

I embrace differences. Neurodiversity included.

Why?

Because of my Fab Four Friends as a child.

My childhood was playing in the streets with neighborhood kids. Our Moms would call us in before sunset, be it early winter or late summer. Being the youngest of the probably 30 street kids, my small group of same-aged friends couldn't keep up or were not included. We considered ourselves the Fab Four: in today's status quo terms I was "neurotypical" as was my friend down the street who had the effects of thalidomide, the other fab two were one with Down's Syndrome and a neighbor who intrigued us in his unique ways. We all lived close to each other's houses, so we were a natural bond of friends in the 'hood; our Moms thankful. My mystery neighbor and I especially connected; his non-verbal communication had me rise to the occasion, especially since we both at the time were not able to conventionally communicate through common language. I was raised as an allophone; learning English at school and French watching Chez Hélène. I thought maybe because of the rudiments of language and our lack of common words we couldn't communicate. But we *did* communicate, by non-verbally sharing moments through play, or being on the sidelines and noticing the antics of others, giggling over a moment understood but by us two. I recall the sensory qualities three of our foursome tried to alleviate for our mystery friend: the itchy grass when cloud gazing in a ditch, sensing the looming lakeshore wind before a storm, the sound and smell of lawn mowers by Dads on a Saturday, the lack of space playing hide and seek, the triumph of icy cold but sticky, melting, messy popsicles, the yell of kids playing ball or street hockey, the sudden crackling of autumn swept burning leaves in a backyard. I grew up alongside my mystery neighbor friend and realized he lived in a world I didn't know; a world of amazement and wonderment he felt comfortable for me to enter and quietly discover. A world that through awareness and education, I hope today others can better understand and appreciate.

Years passed quickly, and the post-primary school years in fall/winter lessened our contact, but our summers were a full return to our Fab Foursome. My mystery neighbor became tall, strong, and active; not everybody could keep up anymore. I was the most sporty and physically able to keep up with him, although was often challenged by his sheer physical strength. His favorite activity was swimming. He would spend endless hours in the pool. Quite frankly, I was mesmerized by how he was able to stay effortlessly underwater for so long, linger in the whirling water by controlled floating, and be captivated by blowing bubbles in an ordered timing of sorts. By high school, I had certified to be a swim instructor and lifeguard. To follow my neighbor's progression, I also certified to instruct adults with special needs. I asked my school counselor to exchange gym hours to volunteer at his school, so that I could continue contact through our love of swimming. Once I was in CEGEP, my neighbor had aged-out of high school but I was determined that our swim buddy relationship continue, so I inaugurated a volunteer (certified) adapted swim program at my local CEGEP which he participated in. I am proud to say that it runs to this day and incorporates adults of all ages.

Fast forward, volunteering and community outreach remains an integral and natural part of me, thanks to the gift of friendship and the life lessons I learned from my Fab Four of friends. In today's world my 'mystery' neighbor would be understood to be autistic. Unfortunately in his (our) day autism was misunderstood and consequently, his needs, interests and abilities were not fully met. We as a society have come far, but we still have a ways to go in educating about understanding, accepting and inclusion for autistic individuals of all ages. My Fab Four friend opened my eyes, heart, and understanding of the autism spectrum who may not be able to communicate or engage in the same way as neurotypicals.

Today, I am the National Manager of community events for Autism Speaks Canada. I first volunteered for the organization in 2012 and then joined their staff in 2013. The funds raised through our Autism Speaks Canada Walk program across Canada as a registered national charity, supports research and community grants. I am proud to share that the school I volunteered at when I was younger, is now a community grant recipient. The effort of one goes far, and I hope that people will support our Autism Speaks Canada Walk in Montreal on June 11<sup>th</sup>, by joining in however they can – register, fundraise, walk, donate or volunteer. Together, let's show our support and celebrate our loved ones.

<https://autismspeakscanada.akaraisin.com/ui/walk2023/g/39087>

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