

## **Nantucket Book Festival Young Writer Award Finalists 2019**

### **Fourth Runner Up**

#### **This is Van: 11th Grade**

**Anya Mogensen**

Throughout the course of every human life, we will all at some point in our existence experience the gift of inspiration. Whether it be from an experience you went through, a teacher who saw something special in you, or maybe even from within yourself, inspiration is out there. Whatever it may be for you, it is indisputably special, because it's moments and people like these who leave you with the rarity that is inspiration. When it comes to me and learning where my inspiration comes from, you'd first have to meet Van.

Since he isn't here with me right now, let me paint you a picture of who Van is. Van Kellogg is an up and coming first grader at the Nantucket Elementary School with a tremendous amount of energy and a beautiful spirit. As well as being a fabulous singer, he's the proud owner of a winning smile, and the giver of the greatest hugs this side of Massachusetts. I've known Van for around two years now and am lucky enough to be his babysitter and teacher at the afterschool program where I work on Wednesdays and Thursdays. What this means is I get to be inspired by Van nearly everyday, because while in addition to being a train enthusiast, and a completely awesome kid, Van is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Considering I can only give you an opinionated description of what it means to be diagnosed with Autism, I'll refer to the definition on the Autism Speaks website. "Autism," it reads, "or Autism Spectrum Disorder, refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication". One thing that stands out to me within this definition, would be the social skills element. This is due to the fact that while Van may struggle with social skills, it most certainly does not prevent him from making meaningful friendships in or out of the classroom.

Ella, (names have been changed) a classmate of Van's and playmate with him after school would be a great example. When asked what she liked best about her friend Van, she replied, "I like Van because he likes trains so much and because he loves Ms. Bridget just like I do." Another friend of Van's would be his neighbour Sam. After seeing the two of them tussle it out in an intense game of tug-of-war, I asked Sam what he like best about Van. After looking thoughtful for a moment, Sam gave me the answer, "Van, always comes outside and plays with me." And isn't that all you could ever really ask for in a friend?

When it comes to Van's strengths, his mom Audrey can attest that Van has quite a good amount. "I feel that Van has many strengths," she tells me. "But I believe that his greatest strength is to make connections and to make those connections in unexpected ways." In my mind, I think that this description of Van is completely accurate and really does say a lot about who he is and the brilliant light he brings to the world.

To me it really is the little things about Van that make him so special. The way that he'll stop my hand from turning the pages of a picture book while I'm reading, just so that he can take in the beautiful artwork, or the moments when he'll look up at the sky spontaneously and marvel to himself, "the sky is blue". To this day, there's absolutely nothing that this kid can't do that won't leave me feeling absolutely inspired, and I believe that is truly wonderful.

Along with the inspiration he gives me just by being himself, Van has also helped me in shaping my plans for the future. As a junior in high school, my dream for after school is to attend college and study psychology. Afterwards, my hope would be to go into a profession that would allow me to work with kids like Van who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I don't believe I would have ever considered this an option if I had never met Van and I am so grateful to him for being who he is. It's rare that in your life you will come across a person, especially one so young, that will have such an impact on the way you view the world.

Somehow, I was fortunate enough to meet Van.

Works Cited: "What Is Autism?" Autism Speaks, [www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism](http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism)