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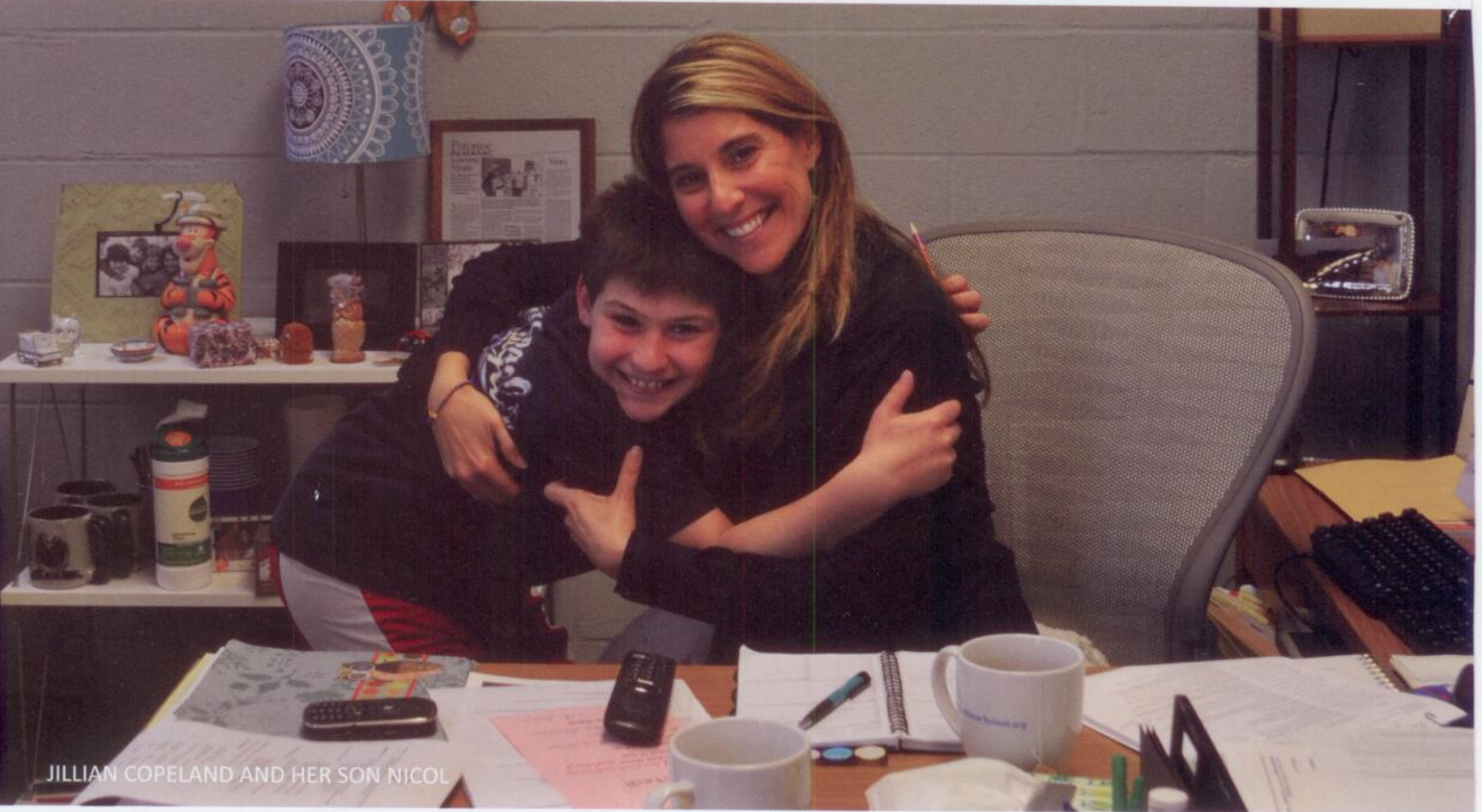
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A Mother's Undying Love for Her Child



JILLIAN COPELAND AND HER SON NICOL

Once in a while, someone rises above and beyond the expectations to help others. Jillian Copeland, founder of the Diener School, is one of these passionate individuals. The Diener School, which is located in the Washington, D.C. area is a school that houses about 40 students whom have trouble adapting to conventional schools and have special needs. Copeland's founding of this life-changing institution was inspired with one child: her son Nicol (Nicholas).

Your son influenced you to found the Diener School. Many people don't even question how schools are even started. How exactly did you create the Diener School? What kind of benefits were you looking for your own son and children similar to him?

With medical, learning, and many other special needs [that my son requires],

I couldn't find the optimal learning environment for him. I searched up and down the East Coast for the perfect school and found it didn't exist. I asked myself: 'What would the perfect school for Nicol look like?' and I knew the answer: a holistic program that would enrich Nicol academically but would emphasize social, emotional, and developmental growth. But again, it didn't exist.

