

Of Wheelchairs and Wings: The Michelle Donovan Story

by
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Michelle Donovan passed out cold on the first day of her first teaching job. Classes at Parklane Elementary in East Point didn't start until the next week, but panic had already set in. Her assistant Debra revived her, and Michelle, still lightheaded and perspiring, looked at her class list again. Though she would be teaching just five students, the children all had polio, cerebral palsy, or sickle-cell anemia, along with two cases of congenital heart disease. She had completed a teaching degree in special education at West Georgia College in the spring, but for kids with orthopedic impairments and medical issues, she needed an entirely different set of skills.

Debra appeared to size her up from across the desk and Michelle saw herself through this experienced woman's eyes. With her overalls and long hair up in a ponytail, Michelle knew she looked about fifteen. She could read Debra's thoughts: "They gave me a baby to take care of."

Instead, Debra said, "You OK? You need some water?"

"I'm fine, thanks. I guess it hit me all at once. I've worked with some children in wheelchairs but this is way out of my field."

"They're good kids. You'll end up knowing more about what's going on inside them than their doctors do. Shoot, after a year of this you might decide to go to medical school."

"No, I have a problem with blood."

"You faint?"

Michelle smiled. "Good guess."

Debra made lots of good guesses about her that first year. She noticed Michelle's tendency to focus on a particular child and would call out, "Hey, what's TJ doing over there?" to broaden her perceptions. She taught her to be aware of the whole classroom at all times. A

fourth-generation teacher, Michelle loved the children and the atmosphere of the classroom, but Debra helped her discover a love for the work itself.

Toward the end of the school year, Michelle pointed that out to Debra. “You ever teach a kid to ride a bike?”

“Yeah, a few.”

“That’s what you did for me. After a while, I didn’t even notice your hands on my back. One day I looked over my shoulder and you were way behind, waving and clapping. I knew I could do this.”

“Just don’t fall and cut your knee. I’d hate to see you faint again.”

Debra helped her love the work so much that Michelle wanted to continue to teach out of her original field. For the next three years, she taught all day and went to night school at Georgia State to get a Master’s in orthopedic impairment. The work took every bit of her effort and creativity, but she found she’d made the perfect choice for her interests. She could take back to the classroom everything she learned about wheelchairs and walkers as well as anatomy and therapies. Michelle was hooked.

As medical technology advanced, children with ever greater needs could attend school. Kyle was five years old when he came to Michelle’s class at Mimosa Elementary in Roswell. He had lung disease, and a tracheotomy helped him breathe, but he still needed to be on oxygen during the day and a ventilator at night. His skin always looked dusky blue. Kyle had to be suctioned too, and he required a feeding tube—it seemed that nothing was right. Yet, Kyle smiled all the time.

Michelle had grown up as one of the original Trekkies, and one of the first questions she always asked her new students was, “Do you like *Star Trek*?” Kyle couldn’t talk much, but she

saw it in his eyes and the extra-wide grin: he loved *Star Trek*. She rewarded his progress with *Star Trek* stickers on a motivational behavior chart, even getting him to eat a little bit on his own.

All of the "normal" kids accepted Kyle immediately. Michelle was pushing one of her children back from the lunchroom one day, and they nearly collided with a five-year-old from a regular kindergarten class pulling the smiling Kyle down the hall in a wagon. For the two years he attended Michelle's class, his sunny nature touched everyone at Mimosa.

Michelle knew that Kyle lived on borrowed time, but she tried not to think about it. After she visited him in the hospital on one occasion, she fantasized about him being touched by an angel and dashing from the medical building under his own power, his cheeks rosy as he ran so fast that no child could keep up. For children with physical impairments, however, even the smallest, shortest-lived steps can be miraculous—just breathing on their own for a time or mastering one part of their bodies.

One Sunday, Kyle's nurse called Michelle to say that he had died. His classmates got the adults through the days that followed. On Monday, one of Michelle's students said, "Oh, Kyle is in heaven, running around, and he's having such a good time." The children talked among themselves, speculating about the games Kyle played in heaven that his impairments had prevented here. They brought in toy telephones and called him up and talked to him during the school day.

