

School reform has a new champion

Island girl helps pioneer national wave called 'inclusion'

By LAURA D'ANGELO
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

During her first nine years of life, Jackie Goepel never made a friend. She never uttered a word.

Now the 10-year-old has a best friend. And when Jackie sees her in the hallway, she lets out a shriek so shrill that teachers dart out of their classrooms to investigate.

Cerebral palsy and profound mental retardation robbed Jackie of the ability to walk and talk. Her early years were confined to a special education class at PS 37, with two other children in wheel chairs and 11 professionals.

That all changed last January when Jackie was wheeled into PS 52 in Dongan Hills. A disabled girl in a "typical" fourth-grade class, Jackie became a pioneer in a national wave of school reform known as "inclusion."

In inclusive classrooms, students with and

without disabilities learn together.

How Jackie took a seat among her peers is the story of a determined mother and a reluctant school system. It's a tale of a little girl's struggle to communicate and the children who understood her.

Jackie Goepel was born in June 1984 in St. Vincent's Medical Center. Her mother, Marie, worried about Jackie, who vomited after every breast feeding, and was unable to hold up her head.

But Mrs. Goepel, a licensed trauma nurse, couldn't find a doctor who would agree that something was wrong. "Her pediatrician wouldn't get on the phone with me, so I'd bring him her stretchies that were soaking with vomit to try and convince him," she said.

Jackie was three months old when Mrs.

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Goepel took her to the Staten Island Mall to get her picture taken. "The photographer was trying to get her to look at the camera by waving stuffed animals in front of her. She had an upward gaze that didn't move," Mrs. Goepel said.

A fixed gaze became Jackie's passport into numerous hospitals, from which she didn't emerge for a year. After countless tests, doctors diagnosed her with a "failure to thrive" and said Jackie would live as a "vegetable" for no longer than a year.

"Then we decided to take the reigns. We said no more invasive tests. If Jackie was going to die, she's going to be at home where she can get love and attention," said Ms. Goepel.

When Jackie was 18 months old she was diagnosed by a doctor who was covering for her regular pediatrician. The doctor placed the tiny baby in the palm of his hand, and she folded over like a seshoe.

"How long have you known your daughter has cerebral palsy?" the doctor told a stunned Mrs. Goepel, then pregnant with her third child.

'Cute ... and sad'

Jackie's little sister, Elizabeth, was as precocious as Jackie was delayed. She walked and talked at 10 months old. "Bethy used to try and make Jackie walk. She'd grab her legs and put her in a walking position," said Jackie's father, John Goepel. "It was cute ... and sad."

Jackie waged her first rebellion from the seat of her high chair. She was looking down at her little sister, who was seated at the table without a bib.

"Jackie started to rip off her



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Jackie is wheeled down a PS 52 hallway by para-professional Nancy Delaney and students Christina Devoll, Allison Heedles and Dominick Volpe, left to right.

own bib. She knocked the fork out of John's hand," Mrs. Goepel recalled.

Six months after Johnny was born, 5-year-old Jackie watched him glide across the carpet on all fours. "Johnny and Bethy would put Jackie on her stomach. One would hold her legs, the other would hold her hands and they taught her to crawl," said Mrs. Goepel. "I told my husband, 'She's learning from them,'" she said.

At the time, Jackie was enrolled at PS 37, a special education

school in Great Kills.

The same year, 1991, Mrs. Goepel heard two educators from Syracuse talk about inclusion during a parent conference. "I was scared to death about it. I thought it would never be for Jackie," she said.

Visited school in Syracuse

Out of curiosity, Mrs. Goepel drove to Syracuse to visit an inclusive school. "The first thing we saw was a little boy with cerebral palsy and all these kids around him reading stories, touching him and hugging him."

"I had this feeling I wasn't doing the right thing for Jackie," Mrs. Goepel said.

One day, Jackie surprised her parents while they were toilet training Johnny. "She started screaming. She wanted to get out of the bathtub, but she wouldn't leave the bathroom. So I told my husband to put her on the bowl," said Mrs. Goepel.

And Jackie went to the bathroom. "She started laughing hysterically," said Mrs. Goepel, whose own thoughts turned to inclusion.

"I said even if we give her a shot, and she can't do it, at least we

nic," said Dominick Volpe, friend of Jackie's.

Dominick often interprets Jackie for the adults around her. "She speaks better to children than to parents. Because she understands us better," he said.

