

The sun bakes my skin, and I sense a burn beginning on my shoulders. I open the door to Starbucks, holding it ajar with my heel, as I clumsily learn how to maneuver Elise's wheelchair over the metal sill. The bell jingles, welcoming us inside. She signs to me that the cashier is not understanding her, and I encourage the use of her talker. She looks at me for help. *This is going to be more challenging than I had anticipated. There is not going to be a rubric for this.* She gradually taps out her order. The tablet's automated voice speaks on her behalf, and her face brightens when the worker comprehends her. Instant relief. My first week as teacher's assistant for the Special Education class is complete.

Driving to school at the beginning of the second quarter, I contemplate how I should lead the lessons this week. *How to make it fun, but also educational?* My brow furrows in concentration. My posture is square and rigid under my sweater. *I have to do this exactly right.* Later that day, I step into the classroom to see "COOKING SKILLS" written in bold letters on the whiteboard. The sizzling aroma of onions permeates the room while Yasmine sautés with precision, her glasses falling slightly down her nose. My eyebrows raise with a spark of surprise. *Yasmine cooks?*

She continues with confidence and she asks me, "Kylie, do you cook a lot at home?"
"No, not often."

Yasmine grins and says, "This class should be called Skills for Kylie!"

She was right, Yasmine was definitely outperforming me in the kitchen.

After spring break, the students are excited for the field trip to the local farm. Abby follows me begrudgingly toward the hose, her two braids in her hair coming undone in every direction. I show her how to water the plants. She seems disengaged, looking everywhere except at me, and I repeatedly call her back when she tries to run away. Feeling slightly discouraged at my failure, I continue to try for her attention. Finally, she takes the hose from me. When Abby's aid, Marianna, is unaware, Abby, with an abundance of excitement, sprays her with water. I turn away quickly to hide my smile, then I help Marianna battle Abby for the hose. I feel my body relaxing and genuine laughter bubbling to the surface. For someone who seemed so disengaged, Abby was listening more than I realized.

Only a few weeks until summer, my excitement turns into a bittersweet pang as I realize Brian is a senior. His eyes brighten upon my approach, and he gently draws his red talker closer. His finger taps on the screen deliberately because he rarely uses it. "Kylie is family" erupts in a robotic voice. The feeling is indescribable, and my heart melts. I've come to realize that perfection is inconsequential to Brian; what truly matters is my sincerity, care, and connection with him.

As 2023 unfolded, I grew more aware of how transformative this experience would become. Although initially I was designated the 'teacher' in the room, I soon found myself becoming the student. Elise taught me the importance of communication and persevering despite obstacles. Her determination never fails to inspire me. Yasmine taught me to never assume the capabilities of another. Abby taught me to enjoy the funny moments in life, and not to take mistakes too seriously. Brian taught me to broaden my definitions of family and inclusivity. Immersing myself in the classroom made me a more observant, forgiving, intuitive, and happier person. Seeing through the eyes of room 708, I found what was missing in my constant pursuit of perfection. While I had been focused on quantitative goals, I had overlooked the importance of connecting with a greater purpose. I had to break through the surface of my preconceived notions to realize that success is about more than me.