

Interview #1

Name of Interviewee: LouAnne Gonzalez

Occupation: Preschool Teacher, Mom of Elise a student we are highlighting

Date of Interview: 3/18/23

00:00:01:07 - 00:00:43:10

Interviewer

Oh, this is great. Okay. So if you just say your name and your relationship with Elise. My name's LouAnne, and I am Elise's mom.

How old is Elise? And what does she enjoy doing in her free time?

My daughter Elise is 16, going on 17 in May, and she loves watching videos on her iPhone. She loves to watch reruns of football games, reruns of basketball games.

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LouAnne

And then she also likes to watch ABC songs. She loves Peppa Pig, Olivia the Pig. And she also just loves hanging out with her siblings and her cousins.

What is one thing you wish people knew about your child?

I wish people knew just how smart Elise is. I think sometimes people see someone like Elise and they just assume stereotypical things about children like her and if they only knew how intelligent she actually is, I think it would shock a lot of people.

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LouAnne

I know that when people meet her and they converse with her, they're surprised at just how normal and bright she is. Even though she looks different.

What are the best qualities of Elise?

Her best qualities are her humor and her communication skills. She is. Oh, and I must say, her memory. She can remember names, faces, places, events.

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LouAnne

If someone says the name of a person, she can attach that to something that happened a decade ago. It's incredible how her mind works. And she is so funny. She loves to make people laugh, whether it be, you know, silly things like burping or or just asking when they took a shower. She just loves talking with people.

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LouAnne

And I think that makes her so special because she always wants to be talking and learning and conversing with everyone around her.

What is Elise's biggest obstacle day to day?

I think Lisa's biggest obstacle is the fact that she can't talk. It really makes it hard when we're out in public and she might want to converse with the clerk or the waitress but she can't.

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LouAnne

She uses her sign and they can understand it. So I'm always the interpreter or whoever she's with interprets. But I think it would just be amazing for all of us if we could just know what's going on in her mind and she could verbalize it. Her talker is an amazing tool. She uses it proficiently, but I wish she could talk.

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LouAnne

Do you feel that Elise has the opportunity to socialize with her kids?

I think Elise definitely has opportunities to socialize, to make friends, to be around whomever she wants to be around. I don't feel like she's at all prohibited from any of that.

What are Elise's plans when Elise finishes high school?

That's a good question. I don't know what her plans will be.

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LouAnne

Probably going on to the next sort of school for kids like her. But honestly, I think she would be happy coming to preschool with me and working there. Hanging out with Nana, whom she adores. I really don't know what the next steps are, to be honest. After the high school program, I do worry after high school ends that she won't have as many opportunities to be social.

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LouAnne

She loves new people. Talking to people and I've heard through people that have gone on past the high school program that it's smaller and just not as many opportunities.

What is a misconception about disabilities that you wish people understood?

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LouAnne

I think one major misconception that people have about children with special needs, especially like a leash, is that they just aren't as intelligent as the next person. I think they judge them by their appearance and they assume that they are only at a certain level of intelligence when actually it's quite the opposite. When it comes to social cues and intuition.

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LouAnne

I think Elise far exceeds other people her age. So I think if people just didn't judge so quickly, I think it would just open up their eyes to a world that they probably don't even realize is there.

What do you think about Spartan Buddies?

I love Spartan buddies. I think it's a fabulous club, and I know Elise looks forward to it every Thursday.

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LouAnne

Do you think that it has been beneficial?

I think one of the best parts about Mountain View is the fact that they have the Spartan Buddies Club. I have friends that have children at other schools that don't have clubs as well, run as Spartan buddies, and their children are missing out on social interactions. They just want friends.

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LouAnne

I think that's another thing that kids with special needs people don't realize is that they just want to be accepted and liked and they want to hang out like everybody else. They just want to be friends. And so Spartan Buddies facilitates that so well, and I'm so thankful for it.

Do you think it is more difficult for children with disabilities to make lasting friendships with those without a disability?

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LouAnne

Why or why not? I think it is harder for children with special needs to make lasting friendships only because it's hard for the other person. So for Elise to have a friendship, it takes work for the other person because they have to learn how she communicates, what she likes to do. And quite honestly, her level of fun is, is more, you know, young, fun like, you know, an elementary school person.

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LouAnne

And so as she gets older, it's harder and harder for kids to kind of come back to her age, if that makes sense. What are your hopes and dreams, friends? My hopes and dreams for Elise are that she will continue to be loved, that she will always have people around her that love her. I don't even want to think about when her dad and I are gone, but I am so thankful that she has an older brother and older sister and a younger sister that adores her.

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LouAnne

And I know they will take care of her for the rest of her life.

Is there any program or activity that you wish the school did not?

I think Mountain View provides a ton of support and activities for kids like Elise. I honestly can't think of anything else that they might be able to provide that they don't already.

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LouAnne

Do you think it would be helpful to have some classes or clubs to integrate both students with disabilities and peers?

I do think it would be helpful to have as many opportunities to mix kids with special needs and typical developing kids only because it benefits both groups. It's hard. It's hard because, again, everyone's on a different level and it takes work to hang out with kids with special needs, but it benefits those that don't have special needs.

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LouAnne

And it definitely, definitely benefits all kids with special needs because they just want to be normal.

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LouAnne

How did you feel when you found out you were going to have a child with a disability.?

I was pregnant with Alice and had my first ultrasound about halfway through my pregnancy and that was the first time I learned that something might be wrong. She was my third baby, so my first two were completely normal and I will never forget where I was sitting when I had the conversation with the doctor who told me she didn't know what was wrong, but something seemed like it could be wrong.

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LouAnne

And from that point on, for the rest of my pregnancy, we didn't know. We didn't know if she would live or die. We didn't know if she'd survive the birth. She came early. I had a C-section

and immediately she was put on oxygen and lived in the nick for about a month. And the doctors told us she probably would never live any sort of life that would be worth living and actually told us either we can end her life in the hospital or I could have ended it while she was still inside of me.

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LouAnne

So it was devastating. No mother ever wants to be told anything's wrong with their child, let alone do you even want your child to live? And I just remember being in the hospital, just praying that God would allow her to live. That's really all I wanted. And as you know, she has completely exceeded every doctor's expectations. The fact that they told us that her life would be not worthwhile, it breaks my heart because I know there's other children that have probably not gone on to live because doctors have said that.

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LouAnne

So I'm just thankful that we chose to trust God and not what the doctors had told us. Thank you for sharing that.

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LouAnne

So based on my research there, since the disabilities, huh? Yup. Yup. But what if, like companies like Google and Facebook for hiring abilities to wish more big companies put more of an effort? I think the more companies that will integrate kids with special needs into their programs, into their workforce. However, I mean, in the lunch line, whatever they can come up with, I think would benefit.

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LouAnne

Like I said, everyone. Both the employees and the state are the children with special needs. I definitely think there's probably more companies that could try harder to integrate them. But again, it's not easy and it takes a lot of work, just like it takes work for us as a family to always take care of Elise. She's not your typical child.

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LouAnne

So I do wish more people would make an effort.

And how do you think you help her prepare for the future?

We are preparing, Elise, for the future by sending her to school, having her involved in things like Spartan bodies. Supporting her in any way we can. Always keeping up with her. Tucker. And the latest ways for her to communicate.

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LouAnne

Trying to teach her new things as much as possible. I always remember the therapist telling me when she was young, You just never want to get to a point where she doesn't learn anymore. Where she stops learning, then that's a bad sign. And I'll never forget that because I always look for that. How can I teach her more?

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LouAnne

Can I teach her more? And so far she's. She's always able to learn more. She's now she hasn't reached that point. So I feel like she's always going to learn for the rest of her life, just like we do. Just like we do. So that's my hope.

Is there any other story that you'd like to share for this documentary?

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LouAnne

Oh, Elise, there are a lot of stories I could share about Elise. Some very embarrassing ones. There's a few stories that I think about when she was born and she was on oxygen for about a year. And so I would go to the grocery store and I'd be carrying her and her little baby carrier, and I'd have a tank of oxygen on my shoulder like my purse.

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LouAnne

And she had the nasal oxygen thing. And I had never been around kids with special needs. I didn't know anyone that had a child with special needs. You don't see them that often, especially a baby and a baby carrier in downtown Los Altos with oxygen. And I will never forget the stairs and the people that just absolutely could not stop looking.

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LouAnne

And I quickly grew a thick skin and I learned to just look at them and say, Isn't she beautiful? Because sort of catches them off guard and they realize, oh, gosh, I am staring. But there's stories about Elise. We were I don't know if you want to, but that's what I but we were traveling in San Diego, in the Hotel Coronado, which is this very ritzy, beautiful hotel.

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LouAnne

And Elise. Little did we know she was probably three or four and she wasn't wearing underwear because she had I think she had peed in her underwear. We took them off. So she's wearing a skirt, no underwear. And we're walking along the beautiful, tiled, crowded hotel lobby. And she had a bowel movement on the floor in the hotel.

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LouAnne

And my husband was behind her and had a big one because it was the beach. He had his big beach hat on. He took his hat off and just threw it right on top and no one ever saw it. He wasn't actually right there with him. I was in the bathroom. He called me and said, You need to come out here and bring a bunch of toilet paper.

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LouAnne

So that's a story we'll never forget, because it was just one of those things that you just can't believe. But that's honestly living with a child like Alice or any child with special needs. Things like that somewhat become normal because you just never know. You can never expect that she's going to be as you might expect, because she's always throwing out new things.

00:14:20:10 - 00:14:48:04

LouAnne

Oh, thank you so much. Is there any other for today? Oh, I think I think it's really great that you're doing this project. And the more people talk about kids with special needs and the more people understand them, the greater understanding the rest of the world will have. Like I said, when I found out I was going to have a child with special needs, I was so alone.

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LouAnne

I was so isolated. I had no friends. All of my friends were having babies that were all typical developing. So I went through a couple of years of feeling extremely scared, isolated, and like my life was never going to be the same. It was devastating. And I look back at that now and I realize, gosh, if I had just known someone or if I had watched a video on, you know, something like this, I probably wouldn't have felt as alone as I did.

00:15:18:23 - 00:15:43:10

LouAnne

But not knowing anyone and not hearing much about kids with special needs, I really had no resources. And so the fact that you guys are doing this and that you're involved in Spartan buddies and the more you can integrate yourself into this world of special needs because let's face it, it is getting bigger. And I don't know why, but everyone probably knows someone that has special needs.

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LouAnne

And so the more they're just like typical friends, the better, I think.