

overcoming challenges

matty christian really touched me. you realize everyone goes through the same things in life, including people with disabilities.
- jessica levesque

By Aimee Levesque

I like taking my daughter, Jessica, an adult with autism, to disability-centric events, because I think it is important for Jessica to realize she is not the only one who struggles with being different. My hope is for her to have the keys to a kingdom of advocacy and empowerment for herself and those she encounters.

Recently Jessica and I attended the Museum of disABILITY History's Film Festival documentary, Raising Matty Christian. We were excited to see the film and attend a presentation by the producers. Matthew 'Matty' Christian (1983-2009), who was born without full limbs or a tongue, faced unimaginable challenges, yet still managed to achieve significant success.

Throughout the movie, Jessica and I laughed and cried, catching glimpses of each other's emotions from the corners of our eyes, and sharing whispers when we were able to identify with experiences Matty encountered that were similar to our own. We understood the pure determination so common to people with disabilities, and were inspired by an incredible human being who refused to take "no" for an answer. Afterward, we talked about what in the documentary stood out. We agreed it was the openness of Matty's family in sharing his alcohol and drug use, because few people realize that often people with disabilities succumb to alcohol and substance abuse.

What really stood out was the vast network of people who loved and supported Matty – his family, friends, co-workers, neighbors and teachers – and embraced him in times of joy and sorrow. We talked about why acceptance is life changing and empowering. But the message Jess and I heard the loudest was that Matty was just as ordinary as he was extraordinary. He lived his life like any other person in this world does – navigating his likes and dislikes, trials and errors, failures and successes. Matty was just like you and me, but chose not to be defined by his disabilities. Instead experienced life with a joy that eludes so many of us, disabled or non-disabled.

About the Author:

Aimee Levesque is an advocate for people with disabilities. She resides in Kenmore with her daughter, Jessica.



The disABILITIES Film Festival is sponsored by the Museum of disABILITY History, a project of People Inc. dedicated to collecting, preserving, and displaying artifacts related to the history of people with disabilities. Located at 3826 Main Street in Buffalo, the museum offers educational exhibits, programs and activities to help expand community awareness regarding all disabilities. People Inc. is WNY's largest and most comprehensive non-profit health and human services agency providing residential services and programs, training and supported employment for individuals with developmental disabilities, affordable senior housing and services, community outreach, health care, recreation programs, and numerous affiliate programs. People Inc. recently received a four-year award for national person-centered excellence accreditation from the Council on Quality and Leadership. It is the only agency headquartered in WNY to ever receive this honor.

As appeared in the June 2014 issue of
Buffalo Healthy Living Magazine