

# My Guardian Angel

By Heidi Nixon



My second year of teaching proved to be a very challenging but rewarding year. In my grade three class, the students had a variety of academic needs. Before starting this school year, I could never imagine what lessons these students would teach me or how they would affect my life. Some of my students had difficulties with reading, some with math, and one of my students was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome during the previous year.

When I first met eight-year-old Nate (not his real name),



I immediately thought that he reminded me of a little hedgehog. He had a round head of dark spiky hair and he walked with his head down, plowing through whatever crossed his path. He made me smile as he was so comical, like a cartoon character. His mind was a beautiful gift and I loved listening to him tell stories. He would draw comic strips based on classroom events and he would always draw me as the

princess who needed to be saved. But what did I need saving from? He was so perceptive of the things that I rarely noticed, so I often wondered what he knew that I did not.

One day, Nate's mother came to tell me that Nate was getting glasses and that he was really concerned that people would not recognize him with glasses on. At the beginning of the school year, I would wear my glasses occasionally, but whenever I asked Nate to look at me, he would reach up, take off my glasses and then say, "There. That's better." I did not find this strange, as my niece who was two years old at the time, would do the same thing. I guess some believe that glasses mask the real message that the eyes convey. I had stopped wearing my glasses and wore contacts lenses instead. Now I realized that it was important to model for Nate that wearing glasses does not change who the person is.

I started to wear my glasses to school and Nate would tell me about the pair he had chosen to order. He told me he thought his glasses would give him special powers and I could do nothing but smile at his wishful thinking. During an in-class discussion, I decided to discuss how differences can bring us together. I asked the students to think of a way

that they were different from everyone else in the class. One boy wore glasses, one girl had freckles, one boy wore hearing aids, etc. We discussed how wearing glasses or changing the style of your hair, or using hearing aids, does not change who the person is on the inside. The discussion was for Nate's benefit, but it was a discussion that we all benefited from.

**I just wanted them to know that they had accepted me, but I, too, was different.**

I decided to share something extremely personal with my class, which is sometimes important for teachers to do during those teachable moments. I admitted to my class that I have a condition called primary lymphedema. I lifted my pant leg to reveal my swollen right lower leg. I could see the surprise and shock in the eyes of my students. Not only was their teacher not the person they had once thought, but she also cared enough about them to share a deep and dark secret.

Nate's attention was awe-inspired. He was not the only one who was captivated by my story. You could hear a pin drop as the students tried to assess what this meant. Was their teacher sick? Would she be okay? Their young minds raced a mile



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a minute and they craved more knowledge. They wanted answers—answers I did not have. Answers that I also wanted, but had never received. This was the first time I had ever admitted why my leg was swollen. When asked, I often lied and said that I had sprained my ankle. I didn't want to hear the stream of questions that always followed when others did not understand.

I took so much care in my teaching career to conceal my swollen lower leg. I wore pants as often as possible to camouflage the compression stocking I had to wear at all times. I tried to sit as much as I could, but did not want to be labeled as lazy or inactive. I would sometimes come home and cry

because of the pain of my swollen lower limb from standing all day, but I never revealed any of this to my students. I just wanted them to know that they had accepted me, but I, too, was different.

My students wanted to know how it had happened. I did not really know, nor did the doctors, however I told them how I found out. I told them how I was running in a race against my cousin on the beach. I was running flat out when I tripped on a rock. I twisted my ankle and subsequently lost the race. My ankle remained swollen for weeks afterward, causing my mother's concern and my trip to the Janeway's Children Hospital in Newfoundland. When I told this part of my story, Nate spoke,

without raising his hand. He looked me directly in the eyes and told me that if he had been there, he would have yelled, "Look out!" He thought that if he was there, he could have saved me and prevented all my suffering. He wanted to be my "guardian angel." It was as if he had always known why I was the princess who needed to be saved. It was that moment that touched me deeply. A child who never paid attention to anything for more than five minutes had been so enthralled, so captivated and felt so connected to me at that moment. Nate never again needed reassurance to wear his new glasses. Glasses meant he was different. They meant that he could be in the same club as me. LP

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