

Finalist, Non-Fiction

Dancing

By Michael McConnell

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I was released from Detroit Children's Hospital in mid-March, with two and a half months remaining of my first grade year. While in the hospital, I'd spent hours everyday catching up on schoolwork so that I wouldn't fall behind and have to repeat first grade. Instead of returning to Robinson Elementary, I finished the school year at White Elementary School, whose entire first floor catered to Detroit's handicapped elementary school children. Although I'd recovered at a remarkable rate from Guillan-Barre Syndrome, the doctors and social workers wanted me to continue my rehabilitation, so they enrolled me in White, where nurses and therapists worked alongside teachers to meet the needs of handicapped children. Like the other children on White Elementary's first floor, I woke up an extra hour early so that I could ride the bus, which traveled to all reaches of the inner city and picked up students at their homes.

The second and third floors of White served as a regular elementary school for children in the surrounding neighborhoods, and the handicapped children stayed isolated from them. We never mingled with the "normal" children at White Elementary. Our busses arrived to the school a half-hour after their classes started. Our lunch period was earlier than theirs. After our lunch break, we'd leave the lunchroom for recess before they filed in to eat. While they ate, we would do one of two things. The teachers gave us a choice: we could go to the gym and play dodgeball, or we could do my personal favorite, which was to go to the auditorium and dance onstage. We would split up into two groups; the healthier or more physically adept children would usually play dodgeball. Though I had recovered at a remarkable rate from Guillian-Barre Syndrome and was already playing physically with other children in my neighborhood, I always went to the auditorium because I loved to dance.

Michael Jackson's "Off the Wall" album had just recently come out, and that is what all of the teachers ever wanted to listen to. The children would all stand on the stage, waiting patiently while one of the teachers took the coveted record out of its sleeve and settled it onto the record player. We'd look in awe at the cover, at the picture of the young Michael, reclined on his elbow, with the late 1970's afro, wide nose, and shiny-dark skin. When the first song, "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough," would play, we would all go crazy with movement. The blind and deaf children would grab onto each other and turn hurried circles. The children in walkers would hold onto the bars with their arms and swing their hips. The children in wheelchairs paddled their arms in the air while the teachers twisted the wheelchairs to the rhythm. I would help the teachers, because there were less teachers than there were wheelchair-bound children, which I was one of just months earlier.

The only time we ever saw the “normal” children was in that same auditorium during assembly, which we all dreaded. They got to see a free freakshow. Our experience felt much different. We would hold our breaths to brace ourselves. For the convenience of the teachers, the first-floor children always filed into the auditorium last and sat in the first rows of the auditorium, but we might as well have paraded across the stage for the whole world to gawk at. As we would march single-file down the stairs and into the auditorium, students all around the room would erupt into laughter, followed by the shrill barking of the teachers; the silent students smiled in mockery at us. Mockery was the main principle that separated us from the normal children – they looked at us and laughed, while we watched them laugh at us.

Whereas most “normal” children at White Elementary would mock, heckle, and tease us relentlessly whenever they had the chance, we would tease but rarely discriminate against each other. We had our dramas and disagreements and fights like other children, but not because of handicaps. Little Mark’s deafness, Sara’s blindness, Nicole’s short two-fingered arms – none of these abnormalities were used to insult or gain leverage. I never thought about the other children as being different from me because of their disabilities, but then again, my main concern was to stay away from Angela Booker.

Though I was tall and I weighed over a hundred pounds in first grade, Angela Booker towered over me and probably outweighed me by about fifteen pounds. The brutish black girl would punch and pinch and kick me for two reasons: I wouldn’t be her boyfriend, and I was the first person in our first-grade class to start calling her “Angela Booger.” In Angela’s eyes, I represented a compound insult. First, I spurned her affections then I wittily shackled her with the kind of nickname that a child can never get rid of. During naptime, Angela Booger would jump onto a bunk near mine, and when the teacher wasn’t looking, she’d sneak over and bite me or knuckle-punch my leg or arm. I’d hit her back, but she was stronger than me, and she’d always hold me down and give me a viscious charlie-horse or indian-burn. I soon learned that calling her “Angela Booger” behind her back was safer than to her face.

I learned many other valuable things at that school. I learned that the children there played and laughed the same as the ones who attended Robinson. I learned that I should be thoughtful of others and help people who are less fortunate than me, a lesson I learned one day while coloring a picture at the same table as a girl named Nicole and a few other children. Nicole’s handicap was blatant to everyone who looked at her – her arms were half the normal size for a six-year-old girl; a web of skin connected her wrist and shoulder on each arm, and each of her small hands had only two fingers. She sat across the table from me, and I watched her as she reached for the bucket of crayons in the middle of the table. Nicole reached her webbed arm to the extent that the skin would stretch; the other hand braced against the table, but she fell forward onto her belly, still reaching for the crayon bucket. I started laughing.

“Michael,” my teacher said. Her stern voice startled me. I didn’t know that she’d been standing behind me. “What’s so funny?”

“Uh,” I muttered. I didn’t know what to say. I felt like a dozen spotlights were on me. The other children continued to play. Nicole just sat there, looking at the table and rubbing her

elbows together. She wore her hair in about a hundred little pigtails, just like LaShondra, my girlfriend from Kindergarten.

“We help each other here at this school, Michael,” the teacher said. “Nicole.”

Nicole looked up at the teacher then at me then at the teacher.

“What color do you need?”

“I don’t know,” said Nicole uncomfortably, still looking at the table. She didn’t like being on the spot either.

“Well, what color were you just reaching for?”

“Yellow.”

“Michael?”

“Huh?”

“Will you please help Nicole out by handing her the yellow crayon?” I reached into the bucket, and after fishing through the different colors, I picked out a yellow crayon that, like most of the other crayons in the bucket, had been broken in half. I’d been using a new, undamaged yellow crayon, so I gave mine to Nicole. I reached out over the table and held out the crayon, and she grabbed it with one of her two-fingered hands.

“Thank you,” she said, looking at me then at the teacher then at me before turning her attention back to her drawing. I peeled the wrapper off of the broken crayon and continued coloring. The teacher patted me gently on the shoulders and walked to another table. Pretty soon, Nicole needed a red crayon, so she asked me if I could hand her one, which I did without thinking.

That following summer, I attended a camp for handicapped children. There were children of all ages and grades there, and we stayed for two weeks, doing the things that normal children do at summer camp. We caught frogs and field-mice. We played kickball and tee-ball, and the older children played softball and basketball. We listened to stories around the campfire about the Ticonderoga – the child-eating monster that lived in the woods behind our camp – and we slept in cabins supervised by camp counselors, most of who taught at White during the school year and, like the children, lived the other fifty weeks of the year in Detroit’s inner city.

On the second-from-last day, all of the cabins competed according to age group in the camp Olympics. We competed all day in sports and horseshoes and the bean-bag toss, the potato sack race, and running and swimming races. After the camp Olympics, after the counselors gave all of the campers a gold medal and made or helped everyone get cleaned up and changed into clean clothes, they packed us into busses and drove us into the local town to the movie theatre to see “Coalminer’s Daughter.” It didn’t seem weird to me at the time, but when I look back, I think how that must have been the only movie available in that town. The theatre was packed with Michigan small town white people and our group of mostly black, inner-city Detroit handicapped children and camp counselors, watching a movie about the plight of country singer Loretta Lynn.

On the next day – the last full day of camp – we got to sleep-in until noon, and we had a special lunch of pizza and cake waiting for us in the cafeteria. Afterwards, the counselors held a trophy ceremony for excellence in certain areas, like athletics, science, and first aid, and

everybody clapped when the winners would walk or be helped to the front table, where the head counselor, who was the gym coach at the school, would shake hands and present trophies. An award was given to the best camper in each cabin, and when the coach said my cabin number and announced my name, I couldn't believe it. I stood up and as I walked toward the front, I looked around at all of the other campers, at all of the friends that I'd made, children of all ages with all kinds of different challenges and backgrounds, and they all clapped for me, and the counselors smiled at me, and the coach slapped me on the shoulder and said, "Good job, Michael." I looked around again at the other children, who were still clapping. When I got back to my seat at my cabin's table, all of my friends cheered, and I couldn't speak.

The rest of the afternoon belonged to the campers – a day of free play. We'd attended activities and workshops and therapy everyday, but not during that last day. We played at the lake and in our cabins and in the woods under the counselors' supervision. After dinner, they took us for hay rides through the woods to look for the Ticonderoga. The horrifying journey ended in an ice-cream sundae party before the dance, the big climax of the whole camping experience.

During the first part of the dance, the counselors performed Motown-style, a complete contrast from "The Coal Miner's Daughter" that we'd seen the day before. They dressed up in costumes and performed a rendition of "The Wiz," a movie starring Michael Jackson and Diana Ross, a remake of "The Wizard of Oz." "The Wiz" was huge in Detroit at the time, and we watched and laughed in excitement as the people who'd watched over us and played with us and kept us in line danced, sang, and "eased on down the road." The tin man was wrapped in aluminum foil that kept coming apart whenever he danced, and the lion wore a thick fur coat and a lot of makeup that dripped down his face as he poured sweat, but we sang when they sang, and we danced when they danced, and it felt like all of the campers were part of the performance.

The mixer followed "The Wiz." A disco ball hung in the center of the room, and one of the counselor's brought in boxes of records, and all of the children danced to Motown and disco, just like back in the school auditorium at lunch time. Then the slow dance came on, and the momentum of the crowd on the floor slowed as most of the children left for the safety of the wall. Some of the older kids started dancing with each other, and then the counselors began pulling children off of the wall and onto the dance floor. I tried to hide. I may have won the trophy for best cabin camper, but I was too shy to dance with anybody. A counselor snuck up along the wall and grabbed my shoulder.

"C'mon, Michael," she said. "Let's dance." She grabbed my hand. The skin on her palm felt very soft. I was nervous and shy and probably red in the face with embarrassment as well as sunburn. She led me a few feet onto the dance floor, and just as we started to dance, another counselor patted her on the shoulder.

"We've got a cut-in here," the other counselor said. She was holding Nicole's hand. "Go ahead, Nicole. Ask him."

"You wanna dance," Nicole said, looking at the floor.

“Sure,” I said. I held out my hands, and Nicole stepped up to me, looked at me, and curled both fingers on each of her hands around my fingers. The two counselors stepped slowly away from us, and there we were, slow dancing, holding onto each other and spinning slow circles across the dance floor. Nicole looked at me for a second and smiled. Her hair was made up in a hundred little pigtails like always, and beads of light from the disco ball raced across our faces. She was shy, so she hid her face by leaning into my chest, which was about face-level for her. This was my first slow dance with a girl; “I’ll Be There” by The Jackson 5 played on the record player. I looked over Nicole’s head and saw the two counselors who had brought us together. They were hugging each other and had tears in their eyes. The next day, all of our parents came and picked us up. I would attend Robinson Elementary the next fall. I never saw Nicole or any of those other children again.