Kyle's father, Karl, spoke at the funeral. A week or so before he passed away, Kyle had wanted to make something for his father's birthday. Michelle's longtime assistant Carole helped him as he wrote on pieces of paper all the things he planned to do for his dad, applying himself as never before. Carole bound the pages together and sent them home with him, in time for the birthday party. Karl talked about how much that gift meant to him, reinforcing Michelle's feeling

that the things the kids grew especially excited about doing could foster the most learning and bring the most joy. Everyone learned from Kyle as well. Michelle often remembered the miracle of his smile and imagined him as free as a bird, his face and body radiant.

Sometimes, miracles flew in on the most surprising wings. Michelle couldn't have predicted such a thing when a boy named Justin enrolled in her class. He had cerebral palsy; as a quadriplegic, he spent his days confined to a wheelchair, unable to move very much. Justin didn't communicate orally but could point to symbols. She asked him to show her a dog and he gestured at the correct picture right away.

Kyle and all of Michelle's other kids gave her daily inspiration—and a few of them provided momentary exasperation—but the nonverbal children resonated deepest with her. Justin talked with his eyes and his hands, and Michelle paid attention and listened. She worked with Justin until he could string symbols together to make sentences.

When the Gulf War broke out in 1991, she wanted her class to write to somebody stationed over in the Middle East. In addition to demonstrating their patriotism, her class could work on grammar, social studies, and current events.

“Can we ask them anything we want?” one of her boys said, rubbing his hands together.

“Anything.”

“Can we ask if they, like, killed somebody?”

“Just make sure you use good sentence structure.”

This assignment appealed to every one of the children. They all typed on computers in their different ways, some trotting out their most bloodthirsty questions, but others asking their most poignant ones: “Do you have boys and girls back home? Can we write to them and say

hello for you?" Justin pointed to the things he wanted to say, and Michelle wrote them down alongside the others' work.

They sent the letter with a class picture to the Navy Department. Two months later, an F-14 pilot on the carrier *Independence* named Captain Jay Yakeley wrote back that he shared their letter with the whole ship. The class began a correspondence with their new friend, the decorated naval aviator who used the call sign "Spook." From his jet, Spook shot videos of camels in the desert, oil fields, and takeoffs and landings on the carrier. He set the images to music and sent the films to Michelle's class.

They replied with videos of class projects. The boys at play pretended to be Captain "Spook" Yakeley instead of Captain Kirk. As Christmas neared, the class sent t-shirts with the children's handprints and a video of them singing carols.

The following February, Michelle got a phone call at the school. "This is Jay Yakeley," the caller said. She'd never heard his voice before. He told her, "We're back in California. How do you think the kids would like it if I flew my F-14 out to Dobbins Air Reserve Base, so they could see it and meet me and my navigator?"

"Like it?" she said. "As soon as I tell them, you'll be able to hear their cheering all the way over in San Diego."

They set a date and her class got busy. They made a big box of Southern souvenirs, with postcards, Moon Pies, pecans, and peanuts, and put in lots of class pictures. On the day of Jay's arrival, everyone dressed in red, white, and blue. Michelle, Carole, and the other assistants decorated the wheelchairs with crepe paper, and they led a convoy of kids and parents from Roswell to Dobbins.

When “Spook” carried each child up the ladder to look in the cockpit, he said, “See, we're strapped in just like you are in your wheelchair. We have to do our best all the time and stay focused.” The kids loved it, pointing and asking questions. Justin only pointed, of course, but Jay explained everything he could.

After everyone had a turn up top, Jay and his navigator showed the children and their parents the underside of the plane, the wheels, and places for armaments. Justin must have been sitting too far away, because he leaned forward, straining to hear and see more. Michelle was pointing her camcorder at him as he gripped his wheels. For the first time in his life, he pushed his wheelchair. She got it on video, though her hands trembled and her eyes burned.

Michelle rushed over and said, “Justin, I am so, so proud of you!” He smiled and smiled for the camera, obviously pleased with himself.

She continued to praise him, crying, “I cannot believe you did it!”

Justin looked at her and laughed. As clear as day, he said, “Spook.”

Who could hold back the tears over this miracle? Jay and his navigator, tough, battle-hardened veterans, wept at least as much as Michelle and the others.

For many of Michelle's kids, such success leads to exciting new possibilities: Justin left her after seven years and went on to graduate from Roswell High School. Twenty-five years of teaching children with orthopedic impairments—more than half her lifetime and far longer than anyone else in Fulton County—has allowed her to give the best part of herself. And seeing her children push open doors of opportunity on their own provides Michelle with rewards that none of her many teaching honors can match. To witness Justin in action, to remember Kyle's smile—that's as good as it gets.