

OPINION

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Taking the risk to include a stranger

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It's spring, the time for new beginnings! Our senses will awaken, experiencing the wonderful fragrance of freshly cut grass, bird songs, more time spent outside and the welcome warmth of the sun.

After what many are saying was one of the coldest and longest Okanagan winters in years, we look forward to not being chilled while barbecuing. We are happy to be back in our gardens, welcoming the feel of soil between our fingers.

Sports activities are also changing from winter to summer pursuits.

It all sounds exciting doesn't it?

With all this excitement about spring, how can we take all that positive energy and share it with someone – perhaps a complete stranger? How can we make their day?

A friend shared a story with me the other day that I found inspiring about a parent and their special-needs child, and how a random act of "inclusion" made a huge difference in their lives.

The 12-year-old boy, we will call him Steve, was the apple of his parents' eye, did well in school and loved sports. He happened to also have both mental and physical challenges.

He had never been invited to play team sports with typical kids, as most people assumed that he would not be able to share the experience like other children did. During their walks in the neighbourhood, Steve and his dad would stop and watch on the sidelines of the soccer field. The games were amongst a casual group of fellow students at his elementary school.

They happened to play soccer about the same time after school almost every day when Steve and his dad walked by, Steve in his wheelchair.

One day, one of the kids risked something outside the norm and his area of comfort. He risked his buddies' comfort zone and his to ask Steve to join in their game.

Curtis waited for Steve and his father to walk by as they did every day, and when they did, he went over to them. The other kids stopped playing and stared, wondering how Steve (who they had seen their whole lives, but had never talked to) was going to play soccer in a wheelchair.

Curtis introduced himself and welcomed Steve to play with them. He didn't really know Steve, but he knew that doing something outside the box was a good thing after reading about random acts of kindness.

It felt strange for him to speak to an "almost stranger" as well as bring him on the field to play with the group of kids who thought they were pretty cool. He just thought that Steve looked like he wanted to play and realized that he was a person with a disability, so not too sure what he was taking on.

He asked Steve's dad if it was OK, and his father encouraged Steve to get out of his chair and go on the field. Curtis asked Steve if he had ever played. Steve said, "No, but I have watched you guys for ever, so I think I get it."

His father watched the game start, albeit a bit emotionally and nervously, with Curtis



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Who's Challenge Is It Anyway?

and Steve staying fairly close together while Curtis coached the new player.

The rest of the team realized they were going to slow down the pace a bit to "include" Steve, who had never played a team sport before and due to his disability could barely walk.

It was not as if he was expected to win, but he was encouraged by the players to be part of scoring a goal, with Steve being a real part of the play and treated like an equal.

The neat thing is that after the game he continued to be treated as an equal all due to being "included" by the other boys.

The point is really about reaching out and touching someone when they and maybe you least expect it. At that point, it did not really matter that Steve had a disability whether visible or not. What really mattered was that a stranger had noticed him on the sidelines and realized that while he had watched the boys play on many occasions, he may have wanted to join in.

By Curtis thinking beyond himself and his soccer mates, he not only made a fellow human feel welcome and wanted, he also demonstrated to the rest of the boys that being kind and welcoming is a wonderful experience. To share in teaching someone something is a wonderful gift both to the giver and the receiver.

Other outcomes could have happened. Steve could have said "No thank you" or his father could have not allowed him to be cared for by someone else in case he was hurt mentally or physically, but that didn't happen in this case.

By Curtis walking over and asking Steve to join them, he risked rejection by Steve and his peers. He also stood up outside of the norm, which at the age of 12 can be a very difficult thing to do.

People say kids are mean, and I suppose that can be true, having experienced being the last person picked for the baseball team at that age, due to my lack of skill in that sport and skinny arms. They can also be incredibly kind, and that is the behaviour that is so inspiring.

We all have thousands of opportunities in our lives to help people and to welcome them into our lives. Many people have been hurt before and may not react in the manner that one would think of acceptance. Many may not trust the honest emotion put forth from another they don't know. Don't give up there.

One of our children, Emma, has Down syn-

drome. She may not have had the same sports and social experiences of her siblings, but she has always experienced tremendous inclusion and kindness from family and friends as well as complete strangers. In turn, what that has provided her with is confidence.

She knows she is welcome, wanted and feels safe in her own community. That in itself is an incredible gift.

People who live with a disability have enough to worry about; they don't need to feel negative feelings, to feel unwanted, not included or worse, teased and humiliated.

Parents, caregivers and families tend to overprotect their child with a disability. It is just human nature to want to care for someone that may not have the skill set or ability to care for themselves.

By Steve's father allowing the interaction to happen, he started or continued the natural journey of teaching the baby bird to fly. Sometimes, this is a hard or impossible transition, but still may happen to some degree no matter the challenge the child has.

Sadly, sometimes the child may not have the full life that typical children have, making them want to keep them "protected" strong, and the need to have them within reach natural.

Let's put that into context with the story of Steve and Curtis.

Through the action of his kindness, Curtis affected everyone present by reaching out to Steve. Steve's father was so pleasantly surprised that it brought tears of joy to his face to see his child encouraged and accepted for who he was, if even just for that hour. He felt gratitude happiness and pride. The other soccer players learned to slow down and not be afraid of what or who they don't know. Steve got to embrace the fact that he could be part of creating such a pleasant experience for all.

Although Steve only played the one day with the boys, the soccer players changed their attitude towards people and situations that are different or unknown to them. They learned it is OK to feel vulnerable and that it feels great to make someone else smile and be happy.

Sounds simple enough, but maybe not so simple to do.

Unfortunately, Steve died last spring. However, until the end, he told his family and the hospital staff about how he "scored a goal" with his classmates during a soccer game.

He remembered one random act of kindness that made him feel alive, and that year a truly new beginning happened for him.

The memory of Curtis's kindness is one that Steve's family will never be able to reward him with unless he reads this story.

May we all risk reaching out, helping a stranger and making a real effort to be friendly, kind and welcoming to all we come across this spring and in the future.

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