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A scholarship saved my bullied daughter

By Elsi Greciano



(GAYLEN FLOY / Knight-Ridder Tribune)

My daughter Maria suffered bullying for years in public schools. She had developmental delays that impaired her speech and left her behind socially. Those things made her quiet and isolated, and a target.

When Maria's classes went on field trips, nobody sat with her on the bus. Instead they would attack her. "You talk weird." "You look funny." "You're disgusting." One time, her classmates tricked her into hiding in a cabinet, then left for recess without her. I kept hoping things would get better, but in sixth grade, they got even worse.

In the end, the only thing that made it better was going to another school — a private school that my husband and I would have never been able to afford without a Florida Tax Credit Scholarship.

Orlando Sentinel columnist Scott Maxwell says it's ridiculous Florida lawmakers want to offer similar scholarships to other bullied children — if the program leaves the bullies in school to bully other kids. He says if you think this is a good idea, then you don't have a brain. But given what my daughter went through, I think it's ridiculous anybody would oppose it.

When my daughter finished fifth grade, she begged me not to send her to the neighborhood middle school, because her tormenters would be there. So we enrolled her in an arts magnet. Maria loved the classes and was excited to start over.

But bad things kept happening. One boy groped her. Another humiliated her when she wouldn't give him her phone number. When a teacher saw a group of boys taunting her in the cafeteria, she sent them to the principal, who suspended them. But then Maria heard the boys were going to beat her up because they got in trouble. She was so upset that she couldn't sleep.

Sometimes the school tried to help. Sometimes it didn't. After the cafeteria incident, I emailed the principal, but never heard back. That was the last straw.

We searched for private schools that would be good for Maria, and found One School of the Arts. It had a curriculum like the school we left, but a safe, family atmosphere. We fell in love with it.

We cut all our expenses so we could enroll Maria right away, then got a tax-credit scholarship. Four years later, Maria is in 10th grade and a totally different girl.

She's confident. She speaks beautifully. She loves to debate in class. At the moment, she's not sure whether she wants to be a missionary when she grows up, or a fashion designer, or president of the United States.

When her friends come over for sleepovers, they wreck the house, but I don't care. Hearing Maria laugh with her friends brings peace to my heart.

I know many other students are suffering from bullying like Maria did, but their parents don't have the power of a scholarship to find something better. I don't know why anybody would oppose giving them that power.

Elsi Greciano lives in Longwood.