Starting the school was a challenging task. I had no idea how many obstacles were headed my way. However, with strength, determination, and a fabulous team of family, friends, and professionals, within six months I was able to receive my license to operate a school. But challenges ensued: finding an appropriate space zoned for a school, attracting qualified teachers, and finding families who were willing to 'take a leap of faith' and enroll their children at Diener. My husband and I were fortunate enough to be able to fund the initial program.

Within the first year, we began fund raising through what has now become an auction. The money raised covers the gap between the cost of tuition and the actual cost of educating each child. This is a reality for most independent schools and is true for Diener even as we enter [into] our fifth year.

We began our first year with five students and ended with eleven. The first year was difficult but we made it through and proved that this model of education worked for this population of students. We were diligent about collecting data and found that students were making progress in all academic areas, language and motor; but, most importantly, we found that our students were eager to come to school every day.

Knowing why you created the school, what exactly is the philosophy of the Diener School? What is your mission for your son and the attending stu-



JILLIAN COPELAND (FAR RIGHT) WITH HER STAFF AND THE DIENER STUDENTS

dents?

We want to build our students through a holistic approach so they will be confident, able learners, have healthful relationships, and a healthful self-esteem. Our individualized program allows each student to learn, to be curious, to make friends, to be included, to solve problems, and to feel proud of who they are.

The Diener School pyramid contains all of the components of a well-balanced program that enriches our students cognitively, artistically, therapeutically, physically, socially, and emotionally.

Because we have created an academic environment that is therapeutic and balanced, our students are able to sustain their attention and remain engaged in learning. They leave every day feeling balanced with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

How does enrollment work?

During the 2010-11 school year Diener

had 34 students K - 6. This coming school year, we have 41 students enrolled. Enrollment is open to all students, however we do choose those students whom we believe need a higher level of therapeutic intervention, small class sizes, and multi-sensory instruction. We are unable to accept everyone who applies because some students do not [require] the level of services we offer, while others need more intensive therapeutic interventions.

The typical Diener student doesn't have a singular need. Our students are layered with needs, which means they have more than one diagnosis.

We strive to help students who cannot access the curriculum in other environments. Many of our students will have multiple diagnoses including attention and processing issues, learning disabilities, sensory or auditory processing delays, executive functioning disorders, and social challenges.

Our students aren't fully understood

by many educators and, in many environments (including their previous schools), are not treated respectfully by other students. Many students come to Diener feeling 'broken.' Our job is to help them learn all the gifts they have, provide modifications and accommodations so they can access [the] curriculum, and most importantly, create opportunities for kids to feel a part of something, including friendships.

Understanding how students are selected for the Diener school, how do the teachers assist each individual student, considering all enrolled students have their own particular needs?

Students accepted to Diener have been through our thorough application process and therefore we understand their needs prior to start of school. All students have been assessed in many areas including academics, adaptive behaviors, language, and motor. We also

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require teacher evaluations and visits. It is common for our students to start the first day of school with visual checklists or schedules, a special seat, a sensory diet or schedule, a therapy ball, or any other modifications that are necessary for success. Our students’ needs are paramount. At Diener, we feel ‘front loading’ allows us to be proactive in setting up the ideal, individual environment for each student. During the first few weeks of school, teachers, therapists, our learning skills specialists, and upper and lower school directors, are busy assessing each child to determine placements for our small group (academic blocks).

We acknowledge that all students should be treated like other conventional students. How do the students themselves respond to each other? How do they interact?

Our students are treated respectfully because that is what they deserve. Our virtues program is critical and helps us teach each child to respect another. We actually teach our students to find virtues in each other. It isn’t uncommon to walk in a room and hear a child thanking another child for his/her cooperation or high fiving for being a good friend. Students at Diener earn Diener dollars for hard work, diligence, friendship, responsibility, cooperation, and other virtues. We take time throughout the year to focus on the gifts we find in each other and in ourselves.

We hold students accountable and have high academic and behavioral expectations. Our kids need guidance, structure, and thoughtful and balanced

programs, but they also need people who believe in them and celebrate their progress and gifts. It is quite amazing to see how far they come with the support they receive! With many students, we discuss their needs and have them help set goals, and evaluate their learning and behavior. Goals are different for each student depending on their needs and cognitive abilities.

We also see that you have monthly academic themes that the school abides by. Could you tell us about what they are and how you work with these themes? How does this help academically and socially?

We work thematically at Diener and our themes change each month. Themes are pulled from The Maryland Voluntary State Science and Social Studies Curriculum. Our multidisciplinary model allows us to integrate our thematic units through language, motor, and the arts. For example, April’s theme was ‘The Earth and Our Environment.’ In art our students made models of The Earth and other planets; in music, they sang songs about our beautiful planet. Some students wrote acrostic poems about The Earth and other planets while studying their unit on poetry in language arts. Since many of our students have trouble connecting, applying, and generalizing information, this interdisciplinary approach provides them opportunities to

connect and synthesize information.

