

In 1997 our son TJ was born. As new proud parents, you can't help but formulate an endless list of hopes and dreams for your child's future. Will he be a Doctor or Engineer, a Shortstop or a Linebacker? As you envision what life will be like for your new son, you never factor in the potential that the future is anything but limitless. But just before TJ turned 2 we were hit with the news that he was diagnosed with a disability called Autism. Instantly, your body and emotions become numb to the reality that the future had more unknowns than ever. Will he be able to talk, read, and develop motor skills to tie a shoe or ride a bike? And one of the biggest question marks was how will he fit into society and how will society accept him.

Over the years thanks to a tremendous amount of hard work from therapists and educators TJ eventually was walking and talking, reading and writing. His hard work and progress made us so proud of him. Yet the social interaction was still a challenge. We also realized that while TJ would probably never be able to participate in sports with his typical peers, he really expressed a desire to partake in sporting activities and loved the action. What's a parent to do? What were our options? We started to find opportunity through a series of sport programs for special needs children and that is when we met Rick Leonetti who introduced us to the world of Athletes Helping Athletes. What a great idea. A program devoted to connecting local special needs athletes with mainstream student athletes in the spirit of friendship for their mutual benefit and inspiration. What a better way to help bridge the gap of social acceptance than to partner typical peers with special needs children in one of the most universally accepted activities – SPORTS.

TJ participated in the Football Fun night, than the Baseball Spring training day at Extra Innings, and finally the basket ball night at CR south. The turn out was amazing, the atmosphere was electric and the smiles on the faces were too many to count. There was even Louis Armstrong singing it's a wonderful world. It was difficult to tell who was having more fun our kids or the typical athletes. And if that wasn't enough TJ was given the opportunity to be an honorary captain at both a CR South Basketball and Football Game. The ego and confidence boost of hearing his name announced over the loud speaker and walking out with the team captains, standing along side the team during the national anthem and oh yes, getting his picture taken with the entire cheerleading squad, what could be better?

Neighbors would come up to him and say Hey TJ I saw you at the Basketball game the other night that was so cool. His classmates would come up to him and say, was that you on the field with the Captains at the Football game the other night. How did you get to do that? I want to do that too? It happened right in front of our eyes, the social barriers were falling and he was not only being accepted but now has become a part of the community and an inspiration to so many of our friends and family.

AHA has been a tremendous experience and opportunity for our family. It was a key to unlocking one of the many doors that we feared may never open for our son. On behalf of TJ and all of the other special needs athletes, I would like to personally thank all the volunteers, special needs Athletes, student athletes, cheerleaders, and all of their parents who together have given us this opportunity and made the Athletes Helping Athletes program so successful. Thank you too to all of the golfers who came out today to support this program. Because of all of you, the potential for this program and for our children is endless, and with your continued support this program will continue to provide amazing opportunities for special needs athletes for years to come.

With much gratitude,
Roseann and Jim Fox