

THE FRIEND WHO SIMPLY LIKED MY SON

A BOND THAT GREW UP BUT NEVER BROKE

A FRIENDSHIP THAT LASTED

SEARCHING FOR ORDINARY FRIENDSHIP:

Since Chris was an only child and his dad and I were firmly “one and done,” I started looking into “mommies’ groups” as a way for him to socialize more. There were all kinds of groups – mothering in your twenties, working moms, English-as-a-second-language moms – and then I saw it: geriatric moms. Well, technically it was “moms over 35,” but let’s be honest, it meant the same thing. Perfect. I was 40 and looking for women with similar experiences and laugh lines.

What I learned is that moms over 35 ROCK. There were six of us who met every Monday. We shared war stories, career-hiatus concerns, and husband drama while the kids played. I remember always watching Chris, trying to mind-meld him into connecting. Bond with the kids. Try not to stand out too much. Make a friend.

The fact that Chris liked to spin his right hand while making the sound of an Apollo launch stood out like a sore thumb to anyone over the age of five – but in the land of two-year-olds, it was accepted. Sometimes even imitated. Looking back, I was so hungry for all the ordinary day-to-day adventures and experiences for him.

A FRIENDSHIP WITHOUT CONDITIONS:

Markus and his family accepted and loved Chris with all of his eccentricities. They had sleepovers, loved watching the comedian Fluffy and Mythbusters, rode dirt bikes, built forts, fought, laughed—all the chaotic, wonderful things...kids do when childhood is still simple and the world hasn’t yet demanded explanations. The love and acceptance Markus and his family gave to Chris remains one of the greatest gifts I’ve ever been given. It was the experience of typical friendship – the thing I wanted most for him, the thing I wasn’t sure he’d ever have, and the thing that arrived not through therapy or planning or social-skills groups, but through a fearless Norwegian kid who simply liked my son.

Markus is now a proud father. And somehow, despite time, distance, adulthood, and all the life chapters that pull people in different directions, they still talk. They still play virtual video games. They still cheer each other on. Markus still teases Chris about some of his quirks – the same ones he embraced without hesitation when they were little—but always with love behind it. Always with that protective edge that says, without words, I’ve got you.

A FRIENDSHIP THAT LASTED

WHEN CHRIS MET MARKUS:

One mother-son duo had been away for a month in Norway, so I was about three weeks in before I met Jeannine and her son, Markus. Long-haired, blue-eyed, Norwegian, adrenaline-junkie Markus. They showed up that Monday - Jeannine, a five-foot brunette with an outspoken bulldozer personality, and this Ray-Banned, bad-ass-dressed kid who, for whatever reason, glommed onto Chris. Markus was the polar opposite of my son: naturally athletic, self-aware, a born leader.

I invited everyone to Chris's third birthday party. In an effort to keep up with the Joneses, we rented the caboose of a local train that wound through the Northern California hills. Michelle had already rented ponies to trot kids around her cul-de-sac, and Lisa had booked the local Pump It Up with a wine bar for the adults - I was out of options. The whole family was there, my dad as always with a camera in hand, filming and photographing everything.

We brought out the cake, everyone sang Happy Birthday, and Markus blew out the candles. It was poetic. I still have the profile picture of Chris and Markus staring at each other in that moment - a bond was forged that I will never fully understand but am forever grateful for.

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THE GIFT OF INCLUSION:

Note to neurotypical kid parents: The things you take for granted are the things we neurodiverse moms crave for our kids. Friendship rooted in acceptance. Kids who include without being coached. Kids who see difference and don't flinch.

It costs you nothing to remember this - and everything to teach your children the gift of having a neurodiverse friend.