



Candace's Story

Shelley Navratil (aka Candace's Mom)

My daughter, Candace, was born in 1996 with an extremely rare abnormality of the 6th chromosome. As an infant, we began in ECI to PPCD and into Life Skills. Once in PPCD, I was told that I had to agree to them labeling her with "mental retardation" in order to receive services from the school. This broke my heart, and I sadly went along with it. Arlington ISD seemed very adversarial and we had many difficulties during Candace's elementary years. I met Deneesa Rassmussen, Social Worker and mother of a child with special needs, at "Our Special Children" at The Arc, and we became fast and furious friends. We attended Wrights Law training and helped create the Special Ed Advisory Committee for Arlington ISD. She recommended an advocate and parent of a child with special needs, David Bienke. He only had to attend one ARD with me and the school accommodated Candace with speech and occupational therapy, more inclusion, and things I didn't even know were available for her.

We moved to my home town of Midland, TX in 2008. Her sixth grade year was mostly spent making the adjustment to living in a new city. I met Melissa Knott, with the PEN Project and she trained me to be a parent leader. She too is a parent who has a child with special needs. Since Candace was the only one in her class transitioning to Alamo Junior High, no arrangements had been made for her to visit the school, meet the teacher, etc. So, I took it upon myself. Her future teacher, Leslie Williamson, had been out on maternity leave, but made a special trip to the school with her newborn daughter to meet us. Based on our previous experience, I was incredibly apprehensive about Candace entering junior high, but this gave me hope that my daughter just might be in good hands.

When Candace began that school year, she had a 3rd surgery on her foot as well as open heart surgery. Meanwhile, Deneesa had been appointed to the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities. They had just voted into law to remove the use of the words "retarded" from the state statute. Melissa, Candace, and I took this information to the next ARD. Without any qualms, they promptly removed the label. To qualify her for services, she was listed as "Other Health Impaired." I felt elated for Candace that these chains of stigma and limitation were removed.

I had been paying to be trained in Neurodevelopmental Therapy and working with Candace 4 nights a week. After I went back to college, my husband left, and I no longer could afford it nor have the time to implement it. Once again, Candace's teacher rose to the occasion. In the next ARD that Melissa and I went to, the teacher incorporated many of Candace's therapy goals into her IEP. Though we met with much resistance from the Occupational Therapist in the ARD, Candace's teacher followed through. Not only did she use our goals, but she had to use the goals as outlined in TEKS. These are mandated by the state, whether it's beneficial to the student or not. Somehow, Leslie made it work. As a result, Candace excelled in the areas she had been having the most difficulty.

Candace is in high school now and once again, we are adjusting. We dearly miss Leslie Williamson, her open-mindedness, and willingness to go out on a limb for Candace. I've learned that we weren't meant to do this alone, and there are people who truly understand and want to help. We may be the minority and not highly visible in our society, but we are there if you look in special places. We aren't drowning in the problem, but striving for solutions. For in helping others, we are in turn, helping and healing ourselves.

Texas Parent to Parent

1805 Rutherford Ln. ★ Suite 201 ★ Austin, TX 78754 ★ 866-896-6001 ★ 512-458-8600

website: www.txp2p.org ★ Email: info@txp2p.org