

A Smile As Big As the Moon: A Teacher, His Class and Their Unforgettable Journey

By: Mike Kersjes

When Mike Kersjes, a high school special education teacher and football coach, read in 1987 a magazine article about [Space Camp](#), he knew his students would love to go. Located at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville, Ala., the camp allows students to spend six days training and living like astronauts. But Mr. Kersjes and his co-teacher, Robynn McKinney, knew they faced a major obstacle: The program had been designed for gifted and talented students. A group of special education students had never before participated.

A Smile as Big as the Moon, published in February by St. Martin's Press, is Mike Kersjes' account (written with Joe Layden) of how he and Ms. McKinney dodged the unwillingness of their school's administrators, convinced NASA's education program that their special education students belonged at Space Camp, and put their young charges through a rigorous period of camp preparation. In the excerpt below, Mr. Kersjes learns firsthand about the emotional hurdles his students must maneuver every day:

This was a moment of clarity.

In a vast ballroom of the Hilton Hotel in Houston, on the first day of a NASA- sponsored Teacher in Space Conference, Robynn and I were searching for a table. We had registered for the evening's program, which included an address by Dr. Robert Brown, NASA's director of education, but had thus far been unable to locate our assigned seats. So we circled the room, looking ... looking. Finally, we found it—our table! It was in the back of the room, nearly against the wall, in a dimly lit corner not far from the clatter and clutter of the kitchen. Seated alongside us were a low-level NASA administrator and two people from the Soviet Union, whose affiliation was never quite made clear. This much I knew: We were the only teachers at that table.

But then, no one really thought of us as teachers. My name tag read: MICHAEL KERSJES—SPECIAL EDUCATION, and that was all anyone needed to know. Nearly everyone I had met since arriving had treated me as though I had fleas or something, staring at that badge, giving me a quizzical look, and then asking, in a tone of bewilderment, "Why are you here?"

"Well, let's see ... I'm a teacher, and this is a conference for teachers."

"Oh ... "

The implied message was that we were not educators. People with good hearts, perhaps; people doing work that was on some level valuable, or at least necessary, but not teachers. Oh no. That designation was reserved for those who worked with real students, and those very same people were seated much closer to the front of the ballroom, where they could see the featured speaker, hear his every word, because obviously it was much more important, more vital ... more relevant ... to them than it was to us.

All of this hit me pretty hard. Never before had I felt the stigma of being associated with special-needs students. Back home in Grand Rapids, people had always thought of me as a football coach first, special education teacher second. In fact, if you had asked just about anyone: "Who's Mike Kersjes?" the response would have been, "He's a football coach."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, he's a teacher."

"What does he teach?"

"Uhhhh...I don't know."

You see, it didn't matter. Now it mattered, and perhaps for the first time in my life I understood what my kids had been feeling. You wear a tag and that tag defines you. It becomes who you are. As I sat down at that table, so far from the center of activity, so utterly disassociated and ignored, it hit me: Special ed kids ... back of the room;

special ed teachers ... back of the room. This is what it was like to be a second-class citizen. It was a lousy, dehumanizing experience.

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