



Contributed photo

Makenna Robson with her aunt, Brenda. Makenna wrote a touching note for her classmates, explaining life with a relative who has Down syndrome.

## THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

# Different doesn't mean scary

**M**any of us who have a child with a diverse ability have a plethora of feelings as we relate, reflect, accept and learn how to be the best parent one can be in these unique situations.

A lot of us have other children and family who can get a bit left behind in the flurry of the experience and realization of new demands a child with special needs may have.

There is a reason that the term special needs is used as it relates to folks with diverse abilities.

There can be physical, mental or medical needs that require ongoing treatment, wheelchairs, bouts of hospitalization, speech therapy, physiotherapy, special car seats, special beds, chairs or doors, hallways may have to be a certain width to accommodate wheelchairs, special access or eating needs, and the list goes on depending on each individual.

In our family, we spoke about that a lot when, 24 years ago, our Emma was born with Down syndrome.

She was coming into a family that already had four children and would go on to give her a baby brother. We tried hard to keep all things equal with each child, as many families have.

I had a chance to meet an amazing family who has done that and more to make a unique experience into a positive change in all their lives.

When Brenda was born with Down syndrome 49 years ago, options were few for her parents. Mum Marge Noble said they were told by their doctor the best option was institutionalization or adoption, which was pretty standard at the time.

They decided not to go with their doctor's advice and to take baby Brenda home and do the best job they could.

Although there many hurdles, Brenda is a lovely woman who lives semi-independently and is a large part of her community and family.

She has the gift of being an incredible artist. In fact, when I met her and her family a few weeks ago, they brought along a few of her masterpieces.

Her ability with a needle and thread is magical – a tribute to how well she has done in her life, and her family's dedication to ensuring she had the best opportunities.

Brenda's niece, Makenna Robson, has never known her aunt any other way, of course. She has always been part of her life, just as any other aunt would be.

Brenda attends family functions, comes for dinner, lives independent of the family, works, plays sports and creates incredible art. She is accepted for who she is, just like everyone else in the family.

When Makenna was 10, her class was asked to write articles on subjects of their choice. Makenna chose the subject "Understanding people with Down Syndrome."

Here is what she wrote:

*I am going to tell you about people with Down syndrome.*

*I am trying to spread the message that people with Down syndrome are no different than any of you. In fact, I have an auntie with Down syndrome and, you know what, she has a job just like any other adult. She goes to the SPCA once a week and helps with the cats. She also goes to a place called Paper Shuffle and works there. My auntie goes bowling and is so good at 10-pin bowling that she is in the Special Olympics! The Special Olympics is Olympics for special-needs people.*

*My auntie has trouble speaking, but that doesn't keep her from following her dreams! I have to say that people, especially kids, think that people with Down syndrome are scary. They aren't, so I*

*just wanted to remind you that it is not their fault.*

*I feel really sad when people tease people with special needs. They can't control who they are, and that's my main message.*

—Makenna Robson

I was very touched, as I imagine most of you were, reading this article by a Grade 5 student. It is hard to imagine being in elementary school now, but I do remember kids teasing anyone who was different in any way, and I gather that has not changed.

What I believe is so remarkable about the message Makenna gives is that it is so straight forward, honest and simple for any age to follow.

Be accepting of people's differences. Yes, things that are different can feel scary, but don't react to that by being mean and teasing that person for being different. They can't help who they are.

But we typical people can help who we are.

I'm not sure why society is afraid of things that are different than what we are accustomed to. My husband used to quote from a Saturday Night Live skit years ago, "That's different, and I don't like it."

Ignorance is bliss; but is it reality?

As much as we love children, they can be mean.

Those children turn into adults, though, and that is the part that is more worrisome.

If they are not corrected by society, how do they learn that what may seem scary can actually be a butterfly that makes their lives better?

I imagine it may have been hard for Makenna to stand up for her aunt before she wrote her article and empowered her fellow students. It's tough to tackle a topic like that when you're an

adult, let alone in Grade 5.

It is a tribute to her strength and knowledge and to her family and the way she was brought up.

I remember being called into the school when one of our children was in Grade 2 dealt with the teasing of having a sibling with Down syndrome.

Jenner had been having lunch at school when one of her "friends" started teasing her, saying that she had a "retarded" sister.

Jenner's reaction was to stand up and state in front of the class, "I may have a sister with Down syndrome, but she is much more intelligent than you will ever be!"

When I was called in, I thought it was for some sort of trouble, but actually it was to congratulate Jenner on defending her sister. In fact, we were asked to come in with Emma to Jenner's class and share the knowledge of what it meant to have Down syndrome because of it.

All of us have the opportunity to be gentle, kind and understanding in any situation we come across. The reality is, it is not anyone's fault they have a diverse ability; they are a victim and did not ask to have their challenge.

Our ability to accept and celebrate differences of all kinds, whether the colour of one's skin, a different religion, different upbringing or belief, is in each of ours hands.

Why not discover the differences and celebrate them instead of noticing that they are different? Why not encourage support and discussion of positive differences in positive and informed conversations at work, school, play and at our family dinner tables so that they become interesting and not scary?

You just never know where a butterfly will grow.

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*Whose Challenge Is It Anyway?*