

# HUGGING A PORCUPINE

By Shannon Hitch

## He is ours.

He was ours when he arrived in kindergarten thirteen years ago – precocious, curious, and bursting with spirit. His blue plaid shirt brought out the tint of his eyes and his bountiful smile brought joy to those around him. He was smart, impish, naturally clever, and full of promise. **He was five.**

He was ours when learning became more challenging in second grade. When his emerging struggles with dyslexia and distractibility started to manifest themselves in emotional outbursts and disruptive behaviors. He was ours when he began to indiscriminately hit and kick other kids on the playground. He was ours when he drew an intricate picture of a prairie landscape in art class, amazing us all with his innate artistic talent. **He was seven.**

He was ours when he began testing the limits of acceptable classroom behavior. When his self-esteem began to slowly die and his personality turned increasingly stormy. He was ours when he intentionally punched his teacher in the arm in third grade and threw a book at another child's head. When he curled up in a corner of the room, hyperventilated, cried, and said he was sorry. **He was nine.**

He was ours in fifth grade when his parents divorced and when he witnessed his 54-year-old grandmother die after an excruciating battle with cancer. We were there when his dad remarried and moved to California, the last time he's seen his father. He was ours when his mother lost another job after showing up drunk at work. He was ours when the home he'd lived in all his life went through foreclosure and when his mother and he moved into a local shelter. He was ours when he started stealing and tormenting smaller kids at the bus stop. **He was 11.**

He was ours when his beautiful, infectious smile retired and the darkness began to encircle him.

He was ours when we had to reassure the other children in his seventh-grade class they were safe, despite his nearly constant threats.

He was ours when he stopped doing homework, when he stopped caring about his grades and when he started skipping school to play violent video games. He was ours when he tried his first cigarette, drank his first beer, popped his first pills, smoked his first joint, and became sexually active. **He was 14.**

He was ours when he got suspended for fighting, for chronic disruptive behavior, for cussing out a teacher, for breaking a computer. He was ours when we couldn't find his mom to pick him up on the day he said he was going to hurt himself after "taking out a few others." When he told his counselor **he wished he'd never been born.**

He was ours when the police handcuffed him and delivered him to the local adolescent care center. **He was 15.**

He was ours six months later when his mom died of an overdose in the back seat of a drug dealer's car. He was ours when he returned to school as a hollow shell of his previous self, nearly catatonic from his prescribed regimen of daily depression medications.

He was ours when a caring teacher decided to take a chance and bring him into her family's home. When the color came back to his eyes. He was ours when he won the grand prize in the Philbrook Museum's Young Artist contest. He was ours when he found a counselor he trusted, who took the time to listen and who was patient enough to peel through the many layers of anger and angst surrounding his soul to discover the sad, insecure, yet lovable boy inside.

He was ours when he recovered his smile again. When he joined a local church youth group and found meaning in his life. He was ours when a beautiful girl with deep blue eyes and an angel's heart gave him a reason to love himself again. **He was 17.**

He will be ours when he walks across the stage next month at graduation. When he hugs his adoptive mom and dad and says, "I love you. Thank you for saving my life." He will be ours when he leaves our school in May to become the best version of what he can be.

**This child is ours.** He is smart and bright and kind and troubled and hurt and angry. For 13 years, he has struggled mightily to overcome trauma, despair, learning challenges, and a self-defeating mentality. He wrestled for most of his young life to keep himself balanced, to calm his inner demons, to make friends, to trust adults, to show compassion, to love himself, and to learn with any consistency.

**To simply be a kid.**

You see, **he was always ours.** He belongs to us as much as the star quarterback, the future Ivy League scholar, the homecoming queen, and the valedictorian. For much of his schooling, he was tough to love. We didn't want to own him.

If you have been in education very long, especially in a larger district, you have met "him" or "her," likely more than once. These children frustrate us, make us angry, and cause us to cry. They cause us to question our effectiveness as educators and the meaning and value of our work.

It hurts to get close to children like "him." **It's like hugging a porcupine.** But they are ours, and *hugging porcupines* occasionally the most important part of our job.

**A core belief I hold tightly is this:** When children are in our schools, they are our kids. All. Of. Them. If a kid walks through the doors of our public school, we should see them, listen to them, push them, care for them, support and believe in them as if they are our own.

When we help these children survive and thrive – academically, socially, and emotionally – we are reminded of the beliefs and passion that power our work as educators. All kids can learn. We know how to teach them. **Together, we have what it takes.**

All the kids at our schools are "ours." For some, we have but a brief opportunity to do the one thing – the RIGHT thing – to change the course of their life in a positive way. What an awesome privilege and frightening burden that is.

This much is certain. **This boy is ours.**

And when you take the chance to *hug a porcupine* like him, the reward **will be yours.**