

It takes two to make a thing go right



BY GINA CROTCHFELT

"Attitude is everything." Whoever coined that term was spot on. My son Lucas had a rough start to first grade. Although, thanks to two very special people at Walnut Ridge in Vernon, he will end the year on a much higher note - with a much better attitude.

By age 7, Lucas had more health-related issues than the average 7-year-old. Even though dealing with such challenges

has had positive changes, it's also affected his attitude negatively. Lucas can be extremely sensitive. And as any parent will tell you, this does not always play out well when there are other children around. Most adults who know Lucas will say he's sweet, funny, friendly and outgoing. However, at the start of first grade, these qualities did not seem to shine through when he was with his peers. Lucas didn't have that same sunny, positive outlook when it came to socializing, playing and sharing with the other first graders.

I will admit that I do tend to be hyper-sensitive to Lucas because of all I've been through with him. So communicating with his teacher Valerie Start was a fairly regular occurrence. Valerie was always available to talk with me and kept a positive outlook assuring me Lucas would be fine. As the year progressed, and Lucas' health issues seemed to be getting worse, I felt I needed to do more. I knew his attitude, self-esteem and general outlook were being negatively affected. Through coordination with Valerie, I requested the assistance of Walnut Ridge's guidance counselor, Nicole Keane. Nicole agreed to meet with Lucas once a week. This was a huge relief because I knew this meant Lucas would have opportunities to discuss his feelings with someone he trusted in an environment where he felt comfortable. I also knew that he would be given advice and guidance on dealing with school

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"The consistency piece is so key here, and my long-term goal is to be the face of consistency at Schuyler Colfax Middle School," he advocates. "That means understanding teachers' perspective on the needs for their kids and having the kids see the same smiling face when they get dropped off every morning."

Clearly, Mr. M puts the "pal" in principal and nobody has felt that more than Sam. That's the reason Sam's father is here again writing a tribute to an educator who "saved my son." We started calling him Mr. M because he became that kind of friend to us when guiding Sam through a discipline issue at the end of sixth grade that was a growing-up moment and the beginning of the end of his school aversion. From our perspective, M could stand for "marvelous," "magnificent" and "majestic."

Sam has some words of his own:

**Valerie Start First Grade Teacher
Nicole Keane Guidance Counselor
Walnut Ridge Primary School, Vernon**

Why Valerie and Nicole are game changers...

"When your child struggles, as a parent you struggle right along with them. Valerie and Nicole not only gave my son reasons and skills to change his attitude but also helped him recognize his strengths and how to use them. They cleared the path so that I was able to guide Lucas as well."

-Gina Crotchfelt, Art Director

situations and his peers that I may not always be able to help with.

Valerie and Nicole continued to work with Lucas throughout the school year, all the while keeping me updated and addressing specific situations as they occurred. Both women were very generous with their time and consideration. They addressed my concerns and listened to everything I had to say. They would not only offer suggestions, but would follow up to let me know outcomes. If something didn't work, they would try something else. They continued to work together to make sure all of Lucas' issues and my concerns were being resolved. Often, it seemed, just as one hurdle had been overcome, another would arise. But, neither Valerie nor Nicole ever let anything fall by the wayside. By May, I could see a very big difference in Lucas. His attitude toward school and his classmates had changed. He talked about his friends at school and the activities they did together. When I got to visit him during Fun Day, I witnessed him interacting with other children and having fun in a way that made my heart glow.

But the biggest reward came when Lucas was awarded May's Student of the Month honor. He received a certificate stating, "Lucas has worked hard to learn new ways to communicate with friends and solve conflicts. He enjoys helping his classmates." This new social paradigm is something that would not have been possible without the care and dedication of Valerie Start and Nicole Keane.

"Caring, funny, helpful and kind," he asserts. "And understanding."

Sam no longer suffers from school aversion syndrome, or at least no longer shows any symptoms. Mr. M attributes that to a team that includes an amazing Child Study Team leader in Caitlin Rodgers, Math Teacher Anne Dedio, Social Studies Teacher Brian Callahan, Science Teacher Lisa Klink and ELA Teacher Karen Masercola. Sam is walking through the halls with his head up, talking to kids who are talking to him. On his most recent report card, he had all A's and a B in ELA.

"He's way more invested in everything that's going on in this building," Mr. M reports. "He's calm, he's focused and to see his smiling face just brightens up my day."

We can only end this show of appreciation with a thank-you note. Thank you to all the teachers and administrators who have changed the game for kids like Sam. Thank you Mr. M from Sam's mother and father for saving our son. And from Sam to Mr. M: "Thank you for looking out for me."