Most popular in class

By the end of the year, Jackie became the most popular girl in class. On the last day of school, Jackie returned home with a crown on her head and a Minnie Mouse necklace, gifts from Stephanie. Two Pathmark bags stuffed with letters were tied to her wheelchair. "You made our fourth-grade class the best class ever." "You're the most fun" and "Please be our friend forever," the children wrote.

Last June, Stephanie graduated to fifth grade, leaving Jackie behind in Mrs. Tate's class. Everyone agreed to keep Jackie in the fourth grade for another year to give her more time to adjust. Her new classmates turned out to be eager to show her the ropes.

"You can teach Jackie different kinds of stuff. The whole class taught her to talk, and now she can say 'panda' and 'teddy bear,'" said

In 1992, the Board of Education adopted an inclusion policy for District 75, the citywide district for severely disabled children. At Mrs. Goepel's request, Laura Towey, the inclusion facilitator on Staten Island, began searching for a school that would register Jackie.

Meanwhile, a committee on special education refused to recommend Jackie for inclusion. But Mrs. Goepel countered by refusing to sign papers keeping her at PS 37.

"I was on a mission," she said.

Poised to sue the Board of Education, Mrs. Goepel subpoenaed top administrators in the system. A day before the impartial hearing, her phone rang.

"Guess what? We found a school!" Mrs. Towey told her. PS 52 principal Rosemarie Varriano and teacher Blanche Tate agreed to take Jackie into a fourth-grade class with other children her own age.

No one expected that Jackie would master the three Rs, but Mrs. Goepel hoped that Jackie would reap the social benefits of being around "normal" children.

Never learned to share

"Jackie had never learned how to share," said Mrs. Goepel. "She would finish all her french fries, wheel herself over to you and take yours."

Mrs. Tate introduced the thin girl whose face is framed with straight brown hair to a group of curious children. "She came in the first day and we saw her in the library. At first we thought she was grabby," said Stephanie Strumolo, a classmate.

Para-professional Lisa Marino was hired to look after Jackie, whose wide desk abutted Mrs. Tate's and pressed against Stephanie's. "She was shy and she would cry in class," Stephanie said.

Some mocking children imitated the awkward way Jackie moved her hands, said Stephanie.

Then Jackie started to shout out and grunt in class. To Mrs. Tate, the sounds were full of hope. "Her intonation is like a child learning to speak."

Mrs. Tate answered the sounds with a cheerful, "And what else do you have to say?"

Students put an end to some of Jackie's anti-social behaviors, including grabbing things that didn't belong to her.

"When she puts things in her mouth, we tell her that it's not-

When Mrs. Tate asks for a volunteer to help Jackie, 20 hands shoot up. Last month, Jackie wheeled herself to the door but couldn't manipulate the locks. The next day, Matthew Peru gave her a chain and slide lock mounted on a block of wood. "My father made it for me when I was a kid," said Matthew, sliding the lock in the hopes of grabbing Jackie's attention.

Sachaline described Jackie as "funny," "friendly" and "nice" but said Jackie isn't spared the taunts of some children. "When she tries to say an easy word and she can't, they make fun of her."

Mrs. Tate includes Jackie in everything, even class trips. During a lesson on the food chain, Mrs. Tate assigned each child a role. A string stretched across the room connecting Jackie, a mouse, to her predator, a bobcat. Before the room became a web of string, Jackie lost patience and wheeled herself toward the door.

Mrs. Tate interrupted the lesson and spoke in a firm voice, without anger. "Stop it right now. You're not going anywhere," she said, driving a broom handle between the spokes of Jackie's wheelchair.

Jackie's grunted protests gave in to the urgings of children who distracted her.

Moved to regular desk

During an afternoon coloring session, Mrs. Marino lifted an excited Jackie from her wheelchair and moved her to a regular desk. But when Mrs. Marino tried to return Jackie to the wheelchair, the 10-year-old fiercely resisted. She jackknifed her body, arched her back in defiance, and screamed.

Mrs. Marino pressed down on Jackie's belly, and strapped her brown leather boots into the foot pedals of the wheelchair. Mrs. Tate rubbed Jackie's head to quiet her sobs. "You want to stay up but ... I know it's hard to go back into the wheelchair," she said, kissing her forehead. "Your little heart is racing."

Mrs. Tate turned away from Jackie with tears in her eyes. "It breaks your heart," she said.

For the Goepels, inclusion has been a heart-warming experience, and their biggest gift to Jackie. "Jackie has taught me more things than I could ever teach her. Whatever her stay on earth is, I'll know she was happy and had opportunities and that's what counts," said Mrs. Goepel.