

I would like to nominate Kelli Devine.

Kelli Devine became a friend of our family shortly before our son's diagnosis. She remains our friend, even after years of difficult and heart-wrenching situations. For this alone, she deserves an award!

Kelli is a phenomenal mother to her own two children. She's one of those individuals who can do it all; work, raise two incredible children and maintain friendships, all while being the life of the party. She is oblivious to how very dynamic she is, making her even more attractive.

We live in a small town in Northwest Indiana; a very, very conservative town. While small towns can provide many wonderful opportunities for some, our small town provides almost nothing to the special needs community. Even the educational system provides services similar to those in the 1950's, at least for the most severe kids, like our son. There are a few sporting opportunities for the high functioning children, but absolutely nothing for our son. As a result, our son is home-schooled. While home schooling affords our son the opportunity to receive a real education, it severely limits his interactions with others and completely prohibits the fun parts of school that other children experience.

Kelli teaches preschool gymnastics at a local gym. In order to give our son an extra-curricular activity, she gives him gymnastic lessons. While this sounds nice, it is actually quite extraordinary.

Kelli is excited to see Jimmy every week. She has created a program that is strengthening his upper body, which allows him to take part in other things as well. Since gymnastic lessons, he is starting to write, dress himself, use more playground equipment, and throw a ball. He can now hold his own weight on the rings and bars (NEVER could he have done this in the past), walk the high beam, jump on solid ground and follow multiple step instructions. He has mastered a forward roll and is so very proud of himself every time he does it! Kelli has given our son strength, coordination, self-esteem and joy. Additionally, I believe her attitude is contagious. Jimmy is greeted enthusiastically and personally at the door. The other employees will offer him a high five, or a happy hello. She makes others accepting of Jimmy, simply by being herself.

Kelli has listened to me for endless hours. She sat at Starbuck's with me while I cried because our pediatrician would not diagnosis my son. She sat on the phone with me while I cried leaving the airport in Washington, D.C., immediately after getting my son's diagnosis. She not only listens, but also truly celebrates every time I call her with another of Jimmy's accomplishments. Even when the accomplishment is something seemingly insignificant to most, such as buckling a seatbelt, she is genuinely elated. For over five years, she has been burdened with my every emotion.

Kelli's hope for Jimmy has never wavered. While I'm certain she aches for him at times, and I'm certain she fears for him at times, she views him as any other child, one with a world of opportunity ahead of him.

It is imperative for all families living with autism to have our global warriors, such as Jenny McCarthy, Dr. Bernadine Healy and David Kirby. These warriors will change the course of autism for the world. However, it is equally imperative for all families living with autism to have our local warriors, the unsung heroes of autism. We need to celebrate the Kelli Devines of the world, who single-handedly change the attitudes of a community, change the course of one child's life and save the sanity of the mothers and fathers just trying to survive their path.

My vote is for Kelli Devine.