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Yesterday was the end-of-the-year assembly at my children's school. It's always a special day -- a day that I mark on my calendar months in advance and construct an iron-clad fort around. NOBODY gets my time on this day other than my children.

Can you go to Arkansas on Thursday?

Nope.

Can we have a conference call Thursday morning?

No way.

Can I have coffee with you?

Ha. No.

This year's assembly was business as usual. A group of bright-eyed and beautiful children ages 4-14 sitting cross-legged on the floor anxiously waiting to hear their name called.

Their prize, of course, is running to the front of the room, grabbing their 8.5x11 pre-printed award and holding it across their chest with great pride while the paparazzi of parents in the audience snap pictures with their smartphones and iPads.

For the younger kids (pre-school through second grade), the school plays by the "everyone's a winner" rule. Each class is called up as a large group and the awards are passed out one by one.

While I prefer a little competitive action when it comes to awards, I try to contain myself. "Try" being the operative word.

Last year Alex received the "rule follower" award, which melted my heart. My 89-year-old grandfather always says, "Katherine, there's only two types of people in this world... rule followers and rule breakers." Being a staunch rule follower himself, I knew my grandfather would be pleased to see my son falling on that side of the divide. Especially since I'm 622 miles on the other side of that divide. Regularly.

This year, Alex received the "amazing athlete" award.

My reaction: "Interesting."

My husband's reaction: "Now THAT'S an award!!!! Way to go son!"

Clearly, opposites attract.

I was hoping for something a little more academic in nature. After watching them hand out awards for the kids who received straight A's, I leaned over to Richard and said, "Oh... I woouooooonder which one of our kids will get that award one day... Layla or Alex?"

His response: "Good lord, Katherine."

Again, opposites.

Layla's class was up next. The precocious group of first graders waited anxiously to hear their names called. Called last, but not least, Layla was awarded the "fantastic friend" award.

Fine.

Last year she received the "extraordinary effort" award, which I loved (I mean really loved), but being a good friend seems like a positive thing to be in this world. I think.

Between the two kids, nothing overly academic, but a solid showing.

Once they finished with the younger kids, the game changed for the older kids (grades 3-8). Not everyone gets an award -- only the people who go the extra mile and perform at the highest academic standards.

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NOW the awards are going to get REALLY good. No more awards for being nice or funny, a decent storyteller or knowing how to count particularly well.

As they go grade-by-grade, beckoning ONLY the top students to come forward, a couple things are going through my mind. (Remember: I have gerbils in my mind) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/katherine-wintsch/what-most-men-dont-have-and-why-im-jealous_b_4856135.html)

I wonder which subjects Layla and Alex will master by the third grade so they can start winning REAL awards?

I wonder what I can start doing IMMEDIATELY to help them prepare?

I wonder how many awards ONE child is allowed to win?

Yes, I'm very competitive. In case you hadn't noticed.

Meanwhile, I'm sure Richard was either thinking about what's for dinner, what's waiting in his Twitter feed or how lame these awards are compared to being an amazing athlete.

However, in the middle of my gerbil-induced day dream, I started thinking about McKenzi -- an 8th grade special needs student at my children's school.

CRAP.

When awards get competitive, it means amazing kids like McKenzi don't win. They can't win. McKenzi won't win the gold star for math facts, she won't be the social studies star and she won't win the coveted creative writing award.

My heart sank and I started to feel really uncomfortable. Damn these awards. Everyone should get one. Absolutely everyone. While that very idea goes against everything I believe in... at the same time I also believe in McKenzi. Deeply.

And maybe even more so, I believe in McKenzi's godmother. She's at every single school event standing right beside McKenzi. Holding her hand, keeping her calm, whispering in her ear. During every awards assembly, every school musical, every field trip and every field day. You name it, she's there.

Hell, I thought. McKenzi's godmother should even be getting an award today. An award for...

Never showing up late.

Never losing her temper.

Never saying McKenzi can't do it.

Never sitting down.

Never leaving early.

Never leaving McKenzi's side.

Never giving up.

McKenzi and her Godmother deserved an award and they weren't going to get one.

It made me sad, and I vowed to cool my jets on being so competitive when it comes to kids winning awards at school. I even contemplated telling the head of the school to find a way to give McKenzi an award next year. She deserved one for God's sake.

The academic awards were wrapping up and I started packing up my stuff. But, apparently like most good awards shows, they saved the best for last.

One of the teachers came out to give the final award -- the community service award.

The teacher told the story of one girl who went above and beyond the 20-hour requirement and completed 86 hours of community service, in fact. There was an audible gasp in the room.

In all honesty, it humbled even the most competitive type-A parents in the paparazzi.

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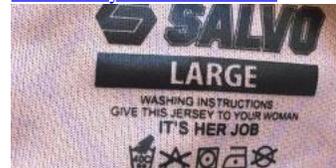
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Right. Giving back to others. Now THAT'S award-worthy.

Fair point. Well made.

And then... they told the story of an even more accomplished child who went on to complete 267 hours of community service.

And her name was McKenzi.

Holy Mary Mother of You-Know-What.

What a remarkable life lesson to watch unfold in front of my tear-filled eyes.

Here's what I learned from McKenzi yesterday that I will remember for the rest of my life.

Don't chase awards you can't win. That's just crazy.

Figure out the ONE thing you do REALLY well and do it better than anyone else.

Don't do it for the recognition, but if you happen to get some, clap for yourself as you walk up to receive your award.

I was so proud of McKenzi as she walked across the stage. And of her godmother smiling in the audience -- who I guarantee stood beside McKenzi during her 267 hours of community service and calmly coached her through the entire experience. So, for the record, I think they actually completed 534 community service hours.

But here's my favorite part.

The school didn't need to change their award policy and give every single student an award... because that would be lame. And they didn't have to create a special award just for McKenzi... because that's not what McKenzi wants or needs.

McKenzi won her own damn award.

Like true winners do.

And there's no question in my mind that McKenzi won the VERY BEST award of all that day.

(If one wanted to be competitive about it.)

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