

Chapter 6 - Never Give Up, Motivating Myself

During my leave, I kept pushing himself. I was racing against time. There were three reasons.

- First, I took 6 months leave. I gave up income. It was a serious matter. If I could not achieve what I targeted for, then it would be very bad.
- Second, my company granted me 6 months leave. It would not be easy to extend further.
- Third, Ag was five years old then. In the following year, he would start to attend full time primary school. Time was running short. If I could not help him to overcome, it would become more and more difficult.

In the course of training, there was setback from time to time. For example, Ag had little progress. He did not follow instruction. Therapist and I had different opinions. Sue and I had different views etc. All these created stress. I needed a way to cope and kept positive. I read books.

I read a book “Dibs in Search of Self”, Chinese version, by Virginia Axline. This book fascinated me. I spent just two nights to finish reading more than 300 pages.

In kindergarten, there was a boy, Dibs. His intelligence quotient was extremely high, but unknown to anyone. Dibs was speechless. He never smiled and joined any activity. He ignored other pupils and teachers. He stayed at a corner or under his table. If he was pushed to join activities, he resisted violently. He yelled, struggled, pushed away or even bit others. His mother came to pick him up daily in a car driven by a chauffeur, but she was always late, seemingly to avoid other parents and students on purpose.

Dibs was calm only when the teacher was reading a book. Dibs isolated himself by sitting or lying on the floor, away from the group, but not too far away from the teacher, within listening distance. He was in silence. Nobody could tell whether Dibs was paying attention or day dreaming by himself.

Dibs' parents were wealthy. They donated large sums of money to the kindergarten. As such, the chancellor instructed to accommodate Dibs. Allegedly, Dibs' father was a famous scientist. His mother was a well-known cardiologist. She described Dibs as "having an emotional and cognitive disorder" because there was a problem in his brain. The kindergarten arranged medical doctor and psychologist to examine Dibs, but all to no avail. Dibs spent two years in the kindergarten until one day there was a strong complaint from parents of other children. Dibs bit another student badly. It was time for decision and action.

Why Dibs behaved this way? He was born and brought up in a seemingly impeccable family. Both his dad and mum were extremely well educated and had big achievements. His mother even gave up her job and took care of Dibs full time at home. What was the cause of the problem, Dibs' seriously bad behavior? Dibs had a sister, who was 'perfect', in the opinion of the mother. However, Dibs hated her sister. Why? Why Dibs' sister did not have any abnormal behavior? Why they were so different?

Finally, the kindergarten invited a top American clinical psychologist Ms. Virginia Axline to help. In 34 weeks, a miracle happened. Ms. Axline corrected Dibs' behavior. She rescued this very smart boy, turned around his parents, restored peace and happiness in the family and the kindergarten. Finally, Dibs became a happy student. Several years later, he was assessed as highly gifted, scoring 168 in IQ test. He was admitted to a school for gifted children and excelled.

Ms. Axline did not instruct Dibs or his parents. She arranged play therapy with Dibs, on weekly basis. In the book, Ms. Axline described these thirty-four sessions with lots of details, what she arranged, what the boy did, the interaction and conversation between the therapist and the boy, how the boy took it and finally how Dibs parent reacted and changed For each of the play therapy session, she substantiated by giving her intent, the theory behind and Dibs' reaction. To me, this book was full of insight, experience and wisdom. I was touched, affected and motivated.

Dibs' story fascinated me greatly. It displayed the great importance and power of family caring. Dibs was highly gifted, but his parents made a big mistake in his early childhood. Dibs was not autistic at all but he chose to isolate himself subconsciously, to protect himself. He developed very serious social behavioral problems too. Ms. Axline was great. With her top professional

skill, she changed Dibs. She unfolded the true cause i.e. his parents did not want to have a baby from the very beginning! She did not tell Dibs' parent upfront. She let the mother discover and speak herself. As such she turned Dibs' parents around and rescued the whole family. My child was with Asperger's. His situation was very different. Nevertheless the story of Dibs motivated me. With the help and advice of a group of the first class therapists, I kept pushing on with no fear. I believed that I and my child would overcome.

