

Including Samuel



Isaiah Habib (then 7), right, comforts his brother, Samuel Habib (then 4), in the intensive care unit of Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital. Samuel had recently come out of a medically induced coma.

Photo(s) Dan Habib, from his documentary film *Including Samuel*

Four years ago, one of my sons lay in a medically induced coma. Samuel was four years old and had developed pneumonia from complications following a tonsillectomy. As I waited by his bedside, one of his doctors, Dr. James Filiano, encouraged me to photograph the experience, perhaps as a way of managing my fear. That was the moment I began to move towards documentary filmmaking, which was a new direction for me professionally and personally.

Samuel Habib sits on the lap of his father behind the steering wheel of his grandfather's sea plane as they prepare for flight.



L to R: Isaiiah Habib (now 11), Betsy McNamara, Dan Habib and Samuel Habib (now 8).



Samuel high-fives Senator Barack Obama.

son, Isaiiah, who was then four. But our youngest child's disability tested us in new ways.

"How can he get a full education and go to college when he can't hold a pencil?" Betsy wondered aloud.

Maybe Samuel's inability to hold a pencil wouldn't be such a big deal. What if his condition were simply considered another version of "normal"? What if he participated in everything that everybody else did?

I made *Including Samuel* to chronicle our family's efforts to mainstream our son into our neighborhood school, into social activities intrinsic to our community and into the daily routines of our family—every aspect of life. This central thread runs through the film.

I wanted audiences to get to know Samuel, who wrestles with his brother, loves t-ball and wants to be an astro-

naut when he grows up. Yet he is only eight, and relies on others to continue to include him. This will likely become more and more challenging as he gets older.

I also made the film to learn from the choices other people with disabilities and their parents have made. I wanted to see how these choices have shaped their lives. So *Including Samuel* also documents the experiences of Keith Jones, Alana Malfy, Nathaniel Orellana and Emily Huff, along with their families, educators and their communities as a whole.

This tale began 20 years ago when, as a newbie staff photographer for the *Concord (NH) Monitor*, I photographed



During a t-ball game, Samuel uses a "Bronco" all-terrain walker to hit and get around the bases.

Photo: Loei Duff-Kessner/Univis



Samuel, at 3 years old, sits in his supportive corner chair and smiles at a school friend.

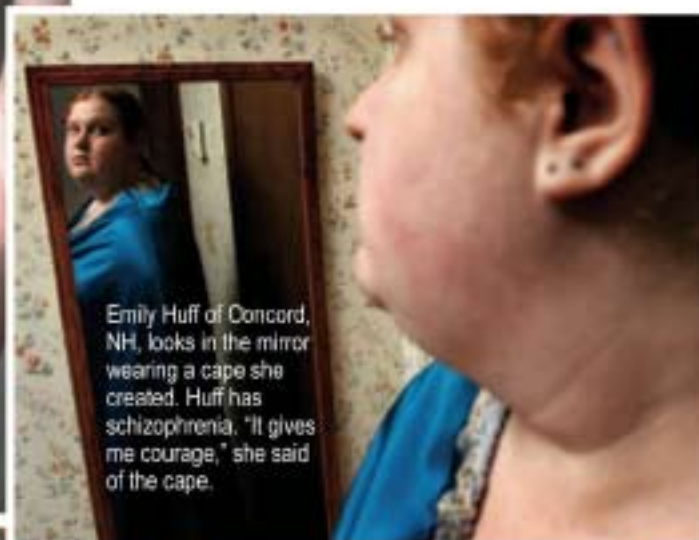
a story at one of the first local elementary schools to include kids with disabilities in mainstream classes. I cared about the topic, but it didn't have much relevance to me at the time. Today, Samuel is in second grade at this school, Beaver Meadow, and I think about inclusion every day.

