

February 15, 2012

Dear Senator Kirk,

My name is Jackson Cunningham. I live in Oakwood, Illinois and I am nine years old.

Last year on February 19, 2011, I was eight years old and I had a stroke. Before the stroke, I was a healthy kid. The stroke was on the right side of my brain. I couldn't move a muscle on my left side. I had two surgeries before I got to leave the hospital.

After a month in the hospital I went to RIC in Chicago. I was on the fifth floor with other kids. After the first two days they took away my crutches and I have been walking since then. A lot of therapy helped. All the therapy paid off.

One of my teachers at RIC knew I liked the Coast Guard. She set up a boat ride for me. It was on a Coast Guard boat on Lake Michigan. It was cold but I had an amazing view of Chicago. When I was at RIC, President Obama was just outside my window in his car. He got out of the car and my dad could see him. We found some good pizza places in Chicago like Gino's East, Giordano's and Lou Malnati's.

I stayed at RIC for a month. I got home on April 19th. I still had to do therapy at Carle, which is in Champaign, Illinois. I also had a tutor who came to my house and worked on school work with me.

This past fall, I started school again. I go for half a day and then go to Champaign for OT, PT and Speech Therapy. I am still doing therapy to help my left side. I can talk fine (my little sister can too - she never shuts up!). But, I am working on memory and attention. I do FastForward on the computer to help my brain.

Last week I was in a basketball game at my school. It was the teachers against the kids. We outsmarted them! I hope I will be able to play sports again, like I did before the stroke.

I wanted to wish you good luck. Here's some advice. Do not give up on yourself. All the hard work is worth it. I think you should go on the grown up floor at RIC. They make you work hard and you get lots of things back fast.

Sincerely,

Jackson Cunningham

P.S. Kids Rights! I think kids should get paid to go to school.



May 19, 2012

Dear Jackson,

We appear to have a lot in common. Like you, I was born in Champaign IL (about 45 years before you!), we both have survived a stroke and have an appreciation for the RIC and its people. Your letter was one of the best of many I received. I appreciate your positive thoughts. Your experience provided me inspiration that with the RIC's help a person can recover from a stroke!

As a North sider I would have to consider myself a cubs fan but also enjoyed watching the 2011 World Series Championship Cardinals!!

I agree with many of the political views that you expressed in your last letter to me, such as that kids should be paid to go to school. I think of you often because of your letters you have written to me.

I look forward to receiving your next letter and hearing about your trip to Chicago and the legos you purchased with your birthday money!!

I would like to close with some words of encouragement that my mother used to always say "socks up little cabbage" - which is another way of saying "keep your spirits up!"

Your Pen Pal,

Senator Mark Kirk

July 22, 2012

Dear Senator Kirk,

My first week of camp was very hard. I got to do karate and I made space gak. I've been improving a lot. I hope you're getting better too. Maybe I will see you in Chicago before camp is over. I've been eating my meals with my left hand. I have to put on my cast when I get up in the morning until I go to bed! My mom is going to send you a picture of me petting a baby chicken at my nana's farm.

Sincerely,
Little Cabbage



August 15, 2012

Dear Pen Pal,

I too have met Georgia the therapy dog many times at the RIC.

She is absolutely adorable. Whenever there was an extra empty bed in my room Georgia would find a way to use it. Georgia has one main trick: When her owner Ellen tells her to "VISIT" Georgia puts her head on your bed so you can pat her. She has such big brown eyes that it would just melt your heart.

I'm very happy to find out about how camp turned out for you especially since you had to wear that awful cast. The people at the RIC surely know a lot about how to put you back together.

I know that cast presents difficulties and I am sorry for that.

I'm glad you like Legos. They were one of my favorite things when I was a kid.

Tell your Dad that my favorite thing to eat these days is the granola bars like the kind your Dad makes.

This part is to Ann: After my experience at the RIC I know how vital Rehab is after a stroke. I honestly didn't know this until I personally experienced it. One of the most inspirational people I met in the RIC was a speech therapist named Katherine Borio.

So Ann, I thank you so much for your work with Jackson. It is so important.

Recently I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Betts who founded the RIC in Chicago.

In two weeks I am looking forward to meeting a man named Mark Stephan who is riding his bike 3129 miles across America. He has a web site so you can look him up, but Jackson don't start riding your bike across America without asking your Mom. I'm sure Mark Stephan already checked with his Mom.

Keep working Jackson!!! Make sure you do everything your PTs and OTs say! I'm thinking of you and your sister Jordyn.

Love from your pen pal,

Senator Mark Kirk

February 20, 2013

Dear Senator Kirk,

Ann and I started to write you a letter yesterday and she had to take a phone call. So, guess what I did? I started to type the letter myself, using our Brainstorming notes. Some of the keys on the computer did not have the letters written on them, but I still figured it out. Ann is sending you that letter too.

I had a fun weekend in Chicago last weekend. We went to a hotel to spend a couple of nights on the anniversary of my stroke. It's been two years now. We went to Shedd Aquarium, to the Lego store, swam a lot at the hotel and eating only at new restaurants. That was my dad's rule. That was OK, but I didn't agree with some things we were eating. He wanted us to go to a Chinese restaurant but I didn't want to. I liked some of the breakfast places like The Original Pancake House and one good barbeque place. I was happy that I had NO appointments!

My uncle got an A on his Chemistry test in college. I got a B on my math test and an A+ on a Spelling test.

Illinois's basketball team is doing very good. They beat Indiana, who is number 1 in the country. And Illinois made the Purdue coach so mad they had to take him out of the game. Do you watch any of the Illinois games?

How is Washington? Are you still getting therapy there? Where do you live? Are you coming back to Chicago soon? Where is Cleopatra staying?

My new dog, Paisley, is very smart. She can open the door by herself and get in to my bedroom. She uses her paws as hands to move things on the counter. She lost two puppy teeth. We found them on the floor and on the bed.

My mom's cat, Sabey, died. He lived 11 years – longer than me. Maybe we will get another cat or a new dog from the same breeder.

I hope you are doing good.

Your pen pal,

Jackson Cunningham
And Jordyn Cunningham too!



February 27, 2013

Dear Jackson,

I got the letter you typed yourself, I'm very proud of your progress keep it up! I am very sad to hear about your loss of Sabey I hope that zombies didn't get her and I'm sure you defended her well. I am writing you this letter from my office in Washington I am very happy to be back at work where I should be, working for all 12.6 million people in the State of IL (that includes you Mister). I recently visited wounded soldiers at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. One of them is planning to do the Bataan March, which is an 11 mile walk—impressive because the patient I talked to had only one working foot. I'll be back in IL in April. Cleopatra is currently destroying my sister's apartment in Evanston, bit by bit.

I've got a good supply of granola bars here at my office; I hope they were made while your dad was at work.

Keep your letters coming.

Your friend,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark Kirk".

Senator Mark Kirk