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## Mark Patinkin: At the Grace School, a special friendship

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Mercy Flomo, who's in fifth grade and 11, was hanging out with her buddy Jason Lopes at school yesterday. Which seems unusual because Mercy has no special needs while Jason's are so profound he can't talk, but Mercy doesn't care — they're still best pals.

She points out he can say "Hi," which brightens her day; and "Bye," too. Those are Jason's only two words, but he has an iPad that lets him express feelings by touching squares like "Happy" or "Hungry," and that's also how the two communicate.

Mercy was explaining about Jason, who is 13, at Meeting's Street's The Grace School in Providence on Eddy Street, which has 110 kids from K through 8. I'd always thought it was just for kids with special needs, but it turns out two-thirds have no disabilities.

You might wonder if that's difficult, since they're in the same classrooms. But Mercy Flomo says it works fine. She explains that helping kids with so many challenges makes you feel good about yourself, and also teaches patience.

"Surprisingly," Mercy admits, "I don't have patience with my siblings." She means her three younger sisters. "They're very annoying."

But she does with Jason.

He began at Meeting Street this year, and Mercy, who started in second grade, went up to him his first day, since the school stresses including everyone. The two just clicked. Jason walks with difficulty and tires easily, but when that happens, Mercy's often right there to push his wheelchair, which is like a big stroller.

The school picked them out for me as typical buddies — there are lots of pairs like that. I was sitting with them yesterday at a lounge.

Mercy said she's not sure what Jason's disability is, but that's okay, because her focus isn't on what he can't do, but what he can.

I asked why she likes going to school with so many kids with special needs.

"I have an aunt, she has Down Syndrome," said Mercy, "and I like that everybody's included here."

I asked what it's done for her, being pals with Jason. She said that when you reach out to kids who might otherwise be left out, it teaches you about friendship.

Mercy is also pals with younger kids like Pawel, who's only 6 but taught her how to say "rainbow" in sign language — everyone at the school learns to sign, since many have hearing problems.

Being there for kids like Jason and Pawel has made Mercy think she wants to be a teacher one day. She told me her mom works at a hospital and her dad at a place like UPS, but a different company, she forgets which.

Linda Tinley was sitting with us — she's been a teacher's assistant here for 19 years.

“Mercy always makes Jason feel included,” Linda said. “That makes him more aware and focused. They’re great friends.”

I asked the school’s marketing director, Cecilia Piroto, what draws parents of kids without special needs. She said the \$9,700 tuition is reasonable for private school and the 9-acre campus and huge building are state-of-the-art. Some parents do ask if the mix of students hurts academics, but Cecilia said all kids get extra attention with classes of 15 and two teachers per class — at times more, since some children have their own outside aide.

It was getting time for lunch, which Mercy said is one of Jason’s favorite parts of the day. At that, Mercy put his iPad in front of him and asked how he felt. He touched three squares and the iPad voice said, “I want spaghetti,” which got Mercy laughing. That’s Jason right there, she said.

The two began heading down the hall. You could see how hard it was for Jason to walk, but Mercy braced him with her arm, helping with each step.

It was clear she got something back for that, which is really what being best pals is about, the things they give each other.

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