

Kleinvieh macht auch mist.

Or, for those of us whose German leaves a little to be desired:

Small amounts add up to something bigger.

And, that's exactly what we have seen since Hanna joined our family. Our family may not be the easiest: our younger son has multiple disabilities, including a rare genetic syndrome, epilepsy, a feeding tube, and cortical vision impairment, in addition to being excessively handsome. But, Hanna didn't come here for easy. She came here to be a part of *something bigger*.

So, what exactly has Hanna become a part of? Therapy sessions, inclusive activities, and goal setting. Roller coasters, buffalo, ziplines, and sunsets over the ocean. Service dog training, matching family pajamas, and getting creative during quarantines. In each of these things, she has brought an amazing attitude, her extensive special needs experience, her boundless creativity, and her sense of humor.

"He can do that," Hanna told me at our son's inclusive soccer practice. I had been hovering over him for months, urging him to kick the ball, to stick with the other kids, and to spend less time squealing at airplanes. I was doubtful. But, Hanna has shown us over and over that we can trust her, so I listened. She let him squeal at the airplanes, then she told him to kick the ball into the goal. And he did.

Seeing our son through Hanna's eyes has taught us so much about him, about his abilities, and also about disability in general. Because she sees our son as the capable little man that he is, the energy and love that she brings to our lives every single day has changed our entire family for the better. She sees not just who our son is now: she sees the person who he will one day be. She sees a kid who can score a goal. She sees a boy who can hold his service dog's leash. She sees a tricky little fellow who gives a zillion hugs to try and get out of doing homework. It turns out he *can* do all of these things and so much more. She teaches *us* what he can do. *And then she teaches him to do it.*

So, *how* exactly does she do that? Kleinvieh macht auch mist. Every day she builds him up, she makes him work, and she shows him just how much he is part of the bigger world. She has joined dozens of OT, PT, Speech, and Feeding Therapy sessions, and has suggested new and improved goals to the therapists. She takes our boys to the beach, even on a cloudy day. She inspires our children to explore, to try new things, and to see the world – a world that isn't always accessible for people with disabilities, but that our boys are now excited to take on together. On a vacation to Yellowstone National Park, Hanna counted buffalo and geysers with our boys. For our older son's birthday, she took him to Six Flags from the time they opened until the time they closed, so they could ride every roller coaster. For Christmas, she wore her light-up ugly Christmas sweater and ate piles of homemade cookies with our family.

And, when our younger son was sick, she held him, she sang "Itsy Bitsy Spider" for hours, and she made us feel like everything would be okay.

For so many families like ours, bringing an au pair into the family starts because things *aren't* always okay: they're hard, overwhelming, and just so exhausting. Parenting a kiddo with a disability is as challenging as it is rewarding. Having Hanna by our side to say "He can do that" has shown us over and over that everything really will be okay. She teaches all of us. She makes all of our lives feel like something bigger: an adventure to be navigated, explored, and taken on headfirst. She has helped us to make our son's world more accessible to him, through creativity, communication, and love. She truly embodies the mission: to empower families and children with special needs to reach their full potential.

Also, she let us know that literally translated into English "Kleinvieh macht auch mist" means "small animals also produce dung," which our boys think is positively hilarious. For that alone, Hanna should be named Au Pai of the Year. But, even beyond her wonderful sense of humor, Hanna stands out because she has made our family add up to *something bigger*. She's a model for the au pair experience at its best: she shows us a bigger, brighter version of our children, ourselves, and our world. And she rocks an ugly Christmas sweater better than anyone I know.