



Jack Farnsworth's third-grade classmates conspire to find a way to include their special friend in a spirited game of "Around the World."

Flying high

Third-grader soars with the help of his classmates

Story by KARA HANSEN | Photos by SUSAN MCSPADDEN

SHAWNEE — Jack Farnsworth might have needed a little help from his friends here at Sacred Heart School recently to make it around the world.

But that's fine with his third-grade classmates; since kindergarten, they've found him a boon traveling companion.

Jack is a special member of Liz Brown's third-grade class. Diagnosed with Down syndrome at birth, Jack has special needs that sometimes require some quick and creative thinking on the part of his teacher.

But where there's a will, there's a way. And when Brown announced to the class that it was time to play a review game of "Around the World," she could tell Jack really wanted to play.



Jack is one of more than a thousand special-needs children enrolled in archdiocesan schools. Some services are provided by the schools themselves, but others are available only through the resources of the neighboring public school district.

It was going to be a challenge, however. The game was notoriously loud and intense; Brown was afraid the commotion would impede Jack's progress, leaving him frustrated. She need not have worried.

"I couldn't believe how supportive the other students were with Jack," she beamed. "They rigged the game so Jack could continue going around the world!"

What? Catholic schoolchildren cheat? Well, not exactly.

"The whole class got into it," said Brown. "Instead of screaming out the answer to help Jack, the students were all using manipulatives and showing him how to solve the problem.

"And Jack was grinning so hard, it was as if he won the lottery."

Best of all, she said, Jack's classmates learned more from "helping" Jack than they would have otherwise.

"Since they were so concerned with him doing well, they were paying much more attention than they usually do!" she said.

Rock star

There are certain kids, principals will tell you, who effortlessly win the hearts of students and teachers alike.

At Sacred Heart School in Shawnee, Jack Farnsworth's that kid.

"Jack is a bit of a rock star," confirmed Kathleen Hess, the mother of a first- and a third-grader at Sacred Heart School.

"When he walks down the hall, he is high-fived by children of every age," she said.

Hess' oldest son, Billy, started school at Sacred Heart at the same time as Jack.

It wasn't too long into that first school year, recalled Hess, that she and other parents began to notice how close the class had grown in a very short time.

"As any parent will tell you, some classes are just special," said Hess. "That's not to say that the parents and children in any other grade aren't.

"But this class seemed to come to the school wanting to connect; and it hasn't changed in these past four years."

"And I can't help but think that one element that has brought these children together is their love for Jack," she concluded.

No questions asked

It's often observed that kids can be cruel.

But they can be kind and loyal and nurturing as well.

And so it was that from the very beginning, Jack's classmates accepted Jack and his twin brother Nick for who they were — no questions asked.

"Jack's tolerance for certain activities is different than other children," Hess explained. "But all the kids seem to understand Jack and show compassion when he is having a hard day.

Jack's heroes

In October, the "First Down for Down Syndrome" buddy walk was held at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Mo. Over 100 kids and adults from Sacred Heart in Shawnee walked together as "Jack's Hometown Heroes," making up the sixth largest team in the city, out of 291 teams.

The Farnsworths, who have been parishioners at Sacred Heart for over 20 years, were deeply touched by the outpouring. The entire family said they feel the love and support from their pastor, fellow parishioners, and school.

"We have tremendous support from our parish. Without that, we wouldn't be where we are today," said Steve.

"They truly are our extended family," added Carol.



But it goes beyond empathy, she said. "They watch out for Jack," she stated.

Everyone knows, for example, which spot in the lunchroom is favored by Jack, and they make sure it is saved each day. They enjoy spending time with him, said Hess, and take pride in his accomplishments.

"When Jack was in first grade and read aloud to his class for the first time, it was the biggest news of the day," Hess recalls. "It was all the first-graders could talk about in either class.

"When parents heard of Jack's accomplishment, neither moms nor dads could keep from getting a bit choked up and a little teary-eyed."

God's love at work

From her vantage point in the school nurse's office, Jack's mom, Carol Farnsworth, is often deeply moved by what she sees taking place in the hallways at Sacred Heart.

"When I see another student helping Jack open his locker, it's an expression of simple, unconditional love," she said. "They aren't expecting anything in return.

"And when I see their reaction to his 'thank you,' I know I'm truly seeing God's love at work."

It's moments like this that remind her of the special blessings of the road she walks — a road that has not always been easy for Jack



Photos clockwise from left:

Like all twins, Jack and Nick share a special bond. And though Jack might not be able to join his brother on the Sacred Heart football team, he gives Nick a run for his money in the backyard.

With the help of phys ed teacher Thomas Harrison and his classmates (front to back: Camden Chastain, Madison Douglas, Colin Miller, and Savas Luther), this photo finds Jack hooping it up in gym class.

While caring for Jack dictates a different pace at the Farnsworth household, the family has found that life with a special-needs child has its own special blessings. Clockwise from left, Carol, Luke, Katie, Jack, Jessie, and Nick enjoy a card game. Out of view at the near end of the table is Jack's father, Steve.

And what would life be without a little roughhousing? Here the Farnsworth brothers enjoy a little male bonding with a dog pile in the living room.

Life can be difficult for a special-needs child, and his or her family as well. Each small accomplishment, however, is a cause for celebration. Here, Learning Resource teacher Mary Miller provides that little bit of extra attention that Jack needs.

and his family. Like any family with a special-needs child, the Farnsworths have faced their share of obstacles.

