cameron but without the suit. He said that you weren't allowed to go onto the ice with a wheelchair. That it was way too dangerous - others could get hurt!

So my brother was back on the sidelines, watching how others had fun, pirouetting, skating fast or going backwards. He wanted to be part of it, he wanted to fit in, but he wasn't allowed to. Don't we all recognize that sense of wanting to be part of something but feeling like we don't belong?

Life is unpredictable. We make plans and then everything turns out differently. My father hadn't ever imagined he would have to spend his Sundays fighting for disability rights. As if it wasn't difficult

enough to care for my brother and to provide a 'normal' family life for his two other children - more obstacles got thrown in the way.

There is always an artificial boundary, an arbitrary rule limiting us, stepping in between us and our dreams. There is always an authority denying us our rights, holding us down.

But there is always a choice: Do we give in or do we fight against it?

Do we just cave in or do we claim our space? Do we fight for what is right?

Now, my father is a soft spoken and humble man. But he can also be very stubborn. 15 minutes later he was back on the ice with Jonas and after one round he again got stopped by David Cameron. They started arguing. 'My son will skate on this ice!' My soft spoken father now turned into Rage-Against-The-Machine.

Another 15 minutes later there was an announcement through the speakers: 'Everybody please leave the ice! The father with his son in the wheelchair may come onto the ice now.'

So everybody went off and stood around the big empty rink and watched while my father skated with my excited brother.

I was so proud of my family that day.

“Those who live are those who fight.”