

An Unlikely Friendship

BY SUE CARLONI

The first thing I noticed was the drool. A thin strand ran from the corner of her mouth to the red bandana tied around her neck.

While Mrs. Wagner introduced the new student as Sarah, all I could focus on was that glistening spit. As Miss Brown, Sarah's aide, pushed the wheelchair toward me, I panicked. Why was the only empty desk next to me? I shrank in my seat.

"Hi," said Sarah. At least that's what it sounded like. Did she really belong in fourth grade?

The morning dragged by. When the recess bell rang, Miss Brown asked, "Natalie, would you play with Sarah? She could use a friend."

How am I supposed to play with Sarah? I wondered. She can't even walk.

"Grab a rubber ball from the bin on your way outside," said Miss Brown.

Once we were on the blacktop, Miss Brown locked the brakes on Sarah's wheelchair.

"Throw ball!" said Sarah.

Standing close to her wheelchair, I said, "Catch" and gently tossed the ball, expecting Sarah to drop it. But she didn't.

Sarah threw the ball back to me. Her throw was rather clumsy, as her arms didn't work like mine.

When the bell rang, Miss Brown asked, “Natalie, would you walk with us back to class?”

I walked next to Sarah while she held onto the ball, dripping drool all over it. There was no way I was going to touch that thing.

Thankfully, Miss Brown took the ball from Sarah.

The rest of the morning continued to drag on. I was hungry for my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and apple. I wondered if Sarah could feed herself, but I didn’t want to sit by her to find out.

When the lunch bell rang, I hung behind. “Mrs. Wagner,” I asked, “can ... can I have my seat changed?”

“Why?” asked Mrs. Wagner.

I stared at the floor. “Well, maybe someone else would like to sit by Sarah.”

Mrs. Wagner placed her hand on my shoulder. “Sarah not only has special needs, she has feelings, too. Give it a try.”

My eyes stung. This wasn’t fair! I didn’t want to be Sarah’s friend. And if Mrs. Wagner didn’t care about my feelings, why should I care about Sarah’s?

All afternoon, I did my best to ignore Sarah. I only glanced at her once and caught her smiling.

At three o’clock, Mrs. Wagner said to the class, “Time to put on your gym shoes.”

As I bent over to tie my shoes, I studied Sarah’s. There wasn’t a single scuff mark on them. I wondered what it would be like to never walk, never run, never climb a tree or ride a bike. My throat felt tight.

Miss Brown tapped my back. “Natalie, would you please help Sarah be a part of gym class?”

I could only nod. The lump in my throat sat as motionless as Sarah’s legs.

“We’re going to play kickball today,” said our gym teacher.

Sarah’s and my team was pitching first. Matt kicked the ball and started rounding the bases. The ball came to me and I handed it to Sarah. She threw it. The ball didn’t roll far, but it sneaked up on Matt like a snake, striking his heel.

“You got him out!” I shouted. Sarah threw her head back, laughing, and her drool went flying. Then I laughed, too.

When it was our turn to kick, the ball bounced off the tip of Sarah’s spotless shoe. She made it to first thanks to a lazy throw by the pitcher, and everyone cheered wildly. We made it to second, thanks to another hit. But the next batter kicked the ball high in the air. It was caught for the third out. The inning was over. “We’ll win next time,” I said. Sarah smiled.

At the end of the day, Miss Brown wrote in a notebook and read the journal entry from Sarah. “My first day of school went well. I had fun playing kickball in gym class. I made a nice new friend. Her name is Natalie.”

Sarah smiled at me. I hardly noticed the thin strand of drool running from the corner of her mouth to the red bandana. What I saw was a new friend, a friend I had almost missed out on. ♦

Questions for Readers

- Why didn’t Natalie want to be Sarah’s friend at first?
- What helped change Natalie’s mind about Sarah?
- What do you learn from a first impression?
- Have you ever changed your mind about a first impression? Why?
- What do you think Natalie is going to do in class the next day? Why?

For more discussion resources visit the portfolio for this story at tolerance.org/unlikely-friendship

