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A Little School with a Big Heart

A small international school takes the challenge of admitting a promising, disabled student

By *Ettie Zilber*

If you walk the hallways of our “little school in the big city” [Beijing BISS International School], you will notice a new fixture parked outside our Kindergarten classroom: a child’s wheelchair.

If you have been part of the BISS family for a while, you might also have noticed other modifications: ramps at all the entrances to the building. Yes, BISS has adapted itself and modified the building to accommodate a new Kindergarten student, Hannah.

Hannah is six years old, Chinese, and was born with spina bifida. She has no control of body movement or functions below the waist. If it were not for her adoptive parents, Cherrie and Ed, Hannah would probably have been left to die from exposure and neglect. But Cherrie and Ed adopted her, and she joined two older adoptive sisters in their warm and nurturing household.

During the admissions interview, Hannah impressed us with her language abilities, quick mind, tenacity, and zest. She showed us how she propelled herself across the floor with strong arms, which also hoisted her up to a standing position with the assistance of a table.

We discussed the logistics of how our school, with four floors



Hannah, hard at work (photo: BISS).

and no elevator, could admit Hannah. While we had no doubt that she would be able to access the curriculum, learn, and thrive, we still had to make sure that her physical needs could be met.

We certainly wanted this admission to succeed for the sake of Hannah and her family; but we also wanted it to work for the sake of our BISS family. We believed that Hannah’s enrollment would help all our students (and faculty) learn numerous lessons about perspective, resilience, empathy, caring, tolerance, and more.

We discussed her need for a full-time assistant who could carry her to and from classes, up and down the stairs and to the bathroom. We then set about identi-

... continued on p. 3

A Little School with a Big Heart

... continued from p. 1

fyng the various locations where ramps would need to be built, to give her wheelchair access.

Now, every time I walk through the hall, my heart sings as I peek into the Kindergarten classroom and note the wheelchair parked outside the door. It does my heart good to see this poised and self-confident young child standing on her “robot legs,” enjoying her successes, learning new skills, singing in the choir, participating on stage, competing in track races, and socializing with her friends.

Hannah is a natural leader and is respected by her classmates. She is what we colloquially call a “happy camper.” Good for you, Hannah. You make us all proud, and you have made us all better people. ●

Dr. Zilber will be leaving Beijing BISS International School this month, but would like to hear from TIE readers about their inclusion-related experiences. Email: ettie.zilber@gmail.com.