

Hello everyone. Thank you for welcoming me this afternoon. And thank you Mrs. Santana for your kind words about The Making of Faith and inviting me here today.

Our family is blessed to know and receive the staff of Collier's incredible support since 2014. Thank you. For those of you I haven't had the pleasure to meet, my name is Victoria Baker. I am the parent of two sons Danny and Ian Baker, both currently attending college.

Nineteen years ago, daycare costs matched my take home salary. The boys were 3 and 1 when we decided I would become a stay-at-home mom. We prayed and believed it was the best decision for our family. I am grateful to have grown up with Ian and Danny.

It never occurred to me that I would embrace the skills of a nutritionist, naturopath, educator, neurologist, therapist, attorney, case manager, advocate, and single parent. Our family psychologist kidded, "You may not have the certifications, but you play them all in real life." As for single parenting, it was only God's Grace that made a way and continues to do so.

Ian, my oldest, was on the receiving end of many miracles that transformed his life here at Collier High School. He found his voice, and perhaps, the better part of himself right here on this beautiful campus. I suspect there are many angels disguised as administrative staff, teachers, counselors, and mentors. When the student is ready the teacher will appear.

There are no words to match our gratitude. Learning that we were held in prayer by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd every morning, strengthened my heart and gave me courage. Thank you.

Ian graduated Collier in 2016. He continued on as a super senior with amazing academic, social, and emotional support from many of you. He earned 12 credits from the Dual Enrollment Program linked with Brookdale Community College. It was quite an accomplishment but more importantly, it was a dress rehearsal for his new life at Montclair State University and the pursuit of his dream of becoming a filmmaker.

One beautiful spring afternoon, not long before graduation, Ian and I visited with Brookdale staff to review courses for the fall and sign up for the summer orientation class. It was a quick meeting. Everything was done with ease. On the ride home, one of Ian's favorite artists, Five for Fighting, began to play on the radio.

I don't know if this happens to you, but when I hear an old song it immediately takes me back to a different time and place. Impressions of events or people are right there. Ian might never audition for American Idol, but he sure belted out the Superman song, *It's Not Easy*.

We were driving on Swimming River Road in Middletown when the song began. The sun was bright and strong taking the spring chill out of the air. I wondered if it crossed Ian's mind, the milestone he reached that day.

"I can't stand to fly, I'm not that naïve, I'm just out to find, the better part of me." That's the start of the Superman song.

Here was the kid with multiple disabilities who didn't receive help in school until he began high school at seventeen years old. We were fortunate to afford private therapies after school. Despite his absence, their Dad mended his relationship with the boys, financially supported us, and attended every school meeting for Ian.

Therapy was hard, frustrating work for Ian and a lot waiting for Danny. His teachers would scoff, "He can do it, he just had to try harder. Why does he cry so much? Must be what's going on at home. What's the deal with covering his ears? You have to sit with everyone, I don't care if you have a peanut allergy. If you're going to throw up every day, aim for the waste basket." No one was looking for the better part of Ian.

"I'm more than a bird, I'm more than a plane, more than some pretty face beside a train, it's not easy to be me."

For Ian and Danny, life was not easy but it's a whole lot better now. Danny, a gentle soul and talented musician is a Godsend of patience and protection never bragging about his successes, always encouraging his older brother.

Here at Collier, Ian learned how to make friends and build relationships. That is not an easy task. And I thank you because there is a time when students turn down the volume of their parents but never miss a word said by their classmates or teachers. They are listening. Shaping, molding, encouraging, that is what you do here at Collier, nothing short of a miracle.

Driving along, I pictured Ian running out of Brookdale's testing center waiving the grade of 92 and hugging me. We both had tears in our eyes that morning. There are no small victories in our lives.

As we drove on, I thought, Ian is really going to make it. I whispered thank you to the heavens.

We drove past Sunnyside Equestrian Center, our local horse farm. Despite my efforts over the years, Ian refused to visit. But it was another gift of hope and therapy on the road paved with Love and Collier. More reminders of our blessings on the way home that day.

We passed the high school Ian would never attend, where Danny excelled as an honor student, played in concert band, enjoyed many friendships and received college scholarships. Our psychologist recently reflected, "Boy, you really had to raise each guy differently." I am glad someone noticed. A little way down the road, Ian brashly

gave the finger to the middle school building where he was bullied and hit. I didn't reprimand him. I didn't blame him.

"It may sound absurd but don't be naïve, even heroes have the right to bleed. I may be disturbed but won't you concede even heroes have the right to dream."

Ian was justly disturbed by how he was and wasn't treated throughout his entire school life before Collier. In middle school, selective mutism and notes that he wanted to die soon followed.

Passing that middle school, I prayed that the good that had come into his life would be magnified instead of these traumatic experiences. I can dream, right?

Then, anxiety tried to rule but Love would have its way as I once again took on a new role, this time, as a home educator.

