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More Rooms like This

Michael Peirce is in fifth grade and suffers from cerebral palsy. He can't walk, talk or write, but he dreams all disabled kids can do whatever they couldn't before. His school room, room 205, is filled with ponies and rainbows. Every day they watch “The Magic School Bus” instead of learning. The lights dim and Michael rolls in with his wheelchair and the teacher says, “where will the bus take us today?” The class cheers quietly. Michael hates how the room smells like baby powder and apple juice even though no one is a baby. He hates how the aides talk to him in that singsong voice adults use for toddlers or puppies.

After a dreadful day in room 205, his mom asks if he wants to be included in… she hesitates, then says, “normal classes,” and sighs. Michael points on his board. Yes. His mom said his teacher emailed her they are starting “Inclusion Classes” and he’s starting tomorrow. He jerked his legs uncontrollably with excitement.

Michael’s aid, Mrs Meyers, pushes the wheelchair into Mr. Smith’s classroom. As soon as they walk in, everyone looks at him. He smiles softly. Mr. Smith says to the class, “Everybody say hi to Michael!" About 3–5 people say hi to him, making him look down at his shoes sadly. “Let's start science!” Mr. Smith asks, “what is the fifth planet of the solar system?” Most kids shout answers. Michael can't, but his eyes light up. He taps his board rapidly. Mrs. Meyers starts to interpret in her singsong way, but Michael shakes his head firmly. Mr. Smith notices, walks over, kneels to his level, and says calmly, "Take your time, Michael. What do you think?" The class quiets. Michael points letter by letter: J-U-P-I-T-E-R H-A-S 95 M-O-O-N-S. A few kids go "Whoa." One boy whispers, "That's more than I thought." For the first time that day, Michael's shoulders relaxed, he felt respected. Michael taps his aid on the shoulder and points to M-O-R-E-R-O-O-M-S-L-I-K-E-T-H-I-S on his board. The aide nods and asks Mr. Smith if there are any more “Inclusion classes.” “It depends on how well he does in this class,” he says quietly.

At the end of the day, Mrs Meyers pushes Michael into the bus. When Michael gets home, his parents roll him into the kitchen and say "how'd it go” in that singsong voice. He points to A-N-S-W-E-R-E-D C-L-A-S-S Q-U-E-S-T-I-O-N. “WOW,” his parents say like they never heard that. Right after, Michael’s mom gets a call. He only hears one end. “Are you sure?” “You don't have to…” “Okay thank you.” “Bye.” "Michael's getting an electric wheelchair!” says Michael’s mom. Michael squealed and jerked his legs. His parents tell him to calm down and turn on a nature documentary. Michael zones out and remembers his old house, like the weird stain on the dining room wall.

Michael's mom calls his name again, her voice steady and excited (not singsong this time). "Michael? Honey, come here—I want to show you something. The school just called back. Mr. Smith said you did so great today in science that they're already talking about adding you to math and reading inclusion classes next week. This wheelchair is going to help you get around faster. What do you think—ready to roll into more 'normal' rooms?" Michael points to Y-E-S R-E-A-D-Y and his mom says slowly, "Alrighty," then we are starting tomorrow. The kid who said "that's more than I thought," Max, sat next to him the next day in math. Max said, "yo do you know this stuff?" Michael pointed to E-Q-U-I-V-A-L-E-N-T. "Thanks man," Max said, and explained his answer to the class. Max leans over again, "Dude, you're basically our solar system expert now."

Michael feels appreciated by his classmates, not just teachers. For the first time, the room didn't feel too big or too loud. It felt like normal life waiting to happen. Michael uses his electric wheelchair for the first time and is glad he's taking a step toward independence. As the wheelchair hummed quietly, Michael remembered the old dining room stain shaped like a lopsided heart. He'd stared at it for hours, memorizing every swirl. His body might not cooperate, but his mind had never stopped racing ahead. Now, finally, people are starting to catch up. As he zips around in the new electric chair he thinks about how this is the start of "disabled kids doing what they couldn't before." Not full walking or talking yet, but independence in movement and voice. He thinks to himself, “how can I help all disabled kids like me?” He thinks if kids tell their parents to start a fundraiser with doctors, he could change the world. He starts asking his friends A-S-K-Y-O-U-R-P-A-R-E-N-T-S-F-O-R-F-I-X-M-E-A-N-D-M-O-R-E. All his friends say “okay.” Their parents and kids hand out papers that say “fundraising for the hospital of Baylor Scott and White.” They raised 1,462,933 dollars. Posters were everywhere saying “disabled kids get fixed for free!!!” and doctors found ways to help disabled kids.