

# All in With LPA

- By Deana Harris

Our Harris family has maximized the benefits of LPA. We are blessed beyond measure for the gift we have been given by this community of friends who have become family. But it took more than just us to be all-in. There would be no benefit for us were it not for the commitment of others. It is those who have also chosen to be all-in who are responsible for creating the gift we so graciously receive.



▲ Ayden & Deana

It was a Thursday afternoon when I picked Ayden up at the bus stop. We engaged in our normal after-school chit chat about his day. We talked about his daily intentional acts of kindness, homework, lunch, and the basics. As we drove away from our house toward the grocery store, I shared with him the details of our shopping mission. That evening there would be seven LPs at our home for dinner, and we needed supplies. That's when the Ford Explorer began to rock back and forth with Ayden doing the dance of joy in the back seat! He broke out in a little sing song about how the average height people were going to be outnumbered.

Our local grocery store has an evening manager who has achondroplasia just like Ayden. Ayden always wants to make sure we find him and say "hi" on our visits to the store. On this Thursday afternoon he was just inside

the front door as we entered the store. Ayden promptly said "hi" and invited him to be the eighth LP at our dinner. Ayden joyfully explained how our house was going to be filled with LP friends and that the two AHs were going to be outnumbered. Our grocery store friend had to decline Ayden's invitation because he was working, but asked for a raincheck.

Our LPA community has shifted far beyond the role of acquaintances with a commonality of dwarfism; they have become an extension of our family. The transformation is a direct result of our involvement in LPA. For many years we lived on the fringe. We rather anonymously scooted in and out of gatherings and events. We attended here and there, but we were not fully committed. During those fringe years, we made a couple of close connections, and those people became my go-to people. This average

▼ Ayden & friend



height grandma raising a little person grandson needed some words of wisdom, and LPA provided the right people with the right words. While on the LPA fringe it was our go-to guides that helped pave our LPA "all-in". It was LP mom Christina who gave me the straight facts laced with love, tears, and laughter. She became my mentor and first phone call when I found myself lacking confidence in my journey with Ayden. And it was Julie, the AH mom of the most confident and charismatic LP teen son, that I also looked to for guidance. I hoped her words of encouragement would help guide me to recreate that confidence in Ayden. These two ladies became my lifeline. I came to realize that through their actions they had shown me something I hadn't realized I was looking for. The reason they both had made the incredible connection with me was because they were all-in. They made themselves available through their leadership and commitment. They showed me how important being all-in was. Our family, our chapter, our community were the benefactors of their willingness to be all-in.

When Ayden was 7 years old I took a great big leap and jumped all-in. With a heart to serve, I volunteered to be a chapter officer. It was on that day that my LPA relationship status shifted from that of

an acquaintance to owning a portion of my soul. It's only now that I am learning how deeply important that decision has been. For the last five years our lives have been profoundly enriched by the deep seeded relationships we have developed within our LPA family. These relationships benefit both Ayden as well as the AH members of our family. We each have separate needs that are filled by the vastness that LPA offers.

I've recently been reading the book *Far From The Tree*, by Andrew Solomon, which gives incredible insight into the profound challenges and joys of raising a child with differences and offers ways on how to help them find and develop their very best identity. The strongest message I took away from this book is how important the sub-cultures are in helping us guide our children. LPA is mentioned throughout the dwarfism section of the book and identified as an invaluable resource. For our family, this is the highest level of truth.

The LPA community has become a part of our daily lives. Our LP mentors have been a presence on the campus of Ayden's elementary and middle schools. This presence has been in the form of student interaction through the Watch D.O.G.S. program and classroom education. Our LP mentors have shared

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informational and honest training and have had raw emotional conversations in school staff meetings. They have been supportive in attending Ayden's functions,



▲ Ayden & Laura

such as school plays and 5th grade graduation. By being on campus, Ayden's classmates and educators have been given the opportunity to see a glimpse of Ayden's life outside of school and (to that) of his future self.

Ayden has been given access to many members of our LPA community, and as he is getting older he is making his own personal connections with mentors. He often makes phone calls and sends text messages to those he has close connections with. Whether it's to talk about a bad day, a rough experience, or to share the joy of a big accomplishment, he knows those who fully understand the ups and downs of his life are a phone call away. He personally invites them to his baseball games, his life activities, or just to come over for dinner and play board games. He attends sporting events and has wild X-box football games with his LP "dudes". In full disclosure, I often wish I could be that person for Ayden. I live life in the trenches with him every day but at the end of the day, I will never understand the true life of being little. This is why I am so thankful that we are blessed to have

a community of people who are all-in for Ayden, and they have my deepest respect and admiration for their commitment. They have invested in him. They have



▲ Ayden & Quentin

earned his trust. They have become role models for him. They have become part of Team Ayden, a village that is helping develop the confident person I hoped for him to become.

It was at the national conference in San Diego where Ayden and Quentin (who goes by "Q") met for the first time. From that moment, Ayden and Q became immediate buddies. The two peas from the same pod have been an indomitable force since day one. Q is from Alaska, and we are from the Seattle area. But distance is not an issue with these two. Q and his family make trips to Seattle, and we recently made our first trip to Alaska solely for a Q & A visit. Ayden and Q have spent time together at chapter, regional, and national events. LPA has given Ayden the gift of a best friend. A friend who shares the usual stuff that tween boys share; belly laughs, burping, video games, a love of the Seattle Seahawks, and throwing footballs in the house. They don't talk much about the commonality of their achondroplasia, but when the need arises they know they will always have each other.

During our recent trip

to Alaska Ayden and Q conquered rough terrain and freezing temperatures with a determination to view the glacier from the edge of the frozen lake. It was a physically challenging process to get there, but they made it. In this moment there were no words, just the two of them and they knew the depth of their accomplishment. I imagine this is how Ayden and Q, as best buds, will take on life together.

This moment is a byproduct of LPA and those who are all-in. This friendship was born out of LPA loyalty and commitment to our organization by volunteers who work tirelessly to put on a national conference. We simply show up, have fun, make new friends, engage, play, learn, and benefit while those who are all-in are behind the scenes are executing a year of planning in an effort to create memories on our behalf. For this gift I am forever grateful.

Our Harris family has maximized the benefits of LPA. We are blessed beyond measure for the gift we have been given by this community of friends who have become family. But it took more than just us to be all-in. There would be no benefit for us were it not for the commitment of others. It is those who have also chosen to be all-in who are responsible for creating the gift we so graciously receive. It is those who answer my phone call when Ayden is having his first meltdown because he no longer wants to be little. It is those who took him to the car and showed him pedal extensions when he questioned how he would drive a car. It was those who left the hospital room of their own child to take Ayden's call because he needed words of encouragement. It

is those who simply give him a frequent glimpse into his future self. And it is those who remind me to breathe when the world seems a little too unkind.

If you are living on the fringe of LPA, I encourage you find a way to whole heartedly commit yourself to this organization. If you are an LP, people like me need you. We need your wisdom and guidance. We need to learn from your experiences. We need your compass to help give us direction and your reassurance when we feel like we are failing our kids. If you are AH raising an LP child, it is our personal experience that the greatest gift you can give your child is to immerse them in the LPA community. It is my hope that you will be surrounded with people like Ayden's incredible tribe; that you will be blessed with those like Christina, Julie, Janet, Laura, Peter, Amanda, Andrew, Alex, and Sam. That your child's world will have a frequent firsthand view through the LPA lens of the incredible life they have before them.

▼ Ayden & Quentin