As Samuel's dad, I am forced to look at my own prejudices. In years past, when I saw people who couldn't walk or talk, I often assumed that they weren't as smart, as capable or as worthy of getting to know as others who did not have these disabilities. Now I wonder *Is that how the world sees my Samuel?*

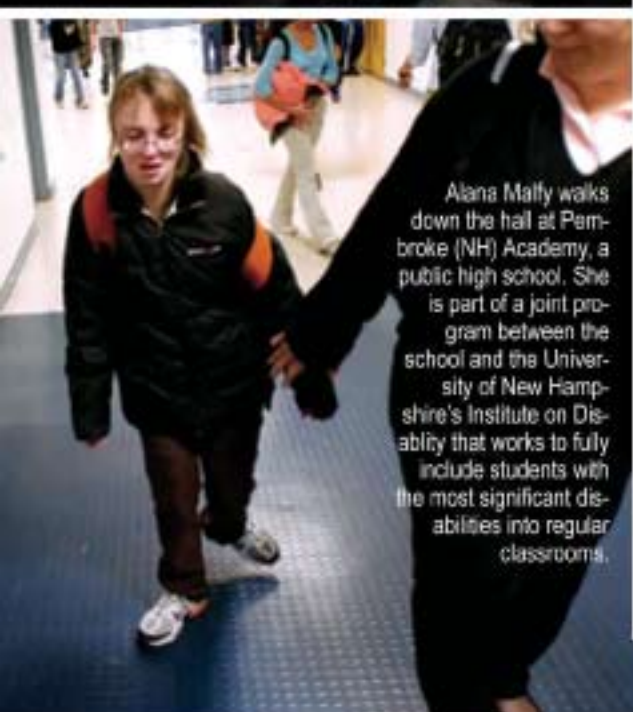
Recently, Betsy and I decided to attend the Disability Leadership Series at the University of New Hampshire



Keith P. Jones turns on a boom-box with his foot while teaching teenagers in a Boston music and theater workshop. Jones, who has cerebral palsy, is a leading disability rights activist and hip-hop artist.



Emily Huff of Concord, NH, looks in the mirror wearing a cape she created. Huff has schizophrenia. "It gives me courage," she said of the cape.



Alana Maitly walks down the hall at Pembroke (NH) Academy, a public high school. She is part of a joint program between the school and the University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disability that works to fully include students with the most significant disabilities into regular classrooms.



Nathaniel Orellana, a first-grader who has autism, does a greeting exercise at the Haggerty School in Cambridge, Mass. The school has been recognized as a model for inclusion of children with disabilities.

Institute to learn how we could be more effective advocates for Samuel. We heard from disability rights leaders such as Norman Kunc, who spoke about his "right to be disabled." He told us that if he were offered a pill to cure his cerebral palsy, he wouldn't take it. "I would have to create my identity all over again," he said. "I like who I am, I like the work I do." The Leadership Series helped us to see Samuel's disability as an intrinsic part of who he is.

My hope is that my film will inspire the public—especially anyone connected to education—to talk about inclusion in a more informed and innovative way. I also hope they will get to know my son at the same time.

Making this film helped me envision the life we want and expect for Samuel. We have a supportive network of teachers, therapists, relatives and friends who help us work towards that goal every day. And there is Samuel himself whose smile and persistence make clear his own vision of happiness.

Samuel brought the disability rights movement into our home. It came with lots of questions: Will his middle and high schools continue to fully include him? What about the times when illness forces Samuel to miss weeks or months of school? As an adult, will he find a mate? Will he get a job that fulfills him? Only time will reveal the answers. But for now, I know that Samuel loves life, he loves to laugh and he loves the Red Sox.

Ultimately, I am certain that my son will teach a lot of people, which is a good thing because the world has a lot to learn. ■ **ABILITY**

by Dan Habib

Dan Habib directed, produced and shot the award-winning *Including Samuel*. He is the filmmaker in residence at the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire. In 2006, he was named national Photography Editor of the Year for papers with circulations of 100,000 or less. Until recently, he was photography editor of the *Concord Monitor*. His work has appeared in *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*. Habib and his family live in Concord, NH.

For a film trailer and more info, visit:
www.includingsamuel.com