

# Enlightening Documentary ‘Forget Me Not: Inclusion in the Classroom’ Released

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“Inclusion early on almost guarantees inclusion later on. But segregation early on almost guarantees segregation in the rest of life.” This quote is from Sara Jo Soldovieri, an advocate in *Forget Me Not: Inclusion in the Classroom*.

Distributed by Cinema Libre Studio, *Forget Me Not: Inclusion in the Classroom* was released on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The documentary is available now on DVD and streaming on Amazon, Hoopla and Vimeo.

Variety reviewed the documentary as "Eye-Opening". Tim Villegas of The Weeklyish wrote, “The doc shows how absolutely frustrating it is for families with a vision of inclusive education for their child to run into a brick wall from school administrators who recommended a segregated setting.” In early 2022, the documentary received the Grand Jury Award at the Slamdance Film Festival for Best Documentary Feature.

The synopsis: “As 3-year-old Emilio prepares to start school, his family finds itself embroiled in a challenge all too common for children with disabilities - to secure the right to an inclusive education. Cornered in one of the most segregated education systems, New York City public schools, filmmaker Olivier and his wife Hilda turn the camera on themselves and their child with Down syndrome, as they navigate a byzantine system originally designed to silo children with disabilities. Emilio's parents learn from other families who have fought against the injustices built into the educational system while they continue their own battle for their son's future.”

As a person with a physical disability, I can relate to the core of this enlightening documentary: the fight for the right to be included. Inclusion does matter, and it matters BIG time in getting a proper education. Everyone deserves the right for a good chance to prove all of their abilities.

Having moderate spastic cerebral palsy, which was caused by the umbilical cord being wrapped around my neck during my breech birth, affects my speech and muscle coordination.

Fortunately, I am still able to do many activities that non-disabled people can do, and often more, like tandem sky-diving (once), mountain climbing, river canoeing, horseback riding, etc.

However, being included and getting a general/regular education from grade school and beyond, came with its own set of challenges.

Similar to the struggles that Emilio's parents encountered as shown in their documentary, my parents also encountered educators who were resistant to me being in regular classes. Also similar in both set of parents is the desire to have their son being able to have the right to equal opportunities as his peers and the chance to prove his abilities. These endeavors require raw determination to fight for what is right.

During my pre-school, kindergarten and first grade education, I went to a school for children with only physical disabilities. After moving, I attended general/regular education classes in a new school. I recently learned from my parents that they had to fight to keep me in regular classes during my second grade and third grade. I think because my teachers had trouble reading my handwriting. In the fourth grade I started using a typewriter in class and that adaptation was a game changer. There were still, however, some challenges to overcome as my education journey continued.

Early in high school, I was put in a special education English class twice due to bad grades. I did not like being in the special class. I thrive best when challenged. I was able to prove my abilities and get back into regular English classes. I started making A's in regular English class my senior year and I mostly tribute that to my awesome English teacher who encouraged me and inspired me to be a writer. Later I wrote her into my first produced screenplay, *Triumph*. She is a true testament that good teachers can make a huge impact on lives!

I was fortunate that my school education was mostly in an inclusive setting. Integration of disabled and non-disabled students helps both to learn from each other and grow, segregation does the opposite. I grew up experiencing some name-calling and mocking from peers and other people. I believe that if they would have known more about my physical challenge, they would have been more understanding. Knowledge replaces ignorance.

When a person has friends who are different ages, races, live in different places and/or have a disability, those unique differences each help to promote better understanding and awareness from someone with unique perspectives. When a person is only friends with someone similar to them, it can narrow one's way of thinking and behaving. Diversity is good.

Segregating students with a disability from non-disabled students harms both because they don't learn and grow from each other, and out in the real world society is integrated. An integrated educational environment can help foster an inclusive environment in which both have the opportunity to learn from each other. This point is brought out in the documentary when non-disabled students are asked about having friends with a disability. School is an excellent place to teach students to learn about each other's unique differences. The opportunity needs to be there first.

In the [International Guidelines for the Education of Learners with Down Syndrome](#), published by Down Syndrome International in 2020, their latest education guidelines states the following: "Students with disabilities educated in general education classrooms outperform students who have been educated in segregated settings (for a review of the research literature, see Hehir et al., 2016). Research specifically in the context of Down syndrome also supports this finding (de Graaf, van Hove, & Haveman, 2013). Social / emotional development is greater in inclusive settings (Buckley, Bird, Sacks, & Archer, 2006). The link between inclusive schooling and social inclusion has also been established (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018)."

In *Forget Me Not: Inclusion in the Classroom*, after a phone conversation with the Special Education office of the New York City Department of Education, Emilio's father says to his wife, "It is clear that like if you ask someone to reach beyond what they're capable of they'll accomplish those things, you know?" It is clear that Emilio's parents believe that Emilio is capable of learning in a general class setting, if given that opportunity first. Opportunity first, not automatic pre-judgement. Some people think they know what they see. As the wise adage goes, don't judge a book by its cover...

Never underestimate what someone is capable of doing just because they have a disability. Having a disability can actually help to forge someone stronger, and it can be like a superpower! When you have to constantly figure out ways to adapt, stand up for yourself, prove yourself, etc., you become a very tough and determined fighter. Equal opportunities are worth the fight, so never give up!

Getting a good, regular education has helped me to open many doors (opportunities). After graduating high school, I earned a Microcomputer Specialist Associate degree and then a Bachelor of Business Administration degree with a major in computer information systems, later I took more classes at a different university. I like learning new subjects, but I still dislike doing homework (sorry Mom and Dad and teachers).

Having my two college degrees helped me to get a professional job. I had a long career, mostly at a beloved Fire Medical Department as their Systems Analyst/computer support technician, helping firefighters and the staff. I am now a credited screenwriter and credited film producer, enjoying my creative calling. One of the meaningful messages in my first movie is about the importance of inclusion. One of my goals is to help promote more awareness and understanding of the importance of disability inclusion.

Believe in yourself, fight the good fight and never give up!

*Forget Me Not: Inclusion in the Classroom* trailer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4yZGGIHTYc>

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