

One Army with Endless Gifts

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Once upon a time, in a land far away, in the Kingdom of DIS, there was an army. This was no ordinary army. This was an army of students from all over the United States. They called themselves “The Special Needs” and they had one objective: give all children the best care they can get. They had two fearless leaders: Master Bo and Maven Trine. Every Monday they met in Vestergade 10A to train in various skills, such as integration and social thinking. They were there best of the best, and ready for anything.

One day, Commander Jen came to the army with a mission. “Denmark’s school system and child rights are great – but as you know, it’s not like this everywhere,” she said, “They do it differently in different countries, and we could learn a lot from them. Go to Tallinn, Estonia and Stockholm, Sweden – there you must go undercover as a Normal, and spy on other institutions to learn all of their tricks of the trade!” The class erupted in chatter and smiles, as they knew this was no ordinary mission: this was a spy mission. Going undercover as a “Normal” (an ordinary abroad student) is difficult, and the most esteemed mission there was in the kingdom of DIS. Master Bo and Maven Trine gave them 24 hours to pack up and say their goodbyes – and then they were off.

Going undercover as a Normal was no easy feat; they purposely had to pack massive suitcases to blend in as typical students. They had to take public transportation – such as public aircraft, tour busses, public subways, and even an overnight ferryboat – and stay in normal hotels. It was hard to give up the private Kingdom jets and submarines, and the lavish bed and breakfasts, but somehow these brave soldiers managed.



Their first night in Tallinn, however, almost compromised the whole mission. They went to a restaurant called “Olde Hansa” – where Master Bo was recognized. The waiter quickly noticed his security breach and covered it up by making a joke of it, and calling him the “Bread Master”. They stuffed themselves silly with Normal food and prepared themselves for the days to come.

They awoke the next morning to their first loss: Agent Katherine woke up with the Pink Eyes. Fortunately, Pink Eyes is common in Normals – so they were able to keep their undercover status. Unfortunately for Katherine, she had to miss the first investigation to get treatment from a Normal doctor (which, unlike appointments in the Kingdom, can take hours).

The army's first stop was at The Ristiku School. Here they found order and organization in the classrooms. They believed strongly in teachers getting to know their students, and for students having a special respect for their teachers and headmaster. The agents were surprised with how small the classes were! Some classes had only one student, many classes had 2-4, and the largest class had about fourteen students. They said this was even considered much too big for them! "What a nice way to learn," the agents thought.

On day two they went to Tallinna Laagna Lasteaed-Pohikool, or Laagna Basic for short. This school had a preschool for normally developing children, and then other special needs classrooms as well. Here, the agents were amazed at the varying levels of functioning of the children. There were severely disabled kids right besides typically developing children. They also had a classroom for children whose first language was Russian. The agents then got their first real challenge: going to different classrooms and really interacting with the kid

s in the classroom. One group went to a class with three boys in seventh grade – it was an Estonian social studies class in Estonian! Unfortunately, none of the agents knew Estonian. These kids were all physically disabled but very bright – but their physical disabilities caused them to write slower, read slower, etc. Laagna accommodated for their various special needs on an individualized basis.



On day two they went to the Helen School, a school for children who are deaf and/or blind. There were many remarkable things at this school but the most surprising and great part is that this school didn't treat students as though they were deaf students or blind students – they were simply treated like students. All classrooms had many different types of sensory tactile surfaces. In the classrooms for the children who are blind, they had bright colors, paintings, and posters. Just like any other classroom. In a music class for blind children, the kids did different motions and gestures along with singing and playing the drums. They didn't just do the minimum and what was easy – they were doing just what other kids would do in a music class. Many of the agents were touched and moved by this idea of inclusion and normalcy.





Then they embarked on their journey over the Baltic Sea to Stockholm on the overnight ferry. It wasn't a submarine, like the Kingdom usually provides, but they sure made the most of it! They even put their negotiation skills to use with the Cruise Manager to get some late-night karaoke; who knew Master Bo was such a rockstar?

In the morning of day three they finally arrived in Stockholm. They checked into their much nicer hotel and set off for their visit that day to Maven Trine's school. There, they learned all about the rights of children in Sweden and went on a tour of the temporary group home for children with mental/physical disabilities. They were amazed to learn that persons with disabilities have so many rights in Sweden in terms of accommodations and compensation from the government – much different than in the United States!



The next day they went to the best visit of all: Stella Nova school. The first thing you need to know is that “stella nova” means “gathering of stars” – which couldn't be more fitting for this place. They put together everything the agents learned about multi-



cultural inclusion, openness, the importance of play, and the power of parent involvement. There were 92 kids, ages 1-5 years old, from 38 different cultures, many speaking languages other than Swedish. They let the kids be independent and speak home language – but many chose to communicate with each other in Swedish, without it being forced on them. When a new student enters, school doesn't just accept a child; rather, it accepts the whole family. The parents and families of the pupils are encouraged to come to events, play with the kids, eat with the kids, and get involved in whatever way they can. The agents were amazed at how the school opens its arms to any and every family, accepting them for who they are and what they have to give. The children were encouraged to express and explore their cultural identity through free play with all different genders, races, and ages of children. The agents then even got to spend time

playing with the kids – the best part of the whole trip. They didn't have to be undercover when playing, that was just being themselves.

Lastly, they had an inspirational lecture from a woman named Sara Wallen. She's 27 and the CEO of two companies, lived all over the world, and speaks many different languages. She allowed them to let go of our cover and just be themselves for a few hours. They were given time to think about our passions – what makes them happy and what they're interested in. It was a great opportunity to just sit and reflect for a while – something no one gets to do very often. All of the agents had been training and traveling together, but they realized how little they know about each other. Talking about why you're doing what you're doing isn't exactly an ice-breaker, so it hadn't really come up for any of them yet. But here they were encouraged to express as much or as little about their passions as they wanted. Some went into emotional detail, some stayed general and on the surface. But no matter how much or how little they chose to share, it was a time to learn a little more about each other and feel a little more connected than we had before. It helped fuse the bonds between the army that they'd needed in order to do truly inspirational work.



They arrived home worn out and tired, both mentally and physically, but the mission was a success. They learned about how some very special schools deal with different special needs,



gathering information they'll retain and use in their work for years to come. They even learned a little about themselves and each other in the process – an unexpected gift from Sara Wallen and from each other. One thing they saw in each other, in Master Bo and Maven Trine, in themselves, and in each school, was the power of giving.

They all gave of themselves to each other, to students, to children. And that is what touched them all the most – because it is when you give of yourself that you truly give.