The real icing on the cake is the experiential learning piece! Our students take biweekly field trips that correlate with our themes. Using April again as an example, our students visited a science center in where they conducted stream studies; some visited the recycling center while others hiked D.C.’s famed C & O Canal; and others visited a nature center.

The Diener School also has a ‘buddy system.’ How does this nurture the students?

Our buddy program is certainly unique and has been instrumental in the social growth of our Diener students. We pair our students up with fifth graders at The Bullis School, a college prep program grades 3-12, which is located just down the street. The students partner up with a

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buddy in fifth grade in the beginning of the year. Throughout the year we participate in many activities together. In April, the Diener student body worked with their ‘buddies’ to clean up a park.

We begin each year getting to know our buddies by playing together on the school playgrounds, doing art projects with one another, visiting our buddy schools during performing arts assemblies, and of course through, our pen

pal letters. This is a wonderful way for our students to progress socially (and through written expression).

As character development is a crucial part of both of our programs, in November we participated in a sing-along at a residential home for the elderly. This community project was a perfect pairing with November's history and peace theme. The residents smiled and waved their American flags and sang familiar songs with pride. The event was the highlight of our year: our students gave back to the community, felt empowered by the results of their efforts (smiling faces on

“Diener has changed me. It is part of my soul and I will forever be thankful for the team who helped me create the school, the staff, students, and parents [whom] have been on this learning journey with me.”

the faces of the elderly), and worked cooperatively with their buddies.

With so many goals for the Diener school, could you tell us about your own personal ambitions. How has this school changed your life? Your perspective?

I am the mom of four fabulous sons, ages 10-16. I cannot deny that motherhood is an adventure of its own. However, the Diener School is something that is completely different. It is my baby also, but a different kind of baby. I am learning so much, so much about people, [and] about what is really important in life. The Diener School has allowed me to be introspective, to learn about myself, to be [open]-minded, to know my strengths and weaknesses, to realize the power of hard work, dedication, and most importantly [to inspire] me.

And the wonderful students must inspire you! How have they motivated you since the creation of the institu-

tion? Whom else have been your angels along this journey?

I am inspired daily by my staff, a dedicated, diligent, eager and talented group of people.

I am inspired by my students. These kids have a lot of challenges and not by their own choice. Everything is hard for them: learning, making friends, understanding language and the world around them, and sometimes just regulating themselves to get through the day.

This year we took 13 of our upper level students on an overnight to The Sheridan Mountain Campus. Most of them had never spent the night away and certainly never spent the night in a tent. Needless to say, there was much anxiety.

Jen, our speech therapist, worked with our students on strategies to help with this and on expected behaviors during the trip. The motto at The Mountain Campus was 'challenge by choice.' Each kid, all 13, chose to do each activity ranging from a giant swing to rock climbing to touching a snake. I was breathless watching these students overcome fears and take risks. I looked over at the staff several times and literally saw tears in their eyes and I knew they felt the same way. I was touched and inspired.

I am also inspired by our parents. Many of our students, including my son, Nicol, have medical conditions. Our students have to undergo medical procedures that require hospital stays, surgeries, medicines, etc. The strength and optimism that I see daily from our parent body is absolutely incredible. They advocate for their kids, help them learn, drive them from one end of the county to another to provide them the services they need, and, of course, kiss them good night at the end of each day so they know they

are loved.

But I will say, my most favorite thing about Diener, about our staff, our students, and our families: we support one another, we help one another, and we celebrate our children's progress and gifts!

How is your son, the inspiration behind an amazing dream-to-reality institution, doing today?

Nicol is 12 now. He started at Diener when he was 7. He is doing really well. He is learning, growing, and most importantly, he is happy. In my opinion, my husband and I have given him the greatest gift -- his childhood. Although it doesn't look quite like the childhood of our other sons, it is a beautiful childhood filled with learning, love, challenges, and friendships.

How would you advise parents who are in the same position as you?

Diener has changed me. It is part of my soul and I will forever be thankful for the team who helped me create the school, the staff, students and parents who have been on this learning journey with me. However, the depth of this journey isn't about being a founder or director of this incredible school, it is about being the mom of this incredible child.

My advice to those parents whose children are not 'typical' - take pride in your child. Don't be ashamed that he or she is different. Embrace his or her uniqueness and celebrate the gifts [that your child has].

Even though things can get hard and I feel anxious about what Nicol's future will look like, I have learned to see who he is now. I think of all the gifts he has given me, all of the beauty he has brought to the people who have entered his life, and I feel incredibly thankful and blessed.

Parents [should] not miss the moments to feel gratitude. Find the special gifts in your child and celebrate who your child is! - VICTORIA LO