Every psychologist, early education expert, social worker know "Dibs in Search of Self". They are all touched too. It is actually on university required reading list for undergraduates. It is translated and published in many languages. Please don't miss out this book. It is very easy to read, somehow like a novel with a surprising and marvelous ending.

'A Smile as Big as the Moon' (Chinese version) by Mr. Mike Kersjes with Mr. Joe Layden is also a great book which has inspired me enormously. Dedication, care and love is magical.

In Alabama, there was a 'U.S. Space & Rocket Center'. The Center ran a weekly 'Space Camp' once a year. Student astronauts, joining this Space Camp, would undertake very intensive training. Then they would board a simulated space shuttle for a space mission. Whenever a problem happened, student astronauts would have to deal with it as a team, make their judgement and solve it. This Space Camp, of course, were designed for the gifted, talented and the best students.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, there was a special education school, Forest Hills Northern High School. Mr. Kersjes was a teacher, as well as a football coach. By chance, Mr. Kersjes read an article about Space Camp. A very unusual idea came up. He wanted to bring his students to Space Camp. Mr. Kersjes and his co-teacher, Ms. Robynn McKinney, were responsible for teaching students with different learning disabilities or disorder, dyslexia, Down's Syndrome, Tourette syndrome, ADHD, ADD, autism and eating disorder etc. Many of these students came from broken families. They had serious emotional or behavioral problems.

These students were labeled as behind, sub-class, stupid, lack of learning ability, troublesome and unable to take care of themselves. However, Mr. Kersjes thought that bringing these

students to Space Camp was a good move. It would enable these students to learn the knowledge of rockets and space, mutual respect, team work and regain self-esteem. They would not abandon themselves.

The first person who agreed to support Mr. Kersjes was his co-teacher, Ms. Robynn McKinney. Since summer 1987 to 1989 until the students completed Space Camp, the two teachers spent 1.5 year to overcome countless big obstacles. With a strong belief, they finally attained incredible achievements.

The first one against Mr. Kersjes' idea was the school principal. He described it as 'crazy'. The second person who objected was the school inspector. With the objection of direct senior, a normal person would retreat, but Mr. Kersjes did not. He escalated to the president of the school board. The president admired his guts and hard work, thus gave Mr. Kersjes his support.

Mr. Kersjes sent a letter to the director of Space Camp. There was no reply even after weeks. Mr. Kersjes did not give up. He sought for help from the Congress man. It happened that this Congress man was the chairman of The Committee on Science, Space and Technology in Washington which had a partial jurisdiction on Space Camp. The Congress man gave a phone call to Space Center. Only one day after, Mr. Kersjes and Ms. McKinney were invited to Alabama to explain their proposal.

The Director of U.S. Space & Rocket Center was full of questions and suspicions. On the following day, he was straight: 'Space Camp is for the best and gifted students. This is silly to bring twenty students who needs special education to Space Camp'. The two teachers strived. After the interview, the director suggested to the Head of Space Camp Program: 'Please have breakfast with the two teachers tomorrow morning.' In the breakfast of the following morning, the Head said: 'I checked. You two are not here to gather glory for your resume, but for the children's well-being. Therefore, I recommended to enroll these students and the Director has approved'. She added very solemnly: 'I make a pledge with my career. You two must guarantee to do a good job'. This was an unparalleled demand. Mr. Kersjes and Ms. McKinney almost fainted.

Contrary to the belief of everybody, entry to the Space Camp was a big surprise. It became a hot and big topic for everyone. Special needs students needed to learn and undertake training seriously. They would be responsible to conduct mission in a simulated space shuttle. They would compete with many other teams of gifted students from all over United States. Could they managed?

The first challenge was to find appropriate teaching material. There was none, of course, designed for special needs students, not even in the Space Camp. After checking around, the two teachers sought for help from Space Center Houston. This center was not attached to the center of Alabama. Entry to Space Camp did not mean anything to Houston. Perhaps, sincerity of the teachers touched the head of Houston Space Center. He generously promised to provide teaching material, free of charge.