Carol and Steve Farnsworth consider themselves very fortunate to be members of a parish whose school can be so supportive of their son's special needs. The special education that Jack receives — some from Sacred Heart and some from the local school district — includes not only speech and occupational therapy, but social skills training as well.

He even bowls, swims, and participates in Special Olympics.

Balancing act

In addition to being a special-needs child, Jack is also a twin, which adds an additional dynamic.

Jack's twin, Nick, does not have Down syndrome, and participates in basketball, baseball, football, and track.

"Having twins when one has Down syndrome is a continual balancing act," said Carol. "Even at nine, they are already not experiencing the same activities together.

"It's difficult with one being special needs. It's hard for Jack."

"There are activities that come easily to Nick when it's safer for Jack to be on the sidelines," added Carol.

It can also sometimes be frustrating for



Nick, who can't help that he can do things that Jack cannot.

"Sometimes he doesn't understand something and he gets really mad," said Nick. "Or he says he's sorry over and over when he doesn't need to."

Jack can also easily be overstimulated and overwhelmed, especially in loud situations or crowds. Add to that his difficulty expressing himself, and it can make for complicated experiences for the entire family.

"When you first think of twins, you think of them being on the same team and it will be great — they will be there to support each other and be good friends for one another," said Carol.

Although they can't be teammates in most

things, now that the twins are older, Steve and Carol are finding that the boys really do rely on one another — but in different ways than originally expected.

"Jack and Nick really do support each other — at home, school, and cheering each other on at their different events," said Steve.

Special blessings

Though the challenges of raising a special-needs child will always be there for the Farnsworths, they have also found it has blessed their family in ways they never imagined.

"Jack is selfless and forgives very easily —

usually in two seconds," said Jack's 19-year-old sister Katie, with a laugh. "He's extremely loving and caring."

And Jessie, Jack's 13-year-old sister, enjoys Jack's big-hearted affection.

"When I see him at school in the hallway," she said, "he always says hi to me and gives me a hug, even though other kids his age probably wouldn't do that with their brother or sister."

In addition to Jack's unconditional love, the family says his presence in their lives has helped them grow as individuals.

"Sometimes it's hard to communicate with Jack, but I think we've all learned to think about what's best for him and look out for him," said Luke, Jack's 16-year-old brother. "Having Jack in our family has taught me that when I see someone with special needs, I treat them the same as I would anyone else."

That is despite the fact that every member of the family is, at times, inconvenienced by the need to do things differently because of Jack.

Everyday activities that most people breeze through — like getting dressed or into the car — take a great deal of time in the Farnsworth home.

Tying shoes and tasks like practicing handwriting are hard for Jack. And when he gets his mind set on something, his family says it's nearly impossible to take his focus from it.

Though frustrating at the time, those experiences have taught the family patience and a deeper appreciation for the small things in life.

"Every little accomplishment is a big thing," said Carol. "We've really learned to take nothing for granted."

"When he just says a sentence on his own out of the blue, it's amazing," added Steve.

"We know how hard he's been working and struggling with it, and then all of a sudden he just wows us all."

Deep impact

The deepest impact Jack has had on the lives of those around him has been a spiritual one. Though they never imagined raising a child with special needs, Steve and Carol see God's hand in it from Day One.

"I think we have more of an appreciation for the gift of life," said Steve.

"The plan is not always what we think it is," he added, "but we learn to accept it and realize what a blessing it really is."

Carol agreed.

"When we get right down to it, it's pretty clear and simple: Let go and let God," she said. "It's not about what I want; it's about what God wants.

"We've met people and formed friendships that never would have happened without this experience in our lives. Going down a different road than we expected has been a real joy of having a special-needs child."

Jack has taught the faculty and staff of Sacred Heart a thing or two as well.

"As a second year teacher, I am well aware that I have a lot of growing to do, and Jack has helped in that department," said Brown.

"Perhaps the most important lesson that I have gotten from Jack is to keep things simple," she said. "He reminds me on a daily basis to focus on what is truly important: treating others how we want to be treated, the importance of a smile, or a comforting hug."

Principal Nick Antista agreed.

"Having Jack at our school is truly a gift, because it allows all of us to see God's beauty in the differences among us," he said.

'Round the world

Before you know it, Jack's classmates will be out of school and traveling 'round the world for real.

And who knows all the places they'll go?

But it's not hard to guess the kind of people they'll be.

Thanks, in part, to a little rock star named Jack.

Meeting special needs

More than 1,088 students with special needs are served through Catholic schools in the archdiocese, totaling roughly 8 percent of the student population.

In fact, every parish school in the archdiocese serves students with special needs. The five most common special needs faced in classrooms across the archdiocese are: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, giftedness, speech and language disorders, and behavior disorders.

Special needs are generally met in schools in one of three ways: various classroom accommodations; the support of the Learning Center teacher (in schools that have Learning Centers); and through collaboration with the public school district where the Catholic school resides.

But the services offered through the 28 public school districts across the archdiocese often vary from district to district, said Karen Kroh, coordinator of the Perfect Wings program.

Perfect Wings, operated through the archdiocesan school office, helps Catholic schools serve their students with special needs by providing on-site consultation and support for the teaching staff, facilitating the professional development of teachers, and acting as a liaison between Catholic schools and local public school districts.

Many of the services available to students with special needs in Catholic schools are contingent upon what the public school counterpart can provide, said Kroh.

"We couldn't do what we do without their support," she said.

But the place to start for more information, she added, is your own parish school.

"If you have a child with special needs and you're interested in a Catholic education," she concluded, "I would encourage any parent to talk with their parish school's principal."