These places I remembered as Ian owned the lyrics, became a healing balm for me.

It was the same school where Danny, then 11 and wise beyond his years, wrote a book report on The Giver. He posed the question, "What is the color of pain?" The question blew me away. I surrendered their hurts and dreams, imagined wholeness for all of us. Letting go of my dreams for them, I believed in the highest good, the Spirit of Life's knowing, for their future and mine.

I believe every one of us, no matter our age, are children of God meant for love, to be loved and to love. This powerful, Divine Love is not some superhero in the sky but the Overseer of our Souls. His plans for us are not just to barely get by or hang in there but to prosper us, to give us hope and a future. I leaned on a scripture passage, "My Yoke is easy, my burden Light." I took our uneasy life and gave it to the Light. It was freeing.

Before we were aware of Collier's existence, Ian had an awful meltdown, the phone went flying across the kitchen counter, he grunted and growled through the neighborhood, stormed back home and doubled over with severe belly pain and vomiting. Danny texted his friends, who watched out for Ian as he screamed through the few blocks of our neighborhood. I was grateful to know he was safe.

When calmed returned, I finally had a chance to go to the bathroom. I know too much information. Sitting there, I had a knowing in my spirit, a whisper from God, "Embrace autism."

If Love hadn't shown up a million times before, I would have screamed, "Are you kidding?" But I listened for the lesson. Two weeks passed, and a wellness consultant introduced us to research and supplements that brought comfort and calm to Ian's body.

My Uncle Victor, a former missionary in Zambia and loving mentor nudged me, "See Ian happy coming home from school, telling you about his great day. Speak it out loud, dream it, believe it. And before sleep, see him coming through the front door, happy, excited to share his day.

My uncle also encouraged me to say thank you in advance. He said, "Live in a state of gratitude." Believe on purpose no matter what is happening in front of you.

And I did what he suggested. Night after night, I pictured that image until it became of part of my spirit and Ian's.

It sounded crazy and even crazier when the words came out of my mouth, "Ian is happy, he's going to a great school, thank you." When he heard me, Danny just shook his head. I dreamed Ian was walking with his Dad and brother in the fall, when the leaves were scattered. A German shepherd was leading them. Ian was accepted in the fall of 2014. I got goosebumps after learning about the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. I thought God is so good to us. Deep Love called to deep hurt and began to heal us.

For Ian, learning how to adapt, moving through the changes of his life, living away at college, listening to other's viewpoints without imposing his own, reflecting on mistakes and next steps, being grateful, and even understanding the responsibilities of mentoring some Collier friends are the growth of seeds planted, watered, and nurtured in his life right here at Collier and home, I hope. He's come a long way from climbing on top of our minivan and howling and biting the neighborhood kids who teased him.

The memories of six state mediations, a DYFS investigation, endless emails, meetings, letters, phone calls, and my Senate Education Testimony seem like another lifetime. Someday soon, I plan release countless boxes of school papers in a bonfire celebration. There is another beautiful passage from Isaiah, “He will give you a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair. We were in despair but not anymore. Thank you.

One of the first things I did when it was suddenly the three of us, after 23 years of marriage, Danny then 7 and Ian 9, my heroes, was to offer piggy back rides to breakfast. Danny was my only taker. He hopped on and glided through his mornings, before the bus stop, until he grew that I could no longer carry him. We soared room to room as Danny lifted one hand high above him and held on tight to me with the other.

He shouted, “Look at me, I’m flying!” I responded that he could be anything he wanted to be and told him how amazing he was. We giggled and clung to each other all the way to the breakfast table. Although Ian stomped down the stairs and grunted at our morning ritual, I knew he was listening, I prayed my words were being rooted.

“Men weren’t meant to ride with the clouds between their knees, I’m only a man in a silly red sheet, digging for kryptonite on this one-way street. Only a man in a funny red sheet, looking for special things inside of me, inside of me.”

I am grateful my uncle lived to hear, long-distance from California, the stories of Ian breezing through the door, this time placing the backpack on the floor instead of flinging it in anger, laughing about what happened during the day, sharing what Ms. Del said, what he learned from Mr. Bush, the comments Ms. Lauer wrote on his writing. We have graduated to bigger dreams. Ian made the Dean's List in the spring. Congratulations to all of you!

Ian, Danny, and I are still mastering the art of becoming who we're meant to be, looking for the better part of ourselves.

*When the student is truly ready, the teacher will Disappear. I'd like to think there is always a new lesson. Sometimes, the most unlikely teacher shows up.*

The special things in each of you reach beyond the spaces of Collier, relentlessly impressing. Can you imagine? I can. Lessons are still in motion long after your students leave the premises. May these special things return to you as blessings. May the better part of you be as easy to find as dreaming, believing, and seeing.

Thank you.

- *It's Not Easy, Five For Fighting*