These materials were for normal students. How to make these material suitable for students with special needs? It was another big challenge for the two teachers. They had no knowledge of rocket and space shuttle. They had to learn too!

These students had different degree of learning disabilities. Teaching them was not easy. It was necessary to convert or reform the teaching material from Houston Space Center to fit these students. Generally speaking, these students were weak to learn by listening. They needed images. They learnt through other means, such as practicing with their hands, trial and error etc. Mr. Kersjes and Ms. McKinney deserved great respect. They created games for their students so that they learnt how to operate space shuttle. They made cardboard games to simulate space missions. The students then learnt fast.

Another good way was to build models, so that the students picked up the design and operation of rockets, space shuttle and propulsion theory. It cost a big sum to buy rocket models, more than 4,000 US dollars. Fortunately, the model manufacturer offered help, sponsoring all models. Once with models on hand, Mr. Kersjes made an attempt to assemble. At first, he had difficulties. He did not make any progress even after one whole day. Suddenly, a boy volunteered to help. He took a box of model home. On the following day, he came back with a good rocket model. The two teachers were amazed. This boy, once assessed as IQ below

normal, became a leader of the team in model building. His long neglected talent became dazzling.

These rocket models were real. They could be launched. Mr. Kersjes and Ms. McKinney arranged a public launch. They first got approval of the Fire Department, who sent fire fighters to stand by. They invited teachers, principal, parents of these students. They invited the media too. Everyone was glad to come and with respect. The special needs students had been neglected for years. They were regarded as sub-standard, slow learner, unsocial, lack of communication skill and motivation. After 1.5 year of hard work, they became confident, cooperative and self-initiating. They showed their good knowledge of rockets and the related science. They launched the model rockets successfully. They were comparable as any outstanding students.

Fund raising was the most difficult of all. Bringing twenty students to Alabama one week would cost a lot. It was estimated to be 50, 000 US dollars. Mr. Kersjes sent out dozens of letters but to no avail. Time passed quickly. Gradually, the students became demotivated. Their will was shaken. Then, sponsorship came suddenly. One of the students worked part time in Big Dan's Burger Shed. Somehow, the owner learnt about this. He liked to help the weak class, to see them win. He promised to sponsor. The largest hurdle was removed.

One of the training was to conduct mission in zero gravity. To simulate this, the students would need to go underwater, in a swimming pool to assemble a structure of tetrahedron. Forest Hills Northern had no pool. Again, after asking around, YMCA offered to help, providing their pool for practice, free. Another hurdle was overcome. Gradually, parents of these students changed their attitude, from laughing, snorting and questioning to believing, encouraging and giving support. After all, this was an exceptional opportunity.

There were always good people around. They came when the students needed encouragement. A famous retired astronaut heard the story of Forest Hills Northern. He came to visit. He even joined the training with the students together, under water in the pool. His participation was a very big support. After the training in the pool, the retired astronaut remarked: "These are the best student astronauts. They were ready for the Space Camp."

In 1989, Mr. Kersjes, Mrs. Kersjes who came as helper, and Ms. McKinney set off with 20 special needs students. Before this trip, these students hardly went out of Grand Rapids, and never boarded a plane. They would meet in the Space Camp two hundred elite students from US as well as from France and Puerto Rico. There would be intense competition. These special needs students would have to prove themselves.

Space Camp activities started. The special needs students won in two non-scoring events. These surprised all students from other schools, camp staff and the two teachers who had never expected the students to win. However, the students proved that they were as good as elite students.

