

September 17, 2022

To Whom This May Concern:

18 years ago my son, Marco, was born with Down syndrome and my husband and I found ourselves thrust onto a road less traveled. As the years went on, Marco also received an autism diagnosis and an apraxia of speech diagnosis. With each new diagnosis, we were placed on another road and left feeling more and more alone. There are plenty of programs/groups for children with Down syndrome, a plethora of programs/groups for children with autism, and even some for children with apraxia. A group for a child with combined diagnoses? Hard to find. And no matter where we went when Marco was a child, we just didn't feel like we completely fit in.

Last fall I came across a Facebook page whose name immediately intrigued me...Always B Smiling. When I began reading the page, I found myself smiling from ear to ear when I realized this page may be what I have been seeking for years; a place for us to feel comfortable. Imagine my surprise, when after our first bike ride, it was actually so much more than a comfortable place.

My husband, daughter, Marco, and I walked towards the Always B Smiling tent on the Montour Trail for our first ride and it was as though we had arrived at our family reunion. The thing that I recall most fondly is that, of the four of us, Marco was the person who was greeted first by Dean and Kristin and he was greeted by name. Marco was SEEN as he so rarely is when we are around people we do not know, and sadly even some people we do know. It was so amazing not to have to explain that Marco is non-verbal and thus the reason he was not answering questions or responding. Dean and Kristin spoke to him as they would any 'typical' person and Marco's positive response to them brought tears to my eyes.

Since that first ride we have attended a Steelers game, the 5K, an additional ride, and are eagerly looking forward to the Spooktacular B Together program on October 2nd. And though all of these experiences have been amazing for our family, we cannot wait for the Always B Smiling Activity Center on the Montour Trail to become a reality.

As a teenager with special needs there is very little programming available to Marco and so the opening of the ABS Activity Center has us thrilled to the core. Kristin and Dean's vision for what they want to bring to life is solid, well planned out, and focused on the true needs for teens and young adults with special needs in Western Pennsylvania. I can actually already envision Marco being a steady participant in the wonderful opportunities that will be presented to him there.

You will not be disappointed if you choose Dean and Kristin Huibregtse to be the recipients of a grant to support the Activity Center. They have a solid business plan in place, but more importantly, they have the hearts to continue to make Always B Smiling the home away from home that so many families like ours so desperately seek.

The Ciummo family looks forward to being a part of Dean and Kristin's dream for their charity for many years to come. And I can assure you that every time we take part in an activity, Marco will "Always B Smiling"!

Sincerely,

Sharon Ciummo

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