



#### INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

My parents have told me many stories about the early days of my childhood. They have six albums of me from the first two years of my life. Mom had a playgroup that met once or twice a week at our apartment. One of the children there was born on the same day as I was and in the same hospital, and his dad was a colleague of my mom's. The others were children of graduate students who lived close by. Based on these photos that I've seen countless times, I was happy to be surrounded by my peers even though they were bigger and stronger than I was. They would crawl all over the place and I would try very hard to mimic their actions, even if I could not keep up with them. I enjoyed the playgroup and I must have learned a lot. I had fun.

My mom asked around for recommendations for a nursery school near us. That's how she heard about Kiddie Camp, a place for kids with intellectual disabilities. Mom and Dad decided to try it out. It was a half-day program and mom would drive me to the camp. She says that dropping me off was hard on her. She would peek through the windows to watch what I was doing inside. I was a happy kid and the teachers were kind.

I look happy in the photos, but Mom was not satisfied and felt that it wasn't the right environment for me. In my playgroup at home, I played with kids my same age. None of them had any kind of disability and we played together just fine. That had been really good for me. Having only kids with intellectual disabilities at Kiddie Camp bothered my parents. The teachers there were great, but I wasn't learning as much from my peers. My mom and dad wanted me to learn as much as I could and to be in an environment that challenged me. They decided to keep searching. It helped to have world-class experts in child development nearby. Those experts were at the Waisman Research Center, part of the University of Wisconsin.



- You can learn more about my childhood in my book: "More Alike Than Different: My Life With Down Syndrome." [www.davideganadvocacy.com](http://www.davideganadvocacy.com) and about the Waisman Early Childhood Program at <https://wecp.waisman.wisc.edu/>





In the fall of 1979, when I was 2 years old, the Waisman Early Childhood Program opened. It was created as a result of state legislation allocating funding for a preschool at the Waisman Center. It also came together out of interest from parents and children in the community, educational institutions, and professionals in education. The goal was to have a high-quality child care and early education program that served children with special needs without isolating them. This was a new idea in the 1970s, and it was called mainstreaming.

The program benefitted families who wanted a rich education for their little ones, but it also was a place for professionals to learn and shape the practice of mainstreaming. My parents agreed that this was bound to be a better approach, so they enrolled me. The very first class was made of up 12 kids. There were 10 more or less typically developing kids plus me, with Down syndrome, and another kid with autism. We had two teachers. One had a background in early childhood education, and the other had a special education background. Both of whom worked with all of us. I loved the program and it was good for me. We had drama, free play, blocks and trucks, music, field trips, and many other activities with our great teachers. They cared for each of us.

It is sad to realize that in 2023, we do not have an inclusive Early Childhood Program in Fairfax County of Northern Virginia. I support all of the families who are seeking to change that situation and create as many inclusive preschool centers as needed in the State or Virginia. How come Wisconsin has such a center since 1979 and we do not in 2023?

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