Scoring events started. The first was to design a shoulder badge, to show their team name as well as to highlight the spirit of cooperation. Time was short. The students were given this assignment after dinner but they needed to submit the design in the following morning. Among the team, only one boy was good at art design. The whole team rushed to give ideas but not in an orderly and organized way. After an hour, there were just dispute. It became chaotic. The designer suddenly went out of control. He swept the paper, the sketch, the crayons and everything to the floor. He yelled: "I quit. I want to go home". Then he ran out of the room and started to cry. All students were astounded. After a few moments, Mr. Kersjes rose: "I'll take him back." This was part of his job whenever there was any trouble. All these students had been relying on their teachers to handle this. However, suddenly two elder students came forward and blocked Mr. Kersjes. They said softly: "Coach, we don't need you." In a second, Mr. Kersjes knew that his students had grown up. They were able to deal with interpersonal problems. In about 10 minutes, all students were back to work. They completed the design and won an award afterwards. In the past, these students were trouble making. They had bad temper. They accused each other but this time, they cooperated. They had a common goal and solved their own dispute like mature adults.

The remark "Coach, we don't need you" was just too sharp and too harsh for Mr. Kersjes.

The most important events began i.e. to operate a simulated space shuttle and to complete two missions in space. This was not just a test of the students' understanding of space science and their skill to control space shuttle. Most importantly, it was teamwork, co-operation and

the right judgement to cope with unexpected problems. All twenty students had to work together as one team and made no mistake. If failing the mission, the shuttle might not return to Earth and all astronauts within neither.

After the mission was over, the retired astronaut showed up unexpectedly. He volunteered to come, with one purpose only, to support these special needs students! He delivered a piece of speech. It was really motivating. 'Remember this. Don't be afraid to go for your dreams. May be you need to work very hard, but as long as you are willing to sacrifice, there is nothing cannot be achieved'. This speech was dedicated to students of Forest Hills Northern.

I hope that every readers and parents please remember the above piece. I am also going for my dreams too, writing this book and helping the needed.

There were four awards in the program, three for the team and one for individual. Before arriving Alabama, these special needs students were content to just participate. Winning was not their goal. However, in all the events, they performed as well as other elite students and they knew. Any award? Yes, they won an award in each and every team event.

Best Space Badge Award – Third place

Best Space Station Award – Second place

Best Mission Award – Third place

It was really commendable. These students were competing with the best students from all schools within US, France and Puerto Rico. They should be proud of themselves absolutely.

The greatest honor of all, "The Right Stuff Award", was for the individual who exhibited the best characteristics of a true astronaut. No matter how tough the situation was, he or she never complained and was always supportive. He made great contribution to the mission and was invaluable to his/her team. He respected staff of Space Camp, his team and all contestants. The award went to The Mission Commander of The Special Needs Students! It was surprising, motivating and touching. A special needs student excelled among two hundred gifted students, won the title and the respect of contestants.

Arriving home with dazzling achievements, the entire Forest Hills Northern and Grand Rapids came to receive and celebrate. Parents, teachers, principal, sponsors and media were all in the airport. After the plane had landed, Mr. Kersjes rose from his seat. He wanted to help and lead the students. Suddenly, Ms. McKinney stopped him: "Let them take care of themselves. They can do it!" Sure enough, without any assistance, these the students led the way, before their teachers, to disembark the plane, to accept their well-deserved congratulations, appreciation, honor and respect, for the first time in their lives.

This book was truly inspiring. It moved my inner most feeling. I could not withhold my tear drops many times. Mr. Kersjes and Ms. McKenny were great role model of teachers. Their dedication moved everybody, the special needs students, Congress man, school principal, president of the board, Head of Space Camp, parents, media, retired astronauts and finally the whole community.

This story is truly a milestone of special education. I believe that any child, no matter gifted or autistic, needs an opportunity and a goal, even if it seems out of reach. With care, encouragement, guidance and training, the huge potential will surface. Please keep it in mind that each and everybody is different. Each child has his own learning method and journey. Mr. Kersjes and Ms. McKinney used cardboard games and models, which were right for Forest Hills Northern students. These students learnt as fast as other elite students who learnt by attending classroom, reading books and other means. We, as parents, have to cherish our children and find the right way for them and explore their talents. If still in doubt, please read the story of "Dibs in Search of Self" again. The contrary is there to prove.

'A Smile As Big As the Moon' is quite long, but missing it is a big loss.