

Author, subject of viral Dear 'Daddy' letter bring message of kindness to Middlesex County high school

Written by Sergio Bichao @sbichao

Apr. 11, 2014 |

mycentraljersey.com

EAST BRUNSWICK — A chance encounter on an airplane trip from Florida made an impact on the lives of two individuals — a Canadian mom and a South Jersey executive who will bring their message about the importance of kindness and tolerance to high-school students this morning at Middlesex County Vocational and Technical Schools here.

The story of Shanell Mouland, 34, and Eric Kunkel, 40, began several months ago when Mouland boarded an airplane with her 3-year-old daughter, Kate.

As Mouland waited for take off she fretted about the long journey ahead. Her daughter has autism, which means social and public situations can be difficult.

“We never go anywhere without an escape route,” said Mouland, a teacher of students with disabilities who lives in New Brunswick, Canada.

Mouland hoped nobody would sit next to Kate, but along came Eric. What happened next Mouland later documented in an open letter titled “Dear ‘Daddy’ in Seat 16C,” which she posted January on her blog, goteamkate.com. The letter was picked up by news outlets and was read and shared by countless thousands of people online.

“I don’t know your name, but Kate called you ‘daddy’ for the entire flight last week and you kindly never corrected her,” Mouland wrote.

“You could have shifted uncomfortably in your seat. You could have ignored her. You could have given me that ‘smile’ that I despise because it means: ‘manage your child please.’ You did none of that. You engaged Kate in conversation and you asked her questions about her turtles.”

The letter about Kunkel’s act of kindness and patience struck a nerve with many parents in the autism community.

Kunkel said he was “shocked” by the attention his actions received.

“From my point of view, I was doing what we always should do: Be nice to people,” he said.

After his 25-year-old stepson found the article online, Kunkel reached out to Mouland, and the two became friends.

Kunkel and Mouland will lead a team Saturday in Easter Seals New Jersey’s fifth annual Walk With Me 5K Run at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford. The fundraiser raises awareness and support for families living with disabilities.

Kunkel also joined the board of Easter Seals of New Jersey, a disability services provider with offices in East Brunswick. He says he is learning “more and more each day” about autism.

The pair's message for the high school students today fits in with the state's effort to address bullying in schools.

Mouland says education about autism and other disabilities is important. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says 1 in 50 children are diagnosed with autism.

"I want my daughter to grow up with and interact with people who are understanding, educated and aware of autism and disabilities," she said.

Mouland said children with severe autism often don't get bullied as much as the more higher-functioning autistic students with Asperger's, who are "a little quirky or speak more like an adult."

"A little more patience goes a long way," she said. "That tiny bit of effort makes the world of difference for a child whose whole day is a herculean effort because sights and sounds and social norms are overwhelming."

Kunkel, an IT consultant from Cape May County, says that young people are growing up in an age of "instant contact and gratification." Fewer and fewer people are interested in speaking on the phone or meeting in person when they can communicate by email or text.

"Hopefully we don't lose that notion of being good to one another," he said.

He plans to tell students that they should think about their actions because they could be "life-changing."

"My being myself and talking to a little girl on a plane, the impact that it had on an entire community dealing with autism is something I never expected it would have."