

It's about The Look. It's very hard to describe. But night after night I saw it and it was the biggest, best, most terrific "paycheck" I've ever received. It was The Look that parents had in their eyes when they watched their special needs kids rehearse for the Building the Circle Variety Show. It was a whole mix of things: awe, disbelief, longing, joy, gratitude. All mixed into a single, staring look. Never in a million years did these parents EVER expect to see their kid in a show; never in a million years n a show on a big stage with a 900 seat sold-out house, with big lights and a killer sound system, with costumes and production numbers with singing and dancing. Not their kid. Not the kid with Downs Syndrome, or Autism, or Cerebral Palsy.

But because the Circle of Friends wanted a show...and the buddies were there to help...these kids got to rehearse and share the friendship of the troupe. They got to stand in the dark backstage and feel the rush of adrenaline until their cue let them burst into the bright. They got to stand on stage and give away every ounce of energy and then soak it all back in as applause. And all the while, their parents lined the wall of the rehearsal hall and sat out in the dark of the theatre and stared at their child with The Look, and clapped and cheered and cried.

I've been around the theatre for 40 years, as a performer on stage, as a techie backstage, as a Theater Mom sewing costumes and running the dressing room. I have NEVER worked with a cast of performers more fearless, more dedicated, more creative, more disciplined or more worthy of the standing ovation at the end of the show.

The bond between buddies in the Circle of Friends is a powerful thing. It's about getting beyond a disability and getting to the "you can do this" ability. These kids, some typical, some with special needs, are fiercely exuberant, generous with their talents and genuinely supportive of each other in weathering the trials and tribulations of navigating their teenage world. It's hard to tell who gets the most benefit out of the relationships, but it's easy to tell that these kids...all of them...will make differences in our world as adults because the Circle of Friends ahs given them a voice and a focus for their energies.

As the grownups at this gig, we need to get to our feet, start clapping and yell "ENCORE" until every child in Kansas has the opportunity to be embraced by the Circle of Friends

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