When I first went to the Special Olympics offices to discuss our partnership on this issue of the Standard, one of the people working on Project Unify mentioned how nearly everyone seems to have some kind of personal connection with Special Olympics—as a volunteer, a worker, a teacher, or as a friend or relative of a participant.

This was certainly true in my case. My sister, Bonnie, was born with a severe intellectual disability as the result of lack of oxygen during birth. We didn’t even know this for sure until several years after she was born, when a trek from our northern Minnesota home down to Rochester’s Mayo Clinic (which seemed to me like a journey to the deep South) confirmed what my parents suspected. And at least we knew where we stood.

Thus began a different kind of journey for our family, one dedicated to ensuring Bonnie had all the opportunities for a good life that my brother and I had. This wasn’t always easy for a family of modest means. It was the late 1950s and P.L. 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, was still 18 years off. When it came to public schools or other public services, many times there was literally nowhere for Bonnie to go and the future seemed to offer only two choices: a lifetime of isolation at home or being consigned to a state institution. We moved down to Minneapolis in hopes of opening up more opportunities, and my mother became one of those many dedicated and activist parents who fought both for their own special needs child and at the same time saw it more broadly as a civil rights matter for all children with disabilities. The issue was getting out there. This was progress.

At home, we managed to get a scholarship for Bonnie at the well-known Fraser School. My mother became president of the Minneapolis chapter of ARC and was a leader in a years-long effort to build Minnesota’s first group home in a residential neighborhood for adults with intellectual disabilities. In the neighborhoods, people expressed many fears and there was plenty of misinformation about who these residents would be and what they might do, along with the well-worn concern of “what will happen to our property values?” To those of us who knew and worked with Bonnie and her peers, some of these fears bordered on the bizarre, but the endless meetings and patient explanations continued until the first group home was finally opened shortly after 94-142 was enacted. Bonnie missed her chance to attend a public school, but at least she had a place to live. And this, too, was progress.

Things proceeded quietly for a while as Bonnie settled into her home and public schools adjusted to having these new students in their buildings. It was true that Bonnie spent most of her time with her peers, though she enjoyed the family and holiday events in a more mixed crowd. She participated in several Special Olympics, including one memorable race where she was in the lead up to the very end. But when she got to the tape at the finish line she stopped, and no amount of loud encouragement could get her to break that tape. When the next runner came and broke through, Bonnie triumphantly walked across the finish line. It was clear she knew her own progress. She beamed and said, “I like that!”—her pet phrase for all things truly good.

When inclusion came along in the early 1990s, some of the fears reminded me of those I heard about Bonnie’s group home: What would those kids do to the regular classrooms? How much would they disrupt activities? How much of the teacher’s attention would they require? Instead of property values it was, “What will happen to my child’s test scores?” In those early years, both the proponents and skeptics had much to learn. While there were many cases where including special needs children in the general classroom was a triumph for all concerned, there were times when these students entered a classroom with little to no support or training for the teacher. Yet, as Alexa Posny points out in her article, while inclusion is not the be-all and end-all (a continuum of services must be offered), research has shown that when inclusive “practices are implemented well, not only do children with and without intellectual disabilities in schools benefit, but schools and communities do as well.”

This issue of the Standard takes inclusion one step further, by expanding it from the classroom to the entire school community. It is not just about academic learning, though that is still central to the purpose of schools. Nor is it just about broadening opportunities to participate in athletics, which Special Olympics has done so well for so many years. It is about broadening the school community itself, so that all students, no matter what their intellectual and physical capabilities, have a chance to study with, make friends with, and learn from each other. This, too, is real progress. And I believe Bonnie, though she might not have been able to fully articulate it, would have appreciated the difference. “I like that!” she would have said.