

One day in 2nd Grade my teacher gave us an assignment to pick our favorite song and tell the class why we liked it. I was a seven-year-old music junky and always on the prowl for new songs, so this assignment was made for me. I found most of my classmates' presentations disappointing, until one boy came up to present his song. As soon as I heard the opening bass, I was hooked. He had chosen "Rolling in the Deep" by Adele. Not only was I thrilled because he shared a great song that would immediately become a favorite, I was also intrigued by Zor.

I knew he was different because he always had an adult with him and didn't interact with the rest of our class much. I had heard the phrase "special needs" but had no idea what that really meant. After his presentation, I knew part of it must mean "better," at least in his musical taste. Little did I know, this was just the tip of an iceberg about how Zor's differences made him better in several ways that were important to me. Over the last ten years, I have come to learn and appreciate his specialness.

Soon after that, I began to hang out with Zor at school. Our parents noticed and organized play dates. One day in 5th grade, I arrived at his house as he was doing a puzzle. Zor is not much of a verbal communicator so I just sat down at the table and watched. To my amazement, he was able to pick puzzle pieces up and place them immediately in the correct place. He didn't have to start by separating the edge pieces from the middles. He just would see the shape of a piece and knew where it fit. I was flabbergasted because I had never seen someone complete a 1000-piece puzzle so quickly and easily. For me, puzzles are impossible, but I would only find out why later that year. I had struggled in math since kindergarten and after years of tears, I was finally tested at school and given an IEP because of a math deficiency. Math was incredibly challenging for me, especially problems regarding spatial awareness. Shapes, learning time, and anything with a graph were extremely difficult. Zor's superpower of spatial awareness was my kryptonite. Even with this superpower, we ended up in the same math group in middle school. Yet, as I soon discovered, even though he could answer high school arithmetic equations with ease and was a whiz at anything with a pattern, he couldn't do a word problem. We have so much in common. Not only does he have good music taste, but he also is embarrassingly separated out for Math. A friendship made in heaven.

Since fifth grade my IEP and a lot of Khan Academy have helped me get to grade level in Math. Meanwhile, Zor has suffered from Epilepsy and has become even less communicative verbally. But Zor and I remain friends and I was overjoyed this year to be paired with him at my school's Spartan Buddies club. I have been active in this club for the past six years through middle and high school. Every Thursday we eat lunch and do activities with our Special Ed Buddies. Each time I am reminded once again that we are all "special needs" in some way, whether we are labeled that way or not. I've also realized that I can help Zor with communication skills that come easier for me, and he can train me in puzzles. But most importantly, he teaches me lessons about true authenticity that he embodies more than almost anyone else I know. Zor and our friendship have shaped me as much as almost anyone in my life, and you can bet we are belting out Adele at the lunch tables on Thursdays.