Barrington resident will host annual Meeting Street Telethon

BY CHRISTY MADALIN
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When the annual Meeting Street Telethon kicks off this Saturday at 7 p.m., a local teen will be on screen as one of the faces of the 72-year-old Rhode Island institution. In keeping with tradition, the telethon will not only be hosted by WPRI-12 news anchors, but also children who receive services from Meeting Street, including Jason, age 14, the son of Alisha Borrelli of Barrington.

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ALISHA BORRELLI

Jason is in the sixth grade at The Grace School at Meeting Street, the nation's first fully inclusive K-8 school and educational model for students with and without disabilities. He was born with Muscular Dystrophy, a rare disorder that has left Jason with both physical and intellectual challenges.

Jason will be accompanied by fellow sixth-grader and good friend Mercy, a Grace School student without special needs.

The bond between Jason and Mercy is the embodiment of what makes the educational model of the Grace School such a success — and it's why the pair has been chosen to serve as ambassadors for the school.

"There are many good peers in the school," said Margaret Knowlton, director of School Age Programs. "But some really stand out. Jason and Mercy have a natural friendship."

Jason attended Meeting Street in pre-kindergarten, but when he was old enough for kindergarten, he was brought back into the public schools, in both the Bristol Warren district, and later in the Providence district. Inclusion, or classrooms that are made up of students both with and without special needs, has become a widespread concept, but its effective application is very uneven.

Meeting Street, as a national model, is an example of how it works when it is done well, but it comes at a high cost — one that must be borne by the school district of residence. This sets up a dynamic, well-known to parents of students with special needs, where parents often find themselves at odds with district administrators who have a close eye on the bottom line. After advocating for Jason for many years, Ms. Borrelli was able to bring him back to Meeting Street last year.

As a math coach and fifth-grade teacher for more than 20 years, Ms. Borrelli is in a unique position to advocate for her son, as well as to recognize what Meeting Street has to offer. "I've always wanted to get him back there," she said. "As an education myself, I can tell you that the culture and climate there is incredible, they are teaching tolerance and kindness, and the students are building authentic friendships. It was that authentic friendship between Jason and Mercy that caught the eye of administrators when they were planning the hosts for the telethon. Ms. Knowlton approached Ms. Borrelli in the fall, and asked if they would be open to that. "I did think about it a bit," admits Ms. Borrelli. "We are pretty private people. But it is such an opportunity, I wanted him to have this opportunity."

"It's challenging to grow up with confidence, even when you don't have special needs. But he put himself in a position to get noticed. That's the wonderful thing about this school — the teachers recognize him for who he is, and let him build on his strengths."

"The biggest benefit of an inclusion classroom is that everyone has something to teach, and everyone has something to learn," said Ms. Knowlton. "Everyone learns respect, everyone learns compassion. The focus is on our similarities, not our differences."

The students without special needs at the Grace School comprise the majority of the student body. The school graduated its first class of 8th graders last year, many years in the making. "I think the exception is the fact that there are students with special needs and everyone who is here, and that is why the students have that sense of community, as well as the ability to have a goal," said Ms. Borrelli. "Everyone learns respect, everyone learns compassion. The focus is on our similarities, not our differences."

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