



2011 G.E.A.R. Parent Network winning poster, "Hand In Hand" by an 11-year-old Maine artist.

## Welcome to the NFL

*By Tamara Ehrenzeller*

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*Hall of Flags, Augusta, ME*

Howdy! My name is Tamara Ehrenzeller, and this is my message of resiliency.

One day I'm kicking back on the couch surfing for the game, when my child is DIAGNOSED. "Special Needs" is a broad definition now used to describe my family.

My living room disappears and I'm no longer sitting on my couch, but on a bench. I hear a roar that comes from a crowd, and my family is in the stands behind me holding foam fingers and little flags. The floodlights are so blindingly bright that night has turned to day. The smells of nachos, hotdogs, and french-fries fill my nose. Food isn't the only thing I smell. I look out over a field covered in green sweet-smelling grass (which is funny since it always looks like AstroTurf on TV). I look around the stadium and realize I've been drafted... apparently a first round pick. Who knew? This is when I hear the coach tell me, "Welcome to the team and welcome to the NFL"

This isn't your typical game though. The scoreboard is flashing evaluation results and the numbers— 101 and 504. The sponsor's billboards are covered in the acronyms FAPE and IDEA. Above the opposing team's goal post, I read the words: "independent" and "meaningful future." The opposing team has a "D" on their uniforms signifying themselves to be a disability. Their intention is to overwhelm my child and define his life.

I look around at my new team. The best, brightest, and most determined people, our team is made up of allies, all of us together working alongside a child we believe in.

Down the field on the 50-yard line lit up with attention due his position is the quarterback— my child and the leader of our team. He is surrounded by his offense— caring providers from dedicated agencies: teachers, doctors, and specialists. My child and the offense

are the celebrities: the players that gain the yardage, do most of the scoring, and end up with most of the glory.

My position, valuable though it may be, is a little less adored. I'm part of the defensive line— the biggest and scariest line on the field! Our mission is to stop their offense and get the ball back for our team. We rip and roar our way towards their quarterback, throw down their receiver like a sack of potatoes, and do a "Lights Out" dance.

My expectations are battered in the process. Blame, criticism, being dismissed and stared at all takes a toll-- well-aimed tackles that sometimes, but not always, take me down. When they do, I always get back up. At the end of the day, the position I play, the hits I take, and the tackles I make, are all for the love of the game— or more precisely, my love for my child. Everyday I wake up and put on my uniform because letting my quarterback be sacked is never an option.

After a long, close game, the touchdowns few and far between, in the locker room when it's just me taking off my pads, I think back over a particularly sweet 1<sup>st</sup> down when my team only made 5 yards, but it was so hard fought that the fans were on their feet and roaring their support. I take that moment and declare victory.

