

## ***“Your smile can make someone’s day!”***

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Whoever said kids today are selfish never met Zachary and Matthew. Inspired by a friend with autism, they dreamed up a way to brighten the lives of special-needs kids ... and to spread kindness all over town!

Waves crashed onto the beach, tempting kids to jump in. Yet Sandy Certner’s usually active boys were reluctant to go outside.

“Maybe we should just stay in. With Mikey,” Matthew and Zachary agreed, glancing toward a boy sitting alone on the floor.

Ever since Mikey had been diagnosed with severe autism, the whole Certner family had grieved for their close friends’ son, seemingly locked in a world nobody else could enter. But now, it was her own boys that Sandy’s heart ached for.

“Special-needs kids are always on the sidelines,” Matthew often sighed.

“It’s *not* fair, Mom,” Zachary added.

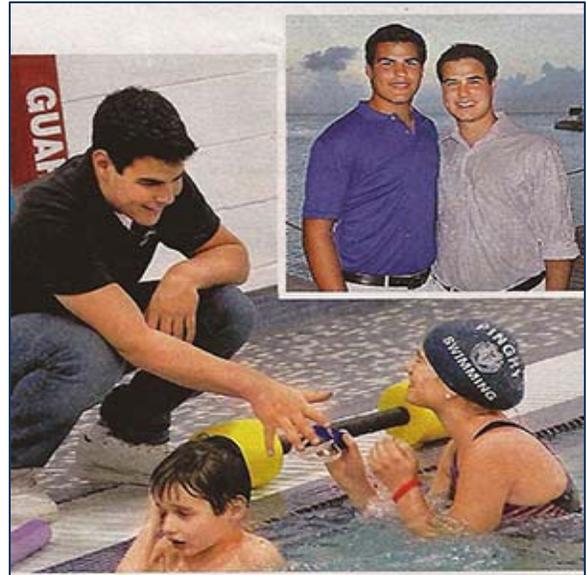
No, the Morristown, New Jersey, mom thought. It’s *not* fair. If only there was something we could do...

### **Kids helping kids**

The truth was, thoughts of Mikey rarely left Matthew’s mind. So one evening when he was 15, while sitting around the dinner table, he brought up one thing in particular that children with disabilities missed out on—sports—and the plan he hoped might change that.

“I can’t imagine not getting to play soccer, basketball or baseball,” he said, thinking of all the joys of sports he took for granted: the thrill of the game, the jubilant high-fives, cheers from the stands. “So I’m going to start a sports clinic,” he announced. That way, special-needs kids could build strength and confidence. They could feel like part of a team. They could have *fun*.

“And I’ll help!” 10-year-old Zachary chimed.



Her boys had always been determined. But this would be a huge undertaking, Sandy realized.

Still, she knew, it was important to them. So as the boys set to work, she and her husband, Bruce, vowed to help in any way they could.

Matthew's school allowed him to use the gym. He used his own money he'd earned as a freelance videographer to buy sports balls. And when he told his friends his idea, they said, "Cool. We'll be there."

Soon, Sandy was helping sign up more than a dozen special-needs kids. "Bless you guys!" parents thanked Matthew and Zachary as their children—children with Down Syndrome or cerebral palsy or, like Mikey, autism—practiced kicking and learned how to dribble.

Every two weeks, the young participants returned for another sports clinic. And suddenly, kids who'd always had to just watch their brothers and sisters from the sidelines were sending soccer balls flying across the grass, hurling basketballs up to hoops and swinging at baseballs so hard they spun around, laughing. Because for the first time, they were playing, really playing, and earning cheers of their own!

"You should have seen how their eyes lit up," Matthew told his parents after he presented each participant with a trophy. "Nobody ever gave them a trophy before."

Soccer season rolled into basketball season, then baseball season. And Sandy continued to swallow back tears as children, once withdrawn and awkward, left the clinics confident and smiling, high-fiving their new friends!

Still, when it came time for Matthew to head off to college and Zachary promised to take over the sports clinics, Sandy pulled him aside.

"Make sure this is something you want, not something you feel like you have to do," she told him.

Zachary looked surprised. "Why wouldn't I want this?" he asked. "It's the best thing we've ever done!"

## The very best days

So that summer, Zachary and Matthew worked to make SNAP—Special Needs Athletic Programs—an official nonprofit.

At his first sports clinic, Zachary bounded around the gym, eyes twinkling. But afterward, he poured out his heartbreak. "You know what one boy told me, Mom?" he sighed. "He said, 'I don't have any friends.'" And when other children with disabilities shared they often felt that way, Zachary couldn't stop wishing there was some way to change that, too.

So, talking to his school principal, Zachary helped develop a program called “Kindness is Cool!” to inspire students to reach out to special-needs peers with compassion.

Much to everyone’s surprise and delight, requests to be teen mentors at SNAP clinics flooded in. Kids volunteered to help teach anti-bullying techniques. And soon, principals all across town were telling Zachary, “Students are being nicer to each other because of this. They’re helping each other, and helping teachers, too. Change is happening.”

And that wasn’t the only miracle.

“Anthony came home and said someone asked him to have lunch with him at school today,” one mom of a child with autism reported to Sandy, “He said it was the best day of his life!” And when four girls heard how a special-needs classmate longed to go to a middle-school dance but feared no one would go with him, they *all* volunteered to be his dates!

Recently, Zachary was honored with the \$2,500 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. And today, he still leads free sports clinics.

“I just want people to accept that it’s okay to be different,” says Zachary, who turns 17 this week. “And that it isn’t hard to be nice. Because your smile can make someone